

Columba and Aquila

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/58202608) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/58202608>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy
Characters:	Hermione Granger , Draco Malfoy , Luna Lovegood , Theodore Nott , Ginny Weasley , Blaise Zabini , Narcissa Black Malfoy , Blaise Zabini's Mother , Cormac McLaggen , Severus Snape , Astoria Greengrass , Antonin Dolohov , Bellatrix Black LeStrange , Voldemort (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	Sexual Assault/Attempted Rape (Not Draco) , Suicide Attempt , Suicidal Thoughts , Blood and Gore , Torture , Murder , Execution , Implied/Referenced Stillbirth (Not Depicted) , Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence (Not Depicted) , Dark Magic , Bonds , Animal Sacrifice , Animagi Transformations , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Trauma , Angst and Hurt/Comfort , Healing Through Slow Touch , Traumatized Hermione Granger , Anxious Hermione Granger , Hermione Granger's Descent Into the Morally Gray , Morally Gray Draco Malfoy , Psycho-Simp Draco Malfoy , Draco Malfoy Might Be a Sociopath , Gaslighting , Manipulation , Stalking , Touch Her and Die (After Losing a Few Body Parts) , "Would It Help You Relax If I Killed Him?" , Death Eaters Make Toxic Boyfriends , But They're Still Pretty Sexy , It's Not a Crush It's an Obsession , Sexual Tension , Loss of Virginity , Dom/sub Undertones , Explicit Sexual Content , Possessive Draco Malfoy , Jealous Draco Malfoy , Possessive Sex , Knife Play , Sweet girl , Pretty Ribbons , Happily Ever After and Still a Little Psycho
Language:	English
Collections:	hp reads that I thoroughly enjoyed , Hermione and The Dark Wizards , bonding magic , Draco Malfoy , Dramione that slays
Stats:	Published: 2024-08-15 Completed: 2025-01-27 Words: 401,308 Chapters: 48/48

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Summary

With Harry dead and Voldemort triumphant after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione finds herself captured by her childhood enemy. Now imprisoned and sentenced to death, she is waiting to see Harry and Ron on the other side.

At least that's what she thinks.

But with Draco Malfoy in charge, things are not always as they seem. As Draco starts to help her process the things that happened to her, he draws her ever closer until she can no longer stay away.

And Draco? He only cares about keeping his sweet girl with him, through any means necessary - and getting revenge on anybody who has hurt her.

Featuring an anxious Hermione Granger and a psycho-simp Draco who helps her heal with gentle touch and by pulling her into the morally grey along with him.

Notes

- ▶ Posting, Binding, and Anti-AI Policy
- ▶ General Disclaimers for this Fic

Chapter 1: Captive

What will come next?

Hermione was frozen, struggling to process the thing she was seeing as the body of her best friend was dumped onto the ground in front of her and the others.

The battle had been waging for hours until Voldemort called a brief reprieve to bury the dead and attract Harry to him in the Forbidden Forest.

Though it tore her heart into pieces, Hermione hadn't stopped Harry after Severus Snape passed him those secret memories. She didn't know what was in them, but she could guess, and she felt only mild surprise to discover he may not be a traitor after all if he had been entrusted with this final secret. She and Ron had left Harry to visit the pensieve alone, while they made their way to the Great Hall. She told herself it was so she could grieve Fred and Remus and Tonks – along with her other friends. She rationalized it by assuring herself that Harry would alert her and Ron when it was time. They would be there with him at the end, standing by his side, even if the outcome was inevitable.

But she had been lying to herself.

She knew he would leave without them. He always tried to leave them behind, and this time she let him do it. She knew he had to go to Voldemort that night. He *had* to. It was a secret she had buried into her heart as she researched horcruxes and learned the identifying markers. She had never voiced her thoughts out loud, not a single time. But it was the only explanation for the prophecy. It was the only reason why Harry could do things that others couldn't – he could talk to snakes and see into Voldemort's mind. He wasn't possessed, but he was connected. And Hermione's suspicions became a certainty when that tiny fragment of soul that was lodged in the scar on his forehead pulsed malevolently the first time she watched him touch the locket.

Voldemort's soul recognized itself.

Hermione had struggled with the knowledge that her best friend would have to die for months. At times she intentionally slowed down their horcrux hunt, even to their detriment. She didn't really believe Godric's Hollow would contain answers for them, but as she came to accept the fact that Harry would have to die she didn't have it in her to stop him from visiting his parents' graves at least once. So she made up some bullshit excuse about the sword and Godric Gryffindor to ease Harry's obvious guilt about the true reasons he wanted to go.

Of course, that had led to a near-disaster. Harry had come very close to dying anyway, far earlier than was required.

She had waffled for the past seven months, oscillating between wanting to keep her best friend tethered to this earth and knowing that the longer they delayed the inevitable the more *others* would be hurt and killed. And so she helped Harry march slowly toward his own death, doing her best to keep him safe and whole, while picking off all the other horcruxes along the way. She made enough progress to assuage her own guilt about the war dragging on. But she insisted on creating plans and backup plans and contingency plans and plans, plans, plans... not just for their safety, but to buy Harry a few more days of life before each find. And then their break-in at Gringotts went sideways and alerted Voldemort to what they were doing, and her hand was forced.

It was the first time she told Harry to look into Voldemort's head. She had always known that was the way to find the horcruxes quickly, but Harry had never thought of it, so she had never suggested it. Her stomach clenched whenever she remembered those faceless bodies dying around them while they figured out the clues the old fashioned way, but Harry was too important to her to rush. Besides, she and the boys were stuck in a tent for much of the year. It was surprisingly easy to forget that others were dying and being tortured while the three of them were in their isolated bubble together. Gringotts, however, had accelerated things because they had to race Voldemort to that last hiding place. Harry had finally used his connection offensively, and it worked.

Of course it worked.

Still, even knowing that they had to *find* the Ravenclaw artifact didn't mean that Hermione particularly wanted to kill it or the cup that day. But it wasn't like she could tell Ron *why* she was so reluctant to go visit the Chamber of Secrets when the battle was waging around them. Some part of her was clinging to the foolish hope that they would fight just long enough to take out some Death Eaters, gather the last horcrux, and then escape so her best friend could live a bit longer before it was his turn too.

But Ron – ever the strategist – pointed out that carrying around a live horcrux was a bad thing. They had done it before, and it had tainted them. And what if this was their only chance? What if the war could be finished right then?

So of course Hermione agreed to do it. She wielded the fang that killed that bit of soul in the cup, and within an hour fucking Vincent Crabbe had destroyed the diadem for them too, while nearly burning them all alive in the Room of Requirement.

All that was left was the snake, and Hermione always knew that she would have to be at the very end. Nagini would go at the same time as Harry. That meant Hermione's ability to drag out the horcrux hunt had officially expired.

So while Hermione knew this was coming, she still wasn't prepared to see it. And that fucking snake was still alive, circling Voldemort. Hermione choked out a sob, because *Harry* should have been the last one. They should have found a way to take out the snake first. He could have lived another few minutes or hours or maybe even another day, if she hadn't stood back and let him walk to his own death.

But she had let him do it because she had been scared. She had let him go because she knew his ending was predestined, but hers was not. She didn't go with him this time because she

believed he would take the snake down too, and Hermione would just distract him from what had to be done.

That's what she told herself at any rate, but maybe she was lying about this too. Maybe she was just selfish.

Hermione could scarcely breathe as Harry's blank, green eyes stared back. That's how she knew he was gone. His eyes weren't closed. They weren't blinking. He was dead. *Dead*. And there wasn't a single thing she could do about it anymore.

She thought she might be suffocating as it began to hit her, and only then did the volume seem to turn back on as screams rent the air to see their hero so broken.

Ron was next to her, or he had been, howling like a wounded animal. The sound went right to her soul, and she desperately wished he would stop. She barely noticed as his wailing started to grow fainter as Ron pushed through the crowd to get closer to Voldemort.

"You bastard!" he cried. "You fucking bastard!"

Hermione felt herself beginning to grow numb as tears coursed down her cheeks. She was still staring at those green eyes – the ones she would never see again. She would memorize him like this. At least it had been the killing curse instead of something more painful and violent. He didn't look surprised. He looked determined. Knowing. At peace.

"I love you, Harry," she whispered. She hoped he could hear her. She really hoped he would forgive her for keeping this secret from him. "I just didn't want you to think about it like I did."

Hermione gave a giant sniff and blinked as she realized the crowd around her was starting to move again.

"Neville!" screeched a voice that sounded like Ginny's. Hermione whipped around to see Neville Longbottom barreling at Voldemort with his teeth bared, only to be struck down moments later by a jet of green light.

"NO!" cried Hermione, and now she was gasping for air all over again.

Harry was supposed to die, but not Neville. Never Neville. He was her first friend in the wizarding world. He had always been there, quiet and kind. He had an innocent crush on Hermione for years. She knew it, and he knew that she knew it, but they had never talked about it. He had gathered the courage to ask her to the Yule Ball after Viktor Krum did, but other than that he had never once spoken of it because sweet Neville was painfully aware that his crush was one-sided. He was a gentleman, and the last thing he would ever want to do would be to make a girl uncomfortable.

Christ, why hadn't she kissed him? Why couldn't she have given him that, at least one time, before he died?

Then she remembered the boy she *did* kiss, only hours ago, and she went pale.

“Ron,” she muttered. Then she screeched, “RON!”

But the battle was starting up again, and she lost him in the crowd. With Harry Potter and much of the Order dead, those that were left were starting to scatter, and the Death Eaters were closing rank.

“Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!”

Hermione could barely think straight, as she whirled and ducked and dodged, firing spells seemingly at random. She knew she was a brilliant witch, but athletic endeavors had never really been her thing. She wasn’t as nimble and coordinated as some of the others, and without a plan she ran on instinct.

Her instincts, she knew, ranged from very good to terrible. She could apparate them out of Xenophilius Lovegood’s house while falling through the air, but she also had a tendency to panic at the sight of blood. And there was so much blood.

Breathe and cast. Breathe and cast.

Hermione took down one Death Eater with a stunner and another with a leglock jinx.

I should be casting to kill.

She knew she should. She *knew* it. But it gave Hermione a sick feeling in her gut to think about it. She wasn’t evil, and she knew what murder did to the soul better than anyone.

A spell lit the air, and a flash of red hair caught her eye. It wasn’t Ron, but Ginny. She and Luna were dueling a couple of men that Hermione didn’t immediately recognize in the dark because their backs were to her. Ginny and Luna looked exhausted, worn, like they were ready to collapse.

“GINNY!” screamed Hermione as she tried to fight her way to them. She had no idea where Ron was, but she had just found the only two girls who had ever been her real friends. Maybe she could get to them and save them. Her boys might be lost to her, but her girls...

Hermione sobbed as a red spell struck Luna first, and then she collapsed while Ginny’s face lit with rage.

“Avada Kedavra you fuckers!” she screeched, and to Hermione’s utter shock a green jet of light flew out of Ginny’s wand, but the wizard she was aiming for dodged it. It missed him and flew within an inch of Hermione behind him. She ducked too as Ginny’s eyes met hers for a split second and widened in horror at what had almost happened.

“KEEP FIGHTING!” screamed Hermione, but it was too late. Ginny’s moment of distraction caught her unawares, and she also fell to a jet of red light, while Hermione’s screams gave away her position.

The two men turned and started to send spells her way now.

“Crap,” she gasped as she started firing off spells in return. The men were hooded and masked, and she had no idea who they were, but as she got closer she thought they were about the same size as Harry and Ron. She was so distracted by trying to duel them two at once that she didn’t notice the person approaching her from behind.

“*Stupefy*,” drawled an aristocratic voice.

Hermione should have ducked, but she was so surprised to hear his voice after watching him cough up smoke from the Room of Requirement that she spun to face him instead. In a split second she took in a Death Eater wearing a mask. But even in the moonlight Hermione recognized the glint of silver eyes that told her this was Draco Malfoy. She didn’t know where the mask had come from, because the last time she saw him he wasn’t wearing it, and he didn’t look that different from any of the other students who were drawn into the fight. Perhaps he had pulled it off of another Death Eater who was dead or dying in the grass. Perhaps it had been kept with his master or his parents, and he had finally been able to retrieve it. Or maybe he had carried it all along, shrunk down in his pocket, so that he could play both sides depending on what best suited his purposes. Regardless of how it happened, she knew she was looking at a Death Eater now and not a boy. The mask had given him back his confidence, and she felt a thrill of terror as he stared her down.

Precisely how Hermione knew that this was Draco and not Lucius, she couldn’t be certain. It could have been his stance or the familiar look of anger that flashed in those eyes when they took in her appearance. Then again, it might have been the wand he was holding. She immediately recognized it as Harry’s.

No, it wasn’t Harry’s wand. It was Draco’s wand.

She remembered now: it was the wand Harry had taken from Draco Malfoy that day at the Manor. Somehow he had collected it from the body of her dead best friend.

Those silver eyes were focused and turned wild as the red spell flew toward her.

Fucking ferret, she thought as the jet of light hit her in the chest, and it all went dark.

“Hermione! Hermione! Hermione!”

Hermione groaned as a frightened female voice penetrated her haze. It took her a moment to realize somebody was shaking her.

“Wha –?” she asked inelegantly as her eyes fluttered open to find stone walls around her. Absolutely *everything* ached. She moved her head and winced. It felt like it was being split open. Her stomach rolled as another slice of pain rocketed through her skull, but she forced it back as she turned her head to find the source of the voice.

Luna's concerned blue eyes swam into focus, her dirty blonde hair in tangles around her face. She had a split lip and a bruise forming on one cheek, and Hermione saw dirt and blood ground into her skin. Hermione was sure she looked just as bad.

"Luna?" she asked weakly.

Luna's eyes showed relief, and her grip was surprisingly strong as she helped Hermione sit up. Hermione closed her eyes as her vision swam. Her head was absolutely killing her. She supposed she had earned a migraine after the most recent fight, but this was positively brutal.

Then her eyes flew open as she remembered the battle.

"Oh God, Harry..." she said in a soft voice as she began to cry.

She felt Luna pull her into a hug and put her head on Hermione's shoulder as she wept. Then Hermione was surprised to feel another person doing the same thing on the other side of her. The flash of red hair and slightly floral scent of her shampoo told Hermione it was Ginny.

"Ginny..." she breathed through her tears. "You're alright."

"Yes," she sniffed. "A bit worse for the wear, but we're alive."

The three huddled in silence for a long while as Hermione's tears finally dried and her pounding head dulled to a steady ache.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"Hogwarts I think," said Ginny. "Down in the dungeons."

Hermione slowly looked around and realized Ginny was correct. The Hogwarts dungeons were extensive, a vast network of various-sized chambers, all connected by low-ceiling corridors and lit with torches. Most students never ventured past the Potions classroom, but Hermione knew the dungeons well. After all, she had patrolled them for two years as a Prefect. This room was fairly small, with a solid wooden door on iron hinges blocking the entry. There were three small slivers of light where the wall met the ceiling. Hermione knew they were nothing more than vent holes at the very base of the Hogwarts foundation. They were no larger than a couple of bricks. She would never be able to escape through them, having never learned how to become an animagus like Peter Pettigrew or Rita Skeeter. But daylight streamed through the small crevices, which did tell her it was no longer the middle of the night.

She raised her hand and pushed up her sleeve, squinting to see her watch in the dim light. It was cheap, but serviceable, and Hermione was relieved to see it still worked.

"It's almost noon..." she muttered. "God, how long were we out?"

"Ten or twelve hours, I'd say," said Ginny. "I went down right after Luna."

"And I went down right after you," said Hermione. "One of them was Draco Malfoy."

“Poncey git,” growled Ginny, and Hermione couldn’t help the small bubble of laughter that escaped her. It was odd and felt brittle, but Hermione was beyond exhausted and so hungry she felt faint. She was slightly delirious.

“No wands, I assume?” she asked, as she shut her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

“No,” said Luna. “Not for any of us.”

Hermione forced herself to do a slow pat down of her body to confirm what she had already suspected: her beaded bag was also gone.

“Great,” she muttered. “So we are stuck here until somebody lets us out.”

Ginny grimaced at this before frowning. “What about wandless magic? I know you have some, Hermione.”

Hermione sighed. She did have some, it was true, but hers was largely unrefined. Still, she knew she had to try. She closed her eyes and tried to coalesce her magic, but it felt too far away to grasp.

“No,” said Hermione with a groan. “It takes a lot of energy, and I’m just...” she trailed off and closed her eyes again.

Exhaustion. Pure exhaustion.

Yes, she had been unconscious for hours, but she hadn’t really *slept*. Nor had she eaten. And she couldn’t even begin to process her emotional state.

Hermione knew there would be no wandless magic coming from her, at least not yet.

“So what then?” asked Ginny with frustration. “We’re just stuck here until somebody remembers us? Or comes looking for us? What if the people who put us here died? They took us in the middle of the battle!”

Hermione felt a prickle of real fear at this, but she tried not to let it show on her face. She wasn’t as afraid of dying as she probably ought to be. It was something she had been grappling with ever since it became clear she would be central to the war, and she had largely made her peace with it. But then again, she had never thought she would die *this* way: slowly, through starvation and dehydration.

She swallowed and forced her brain back on.

“We have to think,” she muttered. “I haven’t heard anything but us since I woke up, have you?”

Both girls shook their heads, and Hermione nodded. “And the battle must be over, because surely we would be able to hear it...”

At this she gestured to the vent holes.

“We’re probably on the east side of the castle,” added Ginny. “It’s not that far from where we were all fighting last night.”

“I suppose we should try the door,” said Luna, and Hermione’s eyes bugged out.

“You haven’t tried the door?”

“Well of course not, I assumed we were prisoners.”

“Merlin. Well let’s try that first!” declared Ginny.

Luna scrambled to her feet, and Hermione and Ginny watched anxiously as she approached the door and tugged on it. Of course nothing happened, and Hermione felt her heart sink. It was stupid, really, to get her hopes up like that but for a split second she had believed they would be able to walk out. The disappointment felt crushing.

“Alright,” she said, taking a deep breath. “So we’re prisoners.”

“But we don’t know who won,” said Ginny quietly.

“I think there’s only one answer to that,” said Hermione softly, and a couple of tears welled and then tracked down her cheek.

“I just... it *can*’t be, Hermione. You know it can’t. What will we do if...”

Ginny’s voice was rising and starting to get hysterical, and Hermione reached out for her to pull her into a hug.

“We survive, Ginny. We do whatever we have to do to survive. And...”

“And?” asked Ginny.

“And if any of us sees Nagini, we have to kill her first.”

Both Ginny and Luna were now looking at Hermione intently.

“Is that what you three were doing for the past year, then? Hunting Nagini?” asked Ginny.

Hermione pursed her lips. She knew how Harry felt about keeping the horcruxes a secret, but Harry was gone. Ron might also be gone. Ginny and Luna didn’t need to know details. But Hermione also couldn’t rely on the odds of her own survival to finish it.

“Among other things,” she said. “Suffice to say, You-Know-Who can’t die until the snake does. That’s all you need to know. She has to go first and then him.”

Both girls looked at her solemnly and nodded.

“If we have a chance, we will take it,” said Luna serenely. “There are worse things than death. Thank you for trusting us with it, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded and swallowed. “It won’t be easy. You can’t just... *stab* her to death or anything like that. Think of her as a magically powerful creature. She has special protection. You can kill her with basilisk venom, but that takes a fang or the true Sword of Gryffindor, neither of which we have anymore. The easiest method is with a wand and *Avada Kedavra*, but of course...”

“We’re wandless,” said Ginny bitterly.

Hermione nodded again. “We are, though wands are much easier to come by than basilisk venom. We still aren’t likely to get a chance, but if we do...”

“Then we know what we have to do,” finished Luna simply.

The girls fell silent, and Hermione found herself just starting to doze off when a noise at the door made her jolt awake and scramble to her feet. She placed her hand against the wall to steady herself as the door was flung open, and three Death Eaters in masks came striding in.

They said nothing as each one of them approached one of the girls and raised their wands to silently bind their hands and gag them. Hermione struggled, but she was so weak from hunger, and the ropes were tight. She had a brief flashback to Malfoy Manor. This precise thing had happened there too, only she hadn’t been this weak. The Death Eater who was handling her grabbed her roughly and pushed her forward, keeping her head bowed and his wand well away from her. Behind her she could hear Ginny and Luna struggling too, but it was no use.

They were led through the dungeons, and only now could Hermione hear some moans and cries from other prisoners in nearby cells. Her heart began to race as she trod the familiar path past the spare dungeons and Potions classroom, then beyond the Slytherin dormitory, until they marched up the stairs and toward the Great Hall.

She knew where she was going. She was certain of it. And this was bad – *very* bad. Hermione closed her eyes and braced herself, hoping that some miracle would intervene to get her out of this.

They slowed as they approached the doors, and Hermione was stunned to find several dozen young people milling around, many of whom were unmasked. She recognized most of the Slytherins from her class, along with several who were in the year or two ahead of her. There were even a few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs in the group and...

Was that Cormac McLaggen?

Bile rose in her throat as he turned and noticed her before giving her a mocking smile.

Her captor made her come to a halt as he called out, “Everyone line up, behind us!”

Draco Malfoy. Sodding Draco Malfoy was the one holding her in place. She would recognize his arrogance anywhere. And while some part of her was filled with fear, mostly she was just angry.

She was *so* angry.

Hermione's temper exploded, and she started to struggle like a wild animal, writhing, twisting, and kicking. She was going for his crotch and pectorals with her knees, just as Tonks had once told her to do in a situation like this, and she heard him gasp as her knee connected with flesh. She felt a moment of keen satisfaction that she had landed a hit, though he was moving now too, and he was quickly overpowering her. Wherever she had hit him, it had not done the damage she was hoping for.

"*Fuck...*" she heard him mutter.

Then a couple of others rushed forward and pinned her down to the ground, holding her in place while the Death Eater she knew was Malfoy stood over her. A moment later she heard a spell she didn't recognize, and a cold sensation moved through her body, as though she was being submerged in water. It took the fight right out of her, and she slumped.

"Get up," he snarled as he tugged on her.

Hermione said nothing, her head just lolled to one side. How could she possibly stand up? She had no reason, no *purpose*. She felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut, feeling both magically relaxed and completely out of her own head. She had just expended the last of her energy in a fruitless attempt to hurt Malfoy. She hadn't even tried to escape, she just wanted him to feel pain.

"I said, *up*," he growled as he hauled her to her feet and bent down to throw her over his shoulder like a sack. She opened one bleary eye and looked down to see Malfoy's arse striding forward, while Ginny's red hair flashed somewhere in her peripheral vision.

Hermione heard the doors to the Great Hall flung open, and then Malfoy was striding toward the front. Hermione was slowly coming back around, but she was still in a daze as he approached. She saw black cloaks and masks that told her she was surrounded by Death Eaters, but she couldn't see clearly to know precisely how many there were. Then she was distracted as his voice rang out.

"My Lord, I have brought you followers and captives. I have been recruiting young men and women who are loyal to you for the past year, and they are here to take your Mark and offer you their service."

She was still draped over his shoulder, but he stepped aside, and she heard shuffling as all of the people who were milling about in the Entry Hall stepped forward and announced their names one by one. Hermione counted twenty-four of them in all.

"You have done good work, Draco," came Voldemort's high voice. "And now, show me your captives."

She felt herself sliding off his shoulder, and as her face passed his, he breathed, "Scream when I say so."

And then without further ado she was dropped in a heap at Voldemort's feet, and she sensed Ginny and Luna being shoved down next to her.

"The Mudblood Granger, my Lord," said Malfoy. "I also have the sister of Ronald Weasley and that Lovegood bint who escaped with Potter from the Manor a couple months ago. I have another half dozen prisoners in the dungeons to offer you as well, after these three."

There was silence as Voldemort contemplated his prisoners. Hermione's head was finally starting to clear from that odd spell, which she now realized must have been some sort of strong calming charm. She struggled to control her breathing as she waited, but there was something odd niggling in her mind.

The sister of Ronald Weasley?

Wasn't Ginny better known for being Harry's girlfriend? True, they had only been together a few weeks at the end of sixth year, but surely Malfoy knew about it. It had been all over the school. Then again, maybe he assumed the relationship fizzled out since it had been nearly a year.

"You have done exceedingly well, Draco," said Voldemort. "And tell me, have you learned any secrets?"

"I have searched the Mudblood thoroughly, my Lord," said Draco. "It was as you thought, but she is no longer a threat. She was the least of them. As you know, Potter and Weasley are already dead."

Hermione went cold, while her heart broke for Ron, and tears started to track down her cheeks as she muffled a sob. Poor Ron was dead too, and now Hermione was all that was left of her little band of best friends. And what did he mean he had searched her thoroughly? When? She hadn't seen him since the battle. She had been unconscious and...

Her head. She woke up with the worst migraine of her life. Had he been inside of her head while she was unconscious? Was that even possible?

Hermione tried to choke back her tears, feeling both desperate and violated. Voldemort knew about the horcruxes, that was something she had accepted during the battle itself. But was he aware of just how close they had come to finishing it?

He must be aware now.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried not to panic.

"Very well," said Voldemort. "I promised you a boon if you were able to gather followers and capture the Mudblood. You have done this, and Lord Voldemort keeps his promises. So tell me, Draco, what is it you desire?"

"I wish to execute the Mudblood for you, in front of the wizarding world. Let us have a spectacle my Lord. Allow me to send her through the veil to join Potter and Weasley so nobody questions your authority any longer. Then I wish to take the Weasley girl for myself.

She is a blood traitor, but she is pure and of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. I am certain I can break her, my Lord. I can make her learn her place in our new world. And finally, as you are most generous, I ask that you consider granting Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini a prisoner of their choice as well. They are loyal and were critical when it came to securing the Mudblood and being my seconds in recruitment.”

He bowed low, and Hermione felt so ill she wanted to wretch.

A public execution. She would be murdered in some horrible event that would be broadcast to wizarding Britain. It wasn’t enough that she would die. No, it would be in front of dozens, if not hundreds of people.

And *Ginny*... Hermione’s stomach turned as she thought about it. Malfoy wanted to take her prisoner for what? Sex? Domination? Surely not *marriage*, despite her status? Regardless of his motives, it was truly horrifying.

At last Voldemort spoke.

“Very well,” he said. “I will not deny that you three captured our highest prize. I will reward you as you wish, Draco. My other loyal followers will be able to choose from our prisoners as well – it is only fitting – but you may have the Weasley girl, and Nott and Zabini may also have priority for their selections as is befitting their rank. We will execute the Mudblood as soon as it can be arranged, and then we will allot the prisoners from there.”

“My Lord, may I suggest the fifth of June for the execution date?” he asked.

Hermione felt the panic truly beginning, and she made herself breath. The fifth of June was just over a month away.

“I am not opposed to it, but you will tell me why,” said Voldemort.

“Of course, my Lord. I am suggesting it because it gives us several weeks to prepare. We can execute the Mudblood, allot the prisoners, and then host celebrations through that weekend. And besides... it also happens to be my birthday. I can think of no greater gift.”

Hermione could hear the smirk in Malfoy’s voice at this last tidbit, and there was a moment of shocked silence as the room seemed to collectively hold its breath at his assertiveness. But then to Hermione’s great surprise Voldemort began to cackle with laughter.

“Excellent Draco, most excellent. Yes, of course we must celebrate your birthday in a unique way this year. Very well – the events will take place on the fifth of June. It will be a national holiday to celebrate my victory. Now then, before you are dismissed... please welcome the Mudblood as our prisoner.”

“Of course my Lord...” he said as he straightened up and removed his mask from his face.

He turned to look down at Hermione, and she stared back at him with dull eyes. His face was carved like stone, and she nearly shuddered at the coldness that was radiating from him. He looked at her for one long moment before pointing his wand straight at her.

“Scream for me, Mudblood,” he said before his face contorted and he cried, “*Crucio!*”

Malfoy’s spell connected, and Hermione began to scream.

Chapter 2: Vow

Chapter Notes

TW: Attempted suicide and minor suicidal ideation. Skip the *** if you do not wish to read it.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Hermione's eyes were closed as she leaned against the wall of her cell, her mind drifting in and out of consciousness as she listened to the rain outside. She wondered if it was washing away the blood from the battlefield or if it was simply pounding it into the earth to linger there forever.

Evening had fallen, and she had been separated from her friends as soon as Malfoy's presentation to Voldemort had ended. This time she was thrown unceremoniously into a smaller room in the dungeons that she didn't immediately recognize. An elf had appeared soon after with food and drink, which Hermione was staunchly ignoring, and she estimated that it had now been approximately twenty-four hours since she had had a sip of water and even longer than that since she had eaten.

It took most people about three days to die from dehydration. This was something Hermione had actually researched before going on the run, though precisely why she had bothered she couldn't really say.

As it turned out, dying through dehydration was truly awful, especially when one had ready access to food and water, and it was simply a matter of willpower not to consume it. But Hermione was determined to die her own way, because she would not, under any circumstances, allow herself to be publicly executed by Draco Malfoy of all people. It wouldn't just be humiliating, it would also be incredibly painful. His cruciatus curse had been surprisingly weak compared to Bellatrix. It had hardly felt like anything, and Hermione only screamed so that somebody who was more competent than him wouldn't have a go. But after experiencing his pitiful attempts at torturing her, Hermione was sure Malfoy did not have enough magic to pull off an *Avada Kedavra*, and that meant she wouldn't have a clean death like Harry did.

There were any number of other hexes and curses that could be fatal of course, but none of them were instant like *Avada Kedavra*. Despite the fact that the killing curse was unforgivable, Hermione had come to believe that it was probably the kindest way to commit

murder, if one was really intent upon it. At least it wasn't messy like a slicing or crushing hex. Ghosts reported that it was painless as well. It did, however, require a strong bit of magic to achieve – not to mention a slight fracturing of the caster's soul – and Hermione doubted Malfoy could do it. While the thought of dehydration had filled her with dread earlier that day, she concluded it wasn't as bad as being sliced open. Blood made her squeamish, and the pain would be unbearable. It was one of the worst possible ways for her to die.

And so, after failing once more to open the door to her cell wandlessly, Hermione decided to take matters into her own hands. Luna and Ginny had their orders about the snake, and Ginny at least would be alive and in the Manor and might have a real shot at killing it someday. Hermione's odds were practically nonexistent.

Besides, some perverse part of Hermione was really hoping that if she wound up dead before her public execution that Malfoy would be blamed for it. This, more than anything, steeled her resolve.

Hermione hadn't found it easy, but she *had* managed to wandlessly vanish a little of the food and drink to maintain appearances in case her captors checked on her. At this point she figured she had less than two days to go before her body gave out. She hadn't taken the time to eat or drink during the battle, and the passage she read about dehydration made it clear that the three day rule was a broad one. It could be much faster than that when exposed to heat or overexertion. Already her awareness was starting to grow hazy, and Hermione was retreating into some twilight place in her own mind as she closed her eyes and counted the drips.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Night soon fell, and Hermione drifted off into an uncomfortable sleep that was suspended between restful and delirious. By the time the sun started to rise the next morning, she was barely conscious and no longer counting drips. In fact, she was pretty certain she was hallucinating as she heard frantic and hushed voices around her, but she couldn't open her eyes to know for sure.

"...get him, quickly..."

"...will *not* let you fucking do this..."

"...figure it out..."

It was only when she felt like her head was splitting open again that she jolted into any sort of awareness. Hermione groaned and made a feeble gesture to bat it away, but it was relentless, rough, and she caught the flashes of scenes playing in her mind's eye.

She saw a wave of her own hand to vanish some of the food and drink and then darkness.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The pain in her head eased abruptly, and Hermione was just beginning to drift again when a sharp stab into her forearm jolted her once more.

“Wha?” she whispered. She felt some pain and then pressure and then cold.

“Stick it to the fucking wall,” she heard a harsh voice say.

Hermione could barely move, but she managed to touch her arm with her free hand and struggled to remember what had happened when her groggy mind seemed to register something that was entirely out of place in the magical world: an IV tube.

Instinctively she started to scratch at it, but a rough hand pulled hers away and pinned it down.

“Don’t even think about it,” the voice growled.

Hermione tried to yank her hand away, but she was too weak and barely conscious to put up any real fight. She slumped and was hardly aware as the minutes ticked by and slowly some of the fog began to clear her mind.

She finally opened her eyes to find Draco Malfoy’s furious face inches from hers. She didn’t think she had ever seen him more angry in her life. Some shuffling told her there were a couple of figures behind him as well, but he was too close to her to identify them.

“What in the actual fuck was that?” he demanded.

Hermione didn’t respond, and her eyes fluttered closed while her head flopped to the side again, no longer willing to fight her exhaustion. If it was Malfoy, she would be overpowered anyway in this state. What was the point of responding?

He gripped her face under her chin and yanked her head upright. His touch was hard, bruising, and Hermione realized he must have been wearing gloves because it felt like leather on her skin. Instinctively Hermione’s eyes opened again.

“Granger, answer me. What are you playing at?”

Hermione tried to sneer but couldn’t quite manage it, and she just closed her eyes once more though didn’t try to turn her head this time.

He made a frustrated sound, and then her head was being split open yet again. As the memories started to fly past, Hermione now realized what was happening.

Legilimency. He was doing legilimency on her, and she tried to close her mind to it, but it was too strong. Not knowing what else to do, she reached up and grabbed his wrist to pull his hand off her face, but that wouldn’t budge either.

She was starting to panic. He couldn’t be allowed in her head, she couldn’t let him find their secrets. Even if Voldemort knew what the trio had been up to now, Malfoy couldn’t know about it... unless he had already found it while she was unconscious...

But no. She had to believe that her secrets were still hers. She *had* to.

Hermione began to struggle, but in her weakened state she was no match for him as he quickly flitted through her memories. He was looking for something, but what it was she couldn't be sure. He skipped the second half of the battle and paused at the short ceasefire to observe what she had done. She hadn't done anything, she knew, except cry over Fred, Remus, and Tonks while feeling sick at the thought that Harry was about to die.

She heard another frustrated sound as he started to move back further than that until he finally landed on the moments in the Hogshead, when Aberforth Dumbledore had fed her the last thing she had eaten before letting her and the boys into the castle. The boys, she knew, had inhaled their food as they always did. Hermione, however, had picked at it, feeling too nervous to eat very much. She had always lost her appetite when she was worried about something.

From there he flipped back further only to discover the single apple she had forced down in some semblance of a breakfast before she and the boys had set out for Gringotts earlier that day.

He nearly growled as he left her mind again.

"She's had an apple and a few bites of bread and stew in the last three days. That's it. Go find Severus and get a nutrition potion."

She heard some movement as footsteps crossed the small cell, and then her door opened and shut. This statement made her eyes open in surprise. Snape was dead. She had watched him die, or so she thought.

Malfoy seemed to register her shock on her face.

"You *friends*," and he sneered at this word, "always liked to call him a bat. But he's really more like a cockroach. He's everywhere and incredibly difficult to kill. Even when you think he's been stamped out, he always comes back."

The slightest spark of hope stirred in Hermione's chest. She couldn't be *certain* that Snape wasn't a traitor – after all, she hadn't seen the memories he gave to Harry – but perhaps...

"My godfather is committed to making sure *you* don't fuck this up for me. You will not be killing yourself any time soon."

Godfather. Snape was his godfather? How on earth had she and her friends missed that detail? And if it was true, then it probably didn't matter what side he was on. Snape would never intervene for her if it would put his godson at risk. She said nothing as the hope flickered and died, and she looked away as a single tear tracked down her cheek. For some reason this seemed to enrage Malfoy who finally released her and moved back, breathing hard.

"You dirty, *sniveling* little Mudblood. Is that what you were after then? You were trying to find a swift exit like your best pal Potter?"

The sound of Harry's name on Malfoy's lips made her forget her commitment to remain silent. Her eyes snapped to Malfoy's face, and he was staring at her intently, his eyes glittering as they bored into her. If she didn't know better she would think he was trying to read her mind.

But he already did, she reminded herself bitterly. *I know what that feels like.*

"Don't ever speak his name," she whispered.

Malfoy's expression turned mocking. "Oh? And why's that? The Boy-Who-Lived turned into the Boy-Who-Died, and now his little Mudblood sidekick is going to tell *me* what to do? You're my prisoner, Granger, in case you haven't noticed. And you *will* stay alive for the next month or I'll –"

"What?" she cut him off. "You'll do what? Your threats are meaningless when I'm already dead, Malfoy."

His nostrils flared at this as he lunged forward and gripped her face again.

"You will not take this from me," he said harshly. "My family's survival is dependent upon it. And it... it will give me everything!"

"Oh like I give a single flying *fuck* about *anybody* in your sodding family or the things you do and don't have!"

Malfoy blinked in surprise as he released her and moved back again.

"Language," he chided her.

Hermione scoffed. "Right. You're allowed to say 'fuck,' and I'm not?"

"Who taught you then? Your dead Weasel?"

At the mention of Ron's name, she froze, and something that felt like ice made her heart constrict. She was breathing hard, determined not to cry in front of Malfoy, but the effort to do it was too much, and she started to feel faint again.

She heard a muttered curse as he closed in on her again. "Slow breaths. You have to take slow breaths, Granger," he said quietly.

As the world began to right itself again, Hermione realized just how close he was to her. He was cupping her face again, speaking into her ear to make her breathe in time with him. She gasped and shoved him away hard.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" she cried.

Malfoy fell back with shock on his face.

"DON'T EVER TOUCH ME!" she shouted again, as the tears fell and she began to sob.

Harry. Ron. Neville. Fred. Remus. Tonks. Colin.

There were probably a dozen others she didn't know about. Ginny would still be alive, but what about Luna? What about George and the rest of the Weasleys? What about Lavender? Had Grayback's injuries killed her or just maimed her?

She pulled her knees to her chest and hugged herself, and only then did she feel that odd tug on her arm and remembered the IV. This was sufficiently distracting that she blinked and looked up to find a bag of what looked like water stuck to the prison wall. Well it was no wonder she could speak now. They were rehydrating her.

She reached for the tube to yank it out, but Malfoy was faster and pinned her again.

"I said don't *touch* me!" she hissed.

"And if you would stop trying to *kill* yourself I wouldn't have to!" he gritted back.

Hermione groaned in frustration, and Malfoy closed his eyes for a moment as though praying for patience.

"What is even the point?" asked Hermione. "Why wouldn't I try to end it? What on earth makes you think I'm not going to take care of this myself as opposed to being publicly tortured and executed? Do you think I *want* to die? Of course not! But I'd rather do it my way than yours!"

"Oh, right," he said coldly. "You would rather die of thirst and starvation than go with a quick *Avada*. Try again, Granger, I know you're smarter than that."

"But it wouldn't be," she said automatically. "You'll never *Avada* me."

At these words, Malfoy almost recoiled, and he stared at her warily.

"What do you mean I won't *Avada* you?" he asked harshly. But his face looked almost frightened. It was an odd juxtaposition.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You'd never manage it. Your cruciatus sucked. You won't be able to do it, and that means I'm going to die in some incredibly violent, very painful way. Do you really think I'm going to give you that?"

All the color left Malfoy's face as he stared at her. She got the impression he was thinking quickly.

"Granger. We aren't friends."

Hermione snorted.

He ignored her and continued. "But I do know you. I'm not going to be slicing through your neck with a *diffindo*. Any death from my hands will be an *Avada*, and it will be fast."

Hermione weighed this and studied his face. "I don't think you can do it."

“I can,” he said simply. “I have before.”

Hermione blinked. She didn’t know what she had been expecting, but a casual confession of murder wasn’t it. Then again, how could she know he was being truthful?

“Your word isn’t good enough,” she said. “Why would I ever trust you?”

He studied her for a long moment, a muscle in his jaw twitching. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision about something.

“I’ll make an Unbreakable Vow,” he said.

Hermione inhaled in surprise.

“Why?” she asked softly.

He stared at her squarely. “I need to do this for my family and for myself. That means you have to stay alive until it’s time. But I’m not interested in making your death messy, Granger. You and I both know that an *Avada* is the most humane way to go. If you stop trying to hurt yourself while we wait for the day to come, then I will make sure it’s as quick and painless as possible. The Dark Lord has given me license to handle it however I wish.”

Something twisted in her gut at this, and Hermione barely noticed as her cell door opened and footsteps came back in. Malfoy held up a hand to stop whoever it was, as they continued to stare at each other.

Hermione was weighing her options. She knew *Avada* was far better than dehydration or any other method she could contrive herself, but she would be sitting around waiting for it for a month. Then again, it could give her some time to work out how to escape. She knew she couldn’t expect to be successful – no doubt she was warded in, and without a wand there would be little hope of breaking the wards – but a month was a long time, and perhaps he would make a mistake. If she was assured of a swift death at the end, then maybe she could be brave while she sat in this cell and waited for it.

Besides, if he failed, then it meant Malfoy would die too.

“Fine,” she said. “Make a Vow.”

Malfoy’s face didn’t change at all, but some of the tension in the air seemed to ease as he sat back and stripped off his gloves.

“Nott,” he said, “be our Binder.”

Hermione blinked as another figure moved into her sightline. Malfoy was so much larger than her that she hadn’t been able to see around him, and his companions had been entirely silent while they stayed back and listened. She looked up and barely recognized Theodore Nott. His hair was shorter than she remembered, his face more strained. But he still had that mop of curls that were surprisingly similar to her own and very blue eyes. She had always thought they looked very much alike, though she couldn’t recall speaking to him a single time in their years at Hogwarts.

Sure enough, he said nothing as he crouched to the side and pulled out his wand.

“I have to touch you for this,” Malfoy said quietly.

Hermione swallowed her distaste, but nodded quickly. Of course she knew that.

He reached up and clasped both of her hands in his. His grip was firm, warm, and Hermione’s hands nearly disappeared in his. He had grown quite a bit over the last couple of years.

He huffed an exhale as though composing himself and then nodded to Nott, who placed his wand on their hands.

Malfoy spoke quickly, before Hermione could begin.

“I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, do vow on my life that I shall never cause Hermione Jean Granger’s death by any means, except through the use of *Avada Kedavra*. So may it be.”

Hermione was so surprised to hear her middle name spoken that she froze as the band of gold slithered out from Nott’s wand and wrapped around her hand before sinking into her skin. Immediately Malfoy released her hand and sat back, as Nott removed his wand.

She furrowed her brow in confusion.

“What about my Vow back?”

“What Vow back?” he said, as he studied her. She thought he would appear nervous about the Vow he had just made, but he seemed to think nothing of it.

“The Vow that says I won’t hurt myself while I’m waiting for you to murder me.”

This seemed to amuse Malfoy, because he gave her a wry smile.

“Like I would ever be foolish enough to let you do that,” he said.

Hermione furrowed her brow. “Pardon?”

Malfoy raised one eyebrow. “You’re here for a month, Granger. After the stunt you just pulled, do you really think I’m going to give you the means to kill yourself so easily?”

Hermione inhaled as she stared at him, now realizing what he was implying. If she had made the Vow too, then any minor injury could have broken it and killed her instantly. Death by breaking an Unbreakable Vow might not be as swift as *Avada Kedavra* – Hermione couldn’t be certain about that – but there would be no saving her from it and still very fast. Truthfully, Hermione hadn’t even thought of this before he suggested it, but she knew it would have come to her at some point over the next month. And if she wasn’t successful in her escape before the execution day, he was right that it would give her a simple way to end things on her own terms instead of his.

Hermione glared at him for taking this away from her, and it seemed to amuse him.

“Gryffindors,” he tutted. “So bold, but so *very* unstrategic.”

Hermione scowled at this, but he ignored her as his eyes flicked up to the bag secured to the wall.

“It’s almost gone,” he said. “Zabini, give me the potion.”

The figure that had come through the door stepped forward and handed Malfoy a vial of something that looked suspiciously like a green smoothie. Hermione wrinkled her nose at it, and Malfoy caught her expression and chuckled.

“It’s your own damn fault, you know. You will drink this. It tastes about as good as it looks, but it will rebalance all the nutrients you’ve lost. And then you will *eat*. If you refuse, then it will be a month of nutrition potions that I will personally force down your throat twice a day. Neither of us wants that, I can assure you.”

Hermione sighed and took the small vial and stared at it. She knew about these in theory, but they were complex and the ingredients expensive. She had considered brewing some before she and the boys went on the run, but there had not been the time, and then she had lost the means as soon as the Ministry fell and she became a fugitive. She couldn’t just walk into an apothecary any longer.

Damn survival instincts, she thought.

Now that Malfoy had vowed to kill her painlessly instead of slicing her open, her will to kill herself through dehydration had evaporated, as it were. She quickly uncorked the vial and downed it. She shuddered. It tasted horrifying, like some blend of overstewed cabbage and rancid meat. But within a few minutes she felt color returning to her cheeks and some of the lingering fatigue in her limbs seemed to be easing. It didn’t make her feel full, but strength was returning to her.

Malfoy was watching her intently.

“Poppy,” he said, and a small elf appeared with a *CRACK!* that made Hermione jump with surprise.

“Poppy, this is Granger. You will keep guard over her. Once that bag is empty you can remove the IV from her arm, and then you will make sure she eats and drinks enough going forward. If she causes any harm to herself, you will find me immediately and inform me. You will not speak to her, and you will not enable her to escape. You will be watching her in twelve-hour shifts with Flinky, and neither of you are to leave her alone unless it is an emergency, and you need to retrieve me. I will let Flinky know.”

Poppy gave an odd sort of curtsy and then moved to the far corner of the room to stand silently.

Hermione glared at Malfoy.

“This is entirely unnecessary.”

Malfoy just snorted. “What’s that muggle saying? Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me? You’ll find that I’m no fool.”

Hermione scoffed. “Right. Because following a half-blood sadist who pretends to be a pureblood isn’t foolish at all.”

Hermione held some mild hope that this taunt would make Malfoy snap, but it didn’t. In fact, he didn’t appear surprised or perturbed by the news at all. Instead he just shrugged.

“It’s you and the others who are in prison at the moment, while I’m free. Sadistic half-blood or not, he’s the one with the power.”

Hermione grimaced, but at the mention of the others, she suddenly remembered her two friends who had been in her cell with her when she first woke up.

Malfoy was starting to rise, but Hermione reached out and grabbed his hand. He jolted in surprise as he stared down at it.

“The others. Tell me about Ginny and Luna. Please.”

Malfoy looked back at her face, and Hermione tried not to appear desperate, but she *was*. She had to know they were alright.

Her expression must have given her away because Malfoy’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he spoke.

“They’re alive,” he said simply. “And if you want them to stay that way, you’ll behave.”

Hermione blanched. “You wouldn’t,” she whispered. “You wanted Ginny for...” she trailed off.

Malfoy’s face twisted at this. “Is that what I told the Dark Lord? Do you think she’ll do a good job warming my bed, Granger?”

There was some uncomfortable shuffling behind Malfoy, but he ignored it as he studied her.

Hermione felt sick as she considered it. “Ginny would *never*...”

Malfoy scoffed at this. “You’d be shocked by the things people are willing to trade if they think it will give them an advantage in war. Their captors just have to find the right leverage. All *you* need to know is they’re alive, and my interest in keeping them that way is entirely dependent on your cooperation. Don’t cause further trouble for me, Granger, or I’ll know precisely who should be punished for it. My Vow did not cover *them*.”

Hermione paled and released his hand, as she sat back and stared at him. Surely they were just empty threats. They had to be. But he also seemed so unconcerned by the thought of them being hurt that she couldn’t be certain. And she realized he was right: people would trade nearly anything when the right leverage was applied. In Hermione’s case, the leverage was her friends, even more so than her own life. She just swallowed and nodded.

“Good,” he said. “I think we understand each other. I’ll be keeping a close eye on you, Granger, to make sure you cooperate. Nott, Zabini, let’s go.”

The three moved out, and Malfoy cast a swift look back at her as he left through the door and locked it behind him. Hermione slumped and turned to look at the little elf who had been left behind, staring at her intently.

“There’s no need,” she muttered.

The elf said nothing, but its gaze remained fixed on her. She shuddered a bit and glanced back up at the bag. It was empty, and she looked down at the needle Malfoy had inserted into her arm.

It was odd, using muggle methods, but she knew it was effective, and no doubt it was far easier to obtain than potions that achieved the same thing. A hydration potion would have been even more rare and complex than the nutrition potion she consumed earlier. Maybe the Death Eaters had adopted some simple muggle methods that required no magic in order to keep their prisoners alive and their private potions stores intact.

She started to slide it out, and the elf immediately hurried over to her.

“I can do it,” muttered Hermione. The elf paused and watched as she slipped it out of her vein. It was perfectly done, just a single stick, as small as possible. A bead of blood pebbled on her skin as she removed it, and to her surprise the elf waved its hand, and the small pinprick healed itself.

Hermione frowned and stared at the elf curiously.

“Why bother to heal me?”

The elf, of course, said nothing, but just stared at her with its large eyes.

It was only now that Hermione realized she still felt weak, but she wasn’t in pain like she expected. She thought back to her injuries during the battle. They had all been minor enough that she hadn’t asked Madam Pomfrey to heal her. She hadn’t even bothered with dittany because it was too rare and valuable to use for minor cuts. She had done what she could, but healing spells were tricky, and she had never been terribly comfortable practicing on herself. She knew she should have plenty of small cuts and bruises, but as she examined her arms and felt her face and neck, she found nothing. Even the place where Bellatrix had held the knife to her throat a few weeks ago seemed to be smoother than she remembered.

“Did Malfoy heal me?” she asked the elf incredulously. “Or have one of the elves do it?”

The elf said nothing to this, but just moved away back to the corner of the room and sat down, never taking its eyes off of Hermione.

Hermione sighed before turning back to the tray of food that was still steaming near her. No doubt it was under some sort of stasis charm. It was a breakfast, composed of all her favorites, and her stomach ached as she stared at it.

She hesitated, knowing that anybody could have spiked her food with something. Then again, Malfoy seemed inordinately interested in keeping her alive and in relatively good health before he killed her. She wouldn't put it past him to have examined her food before giving it to her. Whatever he laced it with it was unlikely to harm her. No, at most it might make her sleepy or stay calm to acclimate to the horrid conditions in which she found herself.

Malfoy was interested in her compliance, her cooperation. He wasn't out to kill her, not yet.

She scooted closer to the food and reached out to take a hesitant bite of eggs as she waited for something to happen.

But there was nothing. Her eggs were just eggs.

The moment the food hit her stomach, the extent of her hunger enveloped her, and her stomach gave an almighty rumble. She took a deep breath and stared down at her food before taking another forkful and chewing slowly.

She had nothing else to do that morning. She would be here for a month or until she finally escaped. She picked at it until every bite was consumed. Then she leaned back against the wall again and allowed her eyes to drift shut, finally succumbing to the first true sleep she had had in days.

The last thing she thought about before her consciousness left her was her breakfast.

How did the elves know my favorites?

Chapter 3: Trauma

Chapter Notes

TW1: Minor suicidal ideation in the first section.

TW2: Graphic depiction of sexual assault and attempted rape in the second section. Skip the text between the three *** if you don't want to read it.

TW3: Depiction of torture in the second section.

This chapter helps set up the rest of the story, but it's a heavy one. Please take care of yourselves first.

Prison was boring.

Malfoy's elves still showed up like clockwork, every twelve hours, and yet neither of them broke to say a single word to her.

Food continued to appear three times a day, and it was the best Hermione had eaten in nearly a year. After a few days of hesitant picking, she finally determined that Malfoy must have her food under his control and nothing was being added to it. The fact that it was always delivered by a third elf made her wonder where, precisely, the food was coming from. The two elves who were her guards wore pillowcases with the Malfoy crest embroidered on them. Hermione knew the Hogwarts house elves wore tea towels like a toga. The elf that delivered her food, however, wore a loincloth, much like Kreacher did. It did not match any of the uniforms Hermione was familiar with, but it made her suspect that her food was being prepared separately from the other prisoners.

Her toilet was nothing more than a discreet bucket, but with the elves there around the clock the mess vanished, and the air was refreshed after each use. It took Hermione some time to get used to relieving herself with another creature in the same cell as her, but at least they gave her the courtesy of turning their backs while she did her business. It was the only time either of them would tear their eyes from her.

She was not allowed to bathe of course, but the elves did perform cleansing charms for her each day, and Hermione had learned years ago how to magically clean her teeth without a wand. It meant that her body and clothes were clean enough, even if she didn't have the benefit of a bath. Again, she sensed she was getting some special treatment.

In those hours between her meals and her toilet, Hermione was forced to turn inward to entertain herself and pass the time. She dwelled on any number of things, but mostly she

thought of death. It should scare her more than it did, and she knew this. She knew that the slight longing she felt every time she contemplated it wasn't healthy or normal. She told herself over and over again that she didn't *really* want to die because Hermione Granger didn't give up. But every so often her imagination ran away from her. She envisioned herself closing her eyes at the execution, seeing a flash of green light behind her eyelids, and then opening them again to see Harry and Ron appearing before her with open arms. It wasn't death she was seeking, it was her friends. But since they were dead now, she would have to die too if she ever wanted to hug them again.

Missing her friends was a problem with only one solution. But if she died then their mission would be incomplete.

It was puzzling, and Hermione was reflective as she turned it over in her mind on an endless loop. Did she want to escape so she could finish it for Harry? Or did she wish it were already the fifth of June so she could see him again?

Yes, she did.

When she was being most honest with herself she knew that some part of her wanted both things, even though they were mutually exclusive. She knew which one she *should* want more - freedom to continue her mission - and most of the time she told herself she *did* want it more. But whenever the pain of their absence hit her, she reminded herself that she would see them again soon. She hadn't escaped yet. All of her attempts had been foiled before they barely started. So she found herself missing her friends, but not grieving them. She would be with them soon, and there was no need to grieve. She only hoped Malfoy really would give her the clean and painless exit he had Vowed.

Then again, she might expire from sheer boredom first.

Death Eaters looked in on her each day. It was usually Malfoy, but occasionally Zabini or Nott checked on her instead, or even others. Some of them she knew, some of them she didn't.

Zabini and most of the others uniformly called her "Mudblood" and didn't speak very much.

Malfoy mixed "Mudblood" with her surname, and he was the chattiest of the bunch. She found herself anticipating his visits simply because it gave her something to *do* to talk to another human being. The cognitive dissonance of being excited to see *Malfoy* was too much for her to sort through properly. She suspected she would die before she understood it.

Nott was an odd one because he only called her Granger. And then one day he slipped and actually called her "Hermione."

"Granger," said Nott in a soft voice as he opened the door and looked in on her. Hermione was in the middle of practicing some wandless magic and making a rock from her cell hover in the air. Other than contemplating death, it was the only thing she could do to pass the time without going mad, and surprisingly, none of the guards ever stopped her. In fact, Malfoy seemed almost amused by her efforts.

“Nott,” she responded.

“More magic then?” he asked curiously as he observed her.

“What else am I supposed to do in this hellhole while I wait for Malfoy to murder me?”

To her consternation, Nott just rolled his eyes.

“Dramatic much, Hermione?”

At the sound of her first name, the rock fell, and she turned to look at him with huge eyes. There was a slight tinge of pink on his cheeks, but he didn’t take it back.

“You called me Hermione,” she said.

“Your powers of observation astound me.”

“But why? Every other person in here calls me Mudblood or Granger. It’s usually just Mudblood, though.”

Nott shrugged and nimbly side-stepped her question. “With so many prisoners it gets confusing when we call them all Mudblood or Blood Traitor.”

Hermione’s heart started to speed up. Nott was rarely this chatty with her. Even Malfoy didn’t tell her things like this. He was very good at keeping information close to his chest.

“How many others?” she asked softly.

Something flashed in Nott’s eyes, and he looked surprisingly grim. “Maybe fifty or so. Enough to fulfill the boons the Dark Lord has promised his key followers.”

Hermione felt sick as she closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. “Maybe it really is better that I’m going to die,” she said softly. “I know I’m not supposed to want it, but it’s certainly better than becoming somebody’s boon.”

Nott said nothing to this, and she opened her eyes again to find him looking at her pensively.

“Not everyone can be saved, Hermione,” he said slowly. “There are... limits... to what can be done in circumstances like this.”

Hermione scowled. “I’m not asking you to save me. I’m just saying I would rather have a clean death than be forced into *that*. I still can’t believe... Ginny....”

A lump in her throat rose as she thought about Ginny being placed in Malfoy’s household. Malfoy had been surprisingly indulgent with Hermione while she was in prison, it was true, but Hermione was certain it was because he felt some measure of guilt for what he was planning to do to her. Ginny, she knew, had no such advantage, and her temper was even worse than Hermione’s. She would surely rage at being caged by Malfoy, and he would snap and retaliate.

“Draco won’t harm her,” said Nott. “I am *certain* about that. They don’t get along, but Draco is a lot more bark than bite when it comes to physical discipline against women. And he doesn’t participate in the revels very often. I’ve never seen him touch a witch who didn’t agree to it.”

“Revels?” asked Hermione with growing horror.

“I’m sure you can imagine,” said Nott grimly. “Ginny will be safe from that.”

“And Luna?” she asked.

“Luna too,” said Nott. “Her future master feels the same way as Draco does about them.”

“Who will claim her?” asked Hermione.

Nott hesitated. “I can’t tell you that. Suffice to say there are negotiations taking place about the order of selection for prisoners, but I feel confident that Luna will go to a generous master. The interested parties are all rather territorial.”

Hermione slumped. There was nothing she could do to stop their fates, she knew that. But it broke her heart to think of it.

“Death would still be kinder,” she said softly, “especially with an easy *Avada*. I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I think I’m lucky.”

Nott looked perturbed. “Don’t say that, Hermione.”

Hermione just dropped her eyes and didn’t respond for a time.

“Are they… being treated well now?” she finally asked. “While they are waiting, I mean?”

Nott nodded. “It’s similar to you, though they are sharing a cell.”

Hermione was grateful for it. At least they had each other for company. Hopefully they weren’t thinking about their fates on an endless rerun like Hermione was being forced to do.

“And the other prisoners?”

He looked hesitant.

“Tell me,” she insisted.

Nott sighed. “I haven’t looked in on them all, but you three are treated better than many of the others, though you aren’t the only ones who are getting special treatment. Like I said, not everyone can be saved.”

“Why us though?” asked Hermione in confusion.

“You because of the sacrifice. The Dark Lord intends to make it a… spectacle. It won’t be as impressive if you don’t look the part. You need to be well-fed and cared for.”

Hermione's stomach turned at this. "And Ginny and Luna?"

"Ginny gets special treatment because she's already claimed by Draco, and that means the others defer to him. Luna gets the benefit of it as her cellmate."

"Don't tell me Malfoy is trying to be their protector."

Nott sighed. "It's more complex than that, but yes. He is."

Hermione gave a mirthless laugh at that.

Nott sighed and turned away. "Look, I need to go. I may not see you again before that... day. And if I don't..."

At the reminder of her execution, the fight left her once more. "Thank you for telling me... all this. I don't know if I believe that Ginny and Luna will really be okay, but I'll try."

His eyes softened. "Please do try."

"I promise not to haunt you after Malfoy murders me," she added. "I'll haunt him instead."

He cracked a grin at this as he started to open the door. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"Bye, Theo," she said softly.

Nott physically jolted at the sound of his first name, but he turned and looked at her one last time.

"Bye, Hermione."

As the day for her execution approached, Hermione still had not found a good opportunity to escape. Malfoy warned the other guards that Hermione could be dangerous, and with rare exception they entered her cell with their wands trained on her. Hermione had tried to wandlessly disarm her guards a handful of times, but spells like that took precision, and she was sloppy without a wand or any real opportunity to practice. They always deflected it easily enough.

She did, however, exact some mild revenge whenever they were particularly rude or cruel to her. One wandless hex she *had* perfected during her imprisonment produced slow-growing hemorrhoids that would require a healer with a specialty to remove, and she had struck more than one Death Eater with it thanks to the fact that it passed through a shield.

Once it became known that she was the source, most of the Death Eaters fell silent when they checked her cell.

One exception, of course, was Malfoy.

The other exception, to Hermione's chagrin, was Cormac McLaggen.

Even more than Malfoy, Hermione despised Cormac. It was odd, she knew, hating the man who was planning to murder her less than her former housemate, but she couldn't help it. It probably had something to do with the fact that Malfoy actually *talked* to her about innocuous things when he visited, and Cormac did nothing but boast. Cormac had always been like that — brash and arrogant — and Hermione soon learned that he craved power. Voldemort was perfectly willing to accept him into his ranks, along with his uncle Tiberius who held sway at the Ministry of Magic, and Hermione was disgusted by how easily he turned for Voldemort as soon as the battle was won.

Cormac's visits also put Hermione on her guard because she sensed he was more influential than he ought to be for a newly-minted Death Eater. Malfoy was never pleased to hear that he had checked on Hermione, and but he didn't seem to be able to stop him. Cormac clearly hovered just outside of Malfoy's control, and something about it put her very on edge whenever he came to visit. He taunted her about the power Voldemort was willing to provide to him and said crude things to her in turn. Hermione learned to just stay silent and suffer his abuse because when she fought back he lingered. Hermione was getting the impression that there was a bit of a power struggle between Cormac and Malfoy in the Death Eater ranks, but she didn't dare ask them about it. Malfoy treated her better than Cormac did — if such a thing could ever be said about the man who was planning on murdering her — but she knew that both men had volatile tempers, especially when it came to the other.

In a moment of clarity, Hermione uncharacteristically decided that she didn't need to know *why* Cormac and Malfoy obviously despised each other so much. Normally she would be curious about an odd dynamic like that, but it really didn't matter, and she didn't dare provoke either one of them by inquiring. So she remained ignorant of the facts surrounding their mutual dislike until Cormac arrived at her cell a week before she was due to die, and Hermione learned firsthand about their conflict.

Her door slammed open, and Hermione flinched in surprise as Cormac and two others wearing the standard Death Eater masks strode through her door. Cormac said nothing at first, but flicked his wand at Hermione, and she found herself stuck to the wall, arms and legs stretched out.

She was in shock at his abrupt behavior. Her heart was racing, and she tried not to panic as she remained pinned there, under his angry gaze. She tried to wandlessly release whatever spell he was using to hold her there, but it wasn't working. She hadn't practiced this, and now she was berating herself for it.

He flicked his wand again and silenced her and then vanished her clothing so she was spread naked against the wall. Now Hermione began to truly panic, as his eyes roved over her hungrily, and he moved toward her.

“Malfoy thinks he’s going to convince the Dark Lord to deny me a boon. *Me*, after I’ve delivered my uncle and his entire fucking department at the Ministry of Magic!”

Cormac stuck her hand against the cheek. Hermione’s head cracked against the wall, and she blacked out for a split second. Her cheek was throbbing, and her head felt like it was split open in the back. She blinked hard to clear her vision.

She made eye contact with the terrified elf in the corner.

“Help,” she tried to say, but she was silenced and nothing came out. The elf, however, seemed to know what Hermione was trying to communicate. She swallowed and nodded quickly before disappearing with a soft *POP!* and Hermione only hoped she would be fast. Cormac’s entire attention was on Hermione, and he didn’t notice the elf leaving. She had never wished for Malfoy’s presence as badly as she did now.

“Malfoy refuses to execute anybody else for the Dark Lord. He says it has to be you, and that’s why I can’t have you. And then he went behind my back and asked the Dark Lord to remove the boon I was promised, all because I told Malfoy I intended to ask for *you*.”

At this his hands gripped her breasts, and Hermione tried to thrash to get away, but she was pinned so tightly and her head hurt so much there was nothing she could do to stop him. The Death Eaters behind him were simply watching, neither of them moving to intervene for her. He dug his nails into her breasts and twisted, and God but it hurt. It hurt *so much*. Nobody had *ever* touched her there, and she didn’t know it could be as painful as this.

“Malfoy thinks he can fuck with me, but I can fuck back harder. If he insists that you’re going to die, then I’m going to have you first. He’s not going to take *this* from me too.”

Now his hands were between her legs, and Hermione felt bile rising in her throat. She thought she was going to vomit all over him. It was horrifying, degrading, and she had never felt more violated in her entire life. Nobody had ever touched her there before.

Even *Hermione* had hardly touched herself down there except for hygiene purposes. She had never been successful at extracting pleasure from herself before. She had heard it was supposed to feel good, but she always found the idea too odd and embarrassing to give it more than a half-hearted attempt. This was her most intimate place that he was touching, and it didn’t feel good. It didn’t feel good at *all*. It was painful — even more painful than her breasts, which might actually be bleeding from nail marks.

“Dry as the fucking desert,” he growled, and then to her horror he cast another spell, and Hermione felt wetness start to trickle down her inner thigh. She struggled to move, but she was pinned too tightly, and she felt sick as something damp and viscous trailed down her leg.

“There,” he muttered. “I’ve always imagined you dripping for me.”

He scraped his fingernails against her core to check once more, and Hermione flinched. He was so rough it felt like he was tearing something open. Her stomach started to heave.

Gods she had never...

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to think about what was about to happen to her. She knew this happened in war. She *knew* it. She told herself she had prepared for it. She would be brave. She would face any man who dared do this to her and get her own in the end. But the horror of her own mind was overwhelming her, and all she could do was struggle against the cold stone wall that was biting in her back.

“Hold still,” he grunted as he pulled something long and slightly purple from his pants with one hand while closing around her throat with the other. Hermione’s flight instinct took over, all of her attention now pulled to her throat where her airway was slowly being cut off. She tried to thrash, until he squeezed so hard that she became lightheaded, and her eyelids started to flutter.

Only distantly did she feel something large and hard start to intrude between her legs. She was doing everything she could to get away, but he was too big and there wasn’t enough air. She felt tears run down her cheeks as he grunted with frustration.

“What the fuck...” he grunted. “Why the fuck won’t it...”

He removed the hard thing and started clawing at her entrance again with his free hand, and Hermione tried to scream but she couldn’t. She didn’t know what was happening, but he seemed enraged, and he reared back and smacked her again. Her head cracked against the wall a second time, and she saw stars as she felt that large thing press again between her legs. She felt, rather than saw, his frustration building. He was shouting with aggravated rage as he squeezed her neck hard and tried to thrust into her. She didn’t know what was happening or why he was so angry, but he tried over and over again, and Hermione’s head scraped against the stone with each attempt.

His fingers clenched around her, and her vision swam. She felt herself losing consciousness, and some part of her was grateful for it. She didn’t want to remember this, *ever*. But then there was a distant shout and some thuds, and then something dark and palpable shifted in the air around her.

A moment later, he was wrenched off of her, and Hermione took a great shuddering gasp of air and blinked hard to right her vision. Her heart was racing as she slowly looked up to find Malfoy staring at her, his eyes taking in everything in an instant. He was pale, and he looked slightly deranged as he surveyed her. Behind him she saw Theo and Zabini, both looking uncharacteristically shaken. The two masked Death Eaters were in a heap on the floor, and Theo and Zabini had their wands over them. Cormac was sprawled on the ground and spread eagle, clearly unconscious. Hermione closed her eyes and tried to bury her face in her shoulder as a silent sob rose. She didn’t want them to see her like this. It was too weak, too degrading. Maybe if she couldn’t see them then she could pretend like they couldn’t see her, either.

She heard some muttered cursing for a moment as a soft brush of magic almost caressed her, but she was still nude and stuck to the wall. Nothing was happening.

“Poppy,” Malfoy's voice rasped. “See if your magic can release her and then help her please, but ask her first. Blaise, check on the others and then call Nita.”

Hermione cracked one eye to see Zabini's eyes widen as he immediately strode toward the door and wrenched it open. She heard his footsteps sprinting down the hall. The house elf approached her and tried for several moments until finally something worked, and Hermione felt her arms and legs release. She collapsed onto the ground and instinctively curled in on herself. She was trembling as the memories of everything Cormac had just done threatened to overwhelm her. She wondered if she was going into shock, and she barely heard the elf leave for a few moments and then return.

The elf whispered, “May Poppy cover Miss?”

Hermione took a shuddering breath and raised her head to find the elf holding a thick blanket. It looked warm, and it was spun in green and gray. Hermione swallowed and nodded, and the elf gently arranged the blanket around Hermione's shoulders before tugging it together. Hermione clutched at it and buried her face in it for a moment to try to calm herself. The blanket was exceptionally soft and it smelled delicious, like some combination of cedar and spice. Hermione breathed it in and finally felt her panic begin to ebb ever so slightly. Only then did she raise her head to see Malfoy staring at her, fury dancing in his gaze. Theo, too, couldn't seem to take his eyes off of her, and he seemed torn between rage and despair.

“Granger,” said Malfoy in a tight voice. “Did he...?”

Hermione opened her mouth to speak and nothing came out. Tears welled in her eyes as the panic started all over again.

Malfoy furrowed his brow for a moment until he seemed to realize the issue. His eyes widened, and he looked fiercer than ever.

“He fucking *silenced* you?”

Hermione nodded through her tears, and he flicked his wand, and Hermione felt the spell release. She took a shuddering gasp and dissolved into now-audible sobs.

“I'm going to fucking kill him,” Malfoy declared as he turned to the still-unconscious Cormac.

“Mate,” said Theo, reaching out to grab Malfoy.

Malfoy turned to growl at Theo now. “But she's—”

“I *know*,” Theo insisted. “But you need to handle this the right way.”

Then he pulled Malfoy to him and started quickly talking in his ear. It was so quiet Hermione couldn't hear.

When Theo was done, Malfoy took a deep breath and nodded once as he turned back to Cormac. He crouched over him and placed his wand against his temple.

“Legilimens,” he hissed.

Cormac's body jerked, but he did not wake, which answered one question for Hermione: Malfoy could indeed perform legilimency on an unconscious person. Cormac continued to twitch, and Hermione got the impression that Malfoy wasn't making any attempt to be gentle.

She knew the moment he got to the scene with her, because he paled as he watched before finally shoving him away and turning around so Hermione couldn't see his expression. Theo was again frantically whispering something to him, and she saw Malfoy taking some deep breaths from behind.

When he finally turned, his expression was calm but so cold Hermione had to look away again.

They stood in silence until Zabini returned.

“He didn't touch them,” he said simply, “and I called an elf to fetch her.”

Malfoy nodded once, and Hermione let out an exhale. She hoped he meant Ginny and Luna, but she was too shaken to ask.

Finally Malfoy approached her, very slowly, his mask still in place. Instinctively Hermione shrank from him and tugged her blanket tighter.

He halted. “I'm not going to harm you,” he said carefully. “Not like that.”

Hermione swallowed but said nothing as he walked even more slowly toward her before crouching down.

“Granger,” he said softly, “he needs to be punished. Tell me how.”

She stared at him, and his eyes bored into hers. They were hard, but encouraging at the same time. She couldn't believe he was letting her have any say in it, but now that he was she knew exactly what she wanted.

“I want it to hurt,” she said immediately. “I don't want him to feel safe anymore.”

Something like approval flashed across Malfoy's face, and he nodded slowly.

“Good. Now tell me. Do you want to do it, or do you want me to do it for you?”

She inhaled in surprise. “You would... let me?”

“Just this once. And I must warn you that despite what happened I can't allow you to hold a wand without supervision. But if you wish to punish him, I will let you do it provided I can hold your hand to cast with you. If that makes you uncomfortable, then I need to do it without your help.”

“Yours is weak,” she said automatically.

A twisted expression appeared on Malfoy's face. "I can assure you, this one will not be weak."

They both fell silent as Hermione considered this. Did she want to hurt McLaggen for what he had done to her? Yes. Some part of her needed to do it, or else she would be terrified for the rest of her very short life. She wanted to reclaim her fear from him. Then again, it meant that Malfoy would touch her, and she wasn't keen on *any* man touching any part of her.

She weighed it a moment longer and asked, "You only have to touch my hand?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Strictly speaking, yes. But if you wish to cast... *that* spell... the magic might fight you. It will be easier if you're braced against me too."

She swallowed as she thought about it a little longer, and then she nodded. "Okay," she whispered. "You can touch me... for this. I need to do this."

He nodded once and then rose and offered a hand to her. She looked at it without moving for several seconds, but then gathered her courage and grasped it. She stood on shaky legs and tugged the blanket to her more tightly as she approached Cormac's form cautiously. Theo and Zabini were both watching her carefully as she swallowed and stared down at him.

"I hate him more than you," she said. "Even though you plan to murder me."

She sensed Malfoy jerk a little in surprise behind her, but he said nothing to this and instead approached her slowly.

"Can I put my arm around your waist to brace you?" he asked quietly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, but forced the bile back down and nodded. A moment later she felt herself being pulled against his chest, and while her heart stuttered, something about it also felt safe. It was an odd sensation because Malfoy was going to end her life in just a handful of days. She *knew* this. And yet, he had been very clear with her about his motives and what he had promised her for her death. He wasn't out to cause her any more pain than necessary, and she sensed that he didn't really want to kill her at all. It was simply a way of ensuring his family's safety, and they were more important to him than she was. Of course they were. Ever since that day he made the Vow, he had taken care not to cross her or push her or demand anything else from her except to stay alive. They still bickered, and he still insulted her on occasion, but none of it felt personal, not even the plans for her death. It was strange, indeed, to take comfort from one's executioner, but in this moment she did.

"Have you ever cast an unforgivable before?" he asked quietly in her ear.

Hermione shook her head, and he tightened his arm a little more.

"Very well. As you know, the *cruciatus* is fueled by hate and fear. You will need to tap into that and draw on it. It will feel like an exorcism of sorts — all of your own hate and fear will be poured into him."

She nodded.

“Alright then, here is my wand,” he said, and he raised his free hand to put his wand in her hand that was poking out from the blanket. It sparked familiarly, and Hermione felt a rush of sadness as she held it.

“The last time I used this Harry was alive,” she said softly.

Malfoy’s hand tightened reflexively at this, but he said nothing as he covered her wand hand with his.

“Remember,” he said. “Pour your hate and fear into the curse. Turn it back on him. Make him feel it, Granger.”

She nodded, and then Theo knelt down by Cormac and placed his wand on his chest.

“*Renervate*,” said Theo, and then he stepped back as he and Zabini both trailed their wands on him.

Cormac groaned and started to sit up, and instinctively Hermione felt herself freeze.

“Breathe,” said Malfoy’s voice in her ear. “He has three wands trained on him. He's not going to touch you again. You can do this, Granger. I know you can.”

She swallowed hard and forced back her fear as Cormac's brown eyes opened and stared at her in amazement.

“Malfoy,” he snarled. “What are you... what is...”

“Now,” Malfoy whispered in her ear, as he moved her hand to point the wand directly at Cormac's heart.

Hermione paused only a moment longer, as she focused on how much she loathed him.

“*Crucio!*” she cried.

The spell hit him, and the force of it pushed her back into Malfoy’s chest as she fought to release the darkness from within her. Malfoy braced her and held her tightly, as Cormac began to scream and something poisonous welled up inside of her. It was all the hate and fear and pain caused by the war, especially over the last year. Memories of her friends dying, her own torture at Malfoy Manor, and finally the violation from Cormac moments earlier flashed before her as the feelings coalesced and then released.

Instinctively she *pushed*, and it seeped out of her and into him. She realized Malfoy was right about it: this spell felt like she was transferring her pain and fear into McLaggen’s very soul. She sensed she could control the intensity of it. He might ache a little if she only said the words, but if she really wanted him to hurt then she had to push her own darkness toward him too.

She wanted him to hurt. She wanted it more than anything at that moment. She was powerful and this darkness had been building inside of her for years. It was begging to be released.

Cormac was shrieking, twitching, and now he was staring up at her, more afraid than she had ever seen him. It should have scared her just how good it felt to make him taste fear, but instead she was thrilled by it. He had taken something from her, and now she was taking it right back.

“Perfect,” said Malfoy’s voice in her ear. “A little more. Give him all of it, Granger.”

She gritted her teeth and pushed harder, and Cormac’s screaming became inhuman as he wet himself. At long last the last vestiges of her pain danced across Malfoy’s wand, and she took a shuddering breath as she broke the connection and lowered the wand.

Cormac’s screams halted, but he was in a heap on the floor, weeping and still shaking, the smell of urine biting in Hermione’s nose.

Hermione sank into Malfoy, who gripped her firmly to hold her up. It felt as though she had cracked open her heart and purged something from it. She was utterly exhausted, but she felt better than she had in months. She knew the darkness would build inside of her again before she met her end, but right now, at this very moment, she felt free.

She now understood how this spell could become addictive. The rush, the power, the sheer *relief* it gave the caster was otherworldly.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Malfoy said nothing to that, but he guided her back to the other side of the room. She sank onto the floor again and watched as he took the wand back from her and then turned to Cormac himself.

“You will pay for this,” he said coldly.

“You sick fuck,” spat Cormac. “You let that cunt—”

“*Crucio!*” cried Malfoy.

Hermione flinched at first, but she found she couldn’t tear her eyes away as she watched in fascination as the spell hit Cormac again. This time Malfoy’s curse was just as strong as hers had been, if not even more powerful. She realized in that moment that she should never have doubted Malfoy. He was more than capable of casting a powerful *cruciatus*, he simply hadn’t done it to her that day he presented her to Voldemort. Instead of transferring his pain and hatred to her, he had kept it all to himself, and he had given her a very dull version of the spell while she screamed and pretended to be in far more pain than she felt. She wondered why he held back with her. Perhaps he simply didn’t hate her enough. Or maybe he found torturing women to be distasteful. Or perhaps he felt there was no need, since he would be executing her anyway. Regardless of his motives then, he wasn’t holding back against Cormac now, and Hermione knew that this time the screams were real.

Malfoy was sweating with the effort by the time he finally lowered his wand, and Cormac looked back up at him. His nose was bleeding, and his eyes looked dull through their tears.

“I’ll tell,” he croaked. “I’ll tell the Dark Lord you allowed her a wand.”

Malfoy, however, just gave him a cruel smile. “By all means, tell him. I think the Dark Lord would be thrilled to know just how powerful her first *cruciatus* turned out to be. You should also tell him that I let her cruciate you because you tried to rape her and take the thing that will make her death most valuable to him. You had better hope that Nita confirms she’s still a virgin, because if she’s not... the Dark Lord will kill you himself.”

Hermione blinked in surprise.

Malfoy knew she was a virgin? Voldemort thought it made her valuable?

Cormac turned paler than ever at Malfoy’s words. “But what...”

“The details are not any of your business,” said Malfoy. “But suffice to say that there were *many* reasons I ordered you and the others to leave her alone. She is not to be touched by *anyone*. Her innocence makes her sacrifice far more powerful than it otherwise would be.”

A bloody virgin sacrifice, Hermione suddenly realized. There must be some ritual or some spell that Voldemort would cast as part of it. She felt sick.

“Will it hurt?” she asked in a small voice.

Malfoy turned to look at her in surprise.

“Will what hurt?” he asked cautiously.

“The ritual or... whatever it is you’re talking about.”

Malfoy’s eyes looked almost gentle now. “No, Granger. The ritual will take place after the sacrifice. You won’t feel a thing.”

Then he turned back to Cormac and said harshly, “But it does require the blood from a dead *virgin*.”

Cormac was ashen now.

“No...” he whispered. “Please... don’t say anything... don’t tell...”

“It’s not up to me,” said Malfoy. “Nita will confirm one way or the other.”

There was silence, as they waited for this Nita to arrive. Hermione had never heard of her and had no idea who she was. But a few minutes later her questions were answered as there was a knock on the cell and a moment later one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen floated through the door. Her hair was pale blonde and shone like moonlight. Her skin was flawless and seemed ageless, though somehow Hermione knew this woman was much older than her.

“You summoned me?” she asked in a musical voice.

“Yes, Granger here was... attacked. We need to confirm her status.”

Hermione swallowed hard as the beautiful woman turned toward her, and then she blurted out, “You’re a Veela.”

The woman gave her a small smile. “You are observant.”

She knelt down by Hermione and studied her for a moment. Something about the woman made Hermione trust her implicitly. She knew it was probably the Veela magic, but she was so beautiful and seemed so good. The part of Hermione that had been shattered seemed to reach for her.

“May I touch you my dear?” she asked gently.

Hermione swallowed and nodded.

Nita placed her hands on Hermione’s face and closed her eyes. Then Hermione felt a warmth traveling down her body and seeping into her heart. It felt like Nita was examining her very soul and was pleased by what she found there. It was lovely.

Hermione sighed with longing as Nita removed her hands and turned toward Malfoy.

“She is still intact. The spell held.”

“So the blood that was between her legs was from what?” he demanded.

Hermione blanched at this, but Malfoy wasn’t looking at her.

“External injuries, no doubt. It was not from full penetration.”

There was a groan of relief from Cormac, and a muscle in Malfoy’s jaw twitched. But he nodded and then turned to Theo and Zabini.

“Take this useless fuck away and lock him in a spare cell until I have a chance to speak to the Dark Lord. I want him out of my sight.”

Theo and Zabini both nodded firmly and hauled Cormac to his feet.

“No!” he shouted. “I didn’t do anything, you heard her... Granger is fine! I didn’t—”

“I will cruciate you until your brain oozes out of your fucking nose if you don’t shut up this instant,” Malfoy snarled. “I am nowhere close to being done with you. Now *go*.”

Theo and Zabini dragged Cormac away, and then Hermione was left with Malfoy and Nita.

“Can you heal her?” Malfoy said, now looking at Nita.

“Of course. If I may touch you again, my dear?”

Hermione nodded eagerly. Nita’s magic felt like being wrapped in a hug. It was soothing, and Hermione was already craving it again.

Nita smiled a little and knelt again as she placed her hands on Hermione's head. There was a pulse of magic, and this time it was so warm it almost burned as it moved through her body. Hermione closed her eyes as she felt her head heal and her bruises diminish and the throbbing pain between her legs cool. She sighed with relief as her body put itself back together. Then she felt an odd tingle below her navel and opened her eyes to stare at Nita in confusion.

"I have reinforced the spell," she said. "He did not breach her, but we shouldn't risk it."

"What spell?" she asked in confusion.

Nita smiled at her serenely. "It is nothing to worry about, my dear. It is Veela magic. Our race has always been desired by men for their baser instincts. We have magic that prevents our bodies from being used against our will. I'm sorry to say that it does not prevent an attack like you experienced, but no man can fully penetrate you unless you wish for it."

Hermione felt a bit overwhelmed by this.

"And you cast it upon me..."

"Right after your capture, my dear. We cannot be too careful."

"Because I have to be a virgin for the ritual," she said. She flushed a bit, but she realized it must have been no secret. She wasn't sure if she should feel grateful for the precaution or bitter because of the reasoning behind it. They were turning her into a perfect sacrifice.

"That's certainly one reason," said Nita blithely. "But virgin or no, it strikes me that all women should have agency over their bodies. I am always happy to cast the spell upon any vulnerable woman."

"And my friends? Ginny and Luna?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, they are protected as well, my dear. It seemed prudent, and I was there anyway to confirm your status."

Hermione reached up and clasped Nita's hand. "Thank you," she said sincerely. "I won't be there to help them, and I just..."

Nita smiled and stroked Hermione's cheek. "You have accepted your death. I can sense it."

Hermione glanced at Malfoy, who was frozen now as he listened. She nodded slowly.

"Yes, I knew it would probably end that way when I followed Harry, and I made my peace with it a long time ago. I just hoped it would be an easy exit. Malfoy has sworn he would give me that. That's why..." she hesitated and glanced at him again. He looked almost sad as he watched her.

"That's why I don't hate him as much as I should," she finished.

Malfoy made a sound of discontentment at this and then abruptly rose and stepped back.

“Poppy,” he said.

“Yes Master?” said the little elf.

Master. So Poppy really is his.

“Bring Granger some clothes from... you know.”

Poppy gave a little bow and then apparated away.

Hermione looked away and hugged the blanket to her more tightly as Nita rose too. She placed a hand on Malfoy’s cheek.

“You need healing as well,” she said, but he shook his head.

“No. Not yet. Find me after.”

She pursed her lips in slight disapproval, but dropped her hand and stepped back. “Very well.”

Then she looked at Hermione. “I do hope we see each other again someday my dear.”

Hermione smiled wryly. “I’ll be dead in less than a week.”

Nita gave her a knowing look. “We both know that the veil is thin.”

Hermione nodded. “It is, that’s true.”

Nita smiled and then moved off. Now Hermione was left with Malfoy, who seemed to be waiting until Poppy returned with clothes for her.

“Granger, I’m sorry about —” he started, but Hermione cut him off.

“No. You don’t get to apologize for what you’re going to do to me. You don’t get to unburden yourself in that way. I said I don’t hate you as much as I should. That doesn’t mean I forgive you for it, especially if my body is going to be used to enhance You-Know-Who’s power after the fact.”

“How did you —” he started, but Hermione rolled her eyes.

“There’s only one thing he wants, Malfoy. Just one thing. It’s power. He wants it from as many sources as he can find, and I know how powerful I am. I imagine he found some ritual that will take it from me after my death, and evidently it’s stronger if I’m still a virgin when it happens. So while I won’t deny that I’m pleased someone had the foresight to protect my virtue against vile men like Cormac, the motivation for it makes me angry. Don’t interpret my cooperation and acceptance of the inevitable as forgiveness for your actions.”

Malfoy swallowed, and his face seemed to shutter at her words. He just nodded curtly and wisely kept his mouth shut until Poppy appeared with fresh clothes that Hermione didn’t immediately recognize.

"These is fitting Miss. Is Poppy allowed to speak to Miss now?" she asked Malfoy.

Draco gave a short nod. "Yes, I suppose there's no harm at this point. Just nothing classified."

Poppy gave a toothy grin at this, and Hermione couldn't help it. She smiled too. It felt strange.

"I will leave you," said Malfoy. "Rest assured McLaggen will be handled. I will be informing the Dark Lord of what he did to you."

Hermione nodded her agreement. She had no sympathy for whatever might happen to him once Voldemort learned his precious ritual had been threatened.

Malfoy said nothing more as he slipped out, leaving Hermione to her thoughts. She had been violated, terrified, and then exacted revenge. She was changed, she knew that. Though she only had a few days left, she would die a different woman than she had been.

Draco was staring into space, barely conscious of the other Death Eaters around him. McLaggen had just been hauled off after the Dark Lord permitted Draco to torture him in front of the other Death Eaters. It had been a large group this time, and Draco had been forced to heal McLaggen periodically so he wouldn't fully bleed out and die. After all, Draco had more that he wished to do to the bastard. The others had looked at him with some wariness and reservation when it was all over, but some of the more senior members had congratulated him on it before shoving a drink in his hand.

Whispers of Draco's special skills had spread quietly in Death Eater circles before this night. Up until very recently, Draco preferred privacy or just a small number of witnesses whenever he tortured a prisoner instead of showing off in front of a group. He usually enjoyed it more that way, and there was always a chance that the wrong people would hear about it if his audience was too large. But then again, this particular display had been effective in making the other Death Eaters sit up and take note. They all respected and feared him now. The Dark Lord had been quite pleased with the performance. Besides, Draco would be doing a lot more than *that* very soon, and perhaps it was a good thing McLaggen had given him some practice at putting on a show. The Dark Lord was firmly in power now, so it was probably time to go public with the full scope of Draco's talents.

He couldn't think about it rationally though. Hermione's words were reverberating in his head.

"Don't interpret my cooperation and acceptance of the inevitable as forgiveness for your actions."

He kept hearing her say this to him on a loop. He couldn't get it to stop.

He thought she had forgiven him. She had been talking to him every time he visited. She had been cautious and occasionally biting, it was true, but for the most part they were cordial to each other now. Ever since Draco found her that day she tried to kill herself, he had gone to great lengths to improve their relationship. He didn't want her to take matters into her own hands, not *ever*.

He had never been so terrified as that day he found her, not even when she was brought in to the Manor or when he knew she was dodging fiendfyre in the Room of Requirement. His heart had never ached like that before.

Or it hadn't until earlier that day when that fucking pig had attacked her. Draco's magic positively crackled every time he thought about it.

She had been so scared. There had been enough blood between her legs that he had scarcely noticed her nakedness. He couldn't stop staring at the blood. It wasn't dirty at all, but he already knew that. No, it was red just like his. It was full of magic and inordinately powerful. McLaggen had spilled something utterly precious. Draco had already spilled far more than that in retaliation, and he wasn't done yet.

But Draco needed her to forgive him. He really, *really* needed her to forgive him.

She will, he tried to assure himself. *There is so much she doesn't know yet.*

Draco took a deep breath and tried to occlude to push her words away. He had been in a near-constant state of occlusion since the Battle of Hogwarts. It was the only way he could stand to see Hermione every day, so bored and lonely in that prison cell.

Not long. It won't be long now.

Pretty soon everything would change, and he wouldn't have to see her on that cell floor ever again.

He forced himself to remember the other thing she had said; the thing that made Draco sad to hear, but also gave him a spark of hope.

"I don't hate him as much as I should."

He would cling to this. It would be the thing he focused on over the next few days as he made his final preparations to kill Hermione Granger.

She may not have forgiven me, but she doesn't hate me. Not really.

Chapter 4: Execution

Chapter Notes

TW: Depiction of public execution - blood and gore. Skip the section between the three *** if you don't wish to read.

Hermione's final days slipped from her like water through a sieve. Now that Poppy and Flinky were allowed to talk to her, Hermione passed her time chatting to them about their lives and families. She used her last few days to learn everything she could about house elves and hopefully plant the seeds of freedom in their minds. She didn't bother to ask about Malfoy. She didn't want to talk about Voldemort. She tried very hard not to think about Cormac, and she buried the thing that had happened to her deep into a crevice of her brain so she would never have to confront it before she died.

After her final escape attempt failed only moments after it started, Hermione knew what was coming, and she didn't want to think about Death Eaters in her last hours.

Instead, she thought of house elves and Harry and Ron and all of her friends she would see soon. She still didn't fear death. She knew there was *something* that came after, if Harry's experiences after the Triwizard Tournament were anything to go by. And the closer she got the more relieved she became that she would be seeing them again, even if her death would make Voldemort even more powerful than he already was.

After the attack by Cormac, she saw no guards except for Malfoy, Theo, and Zabini. Of the three, Malfoy had largely avoided her and Theo had visited the most often. The only time she allowed herself to think about Cormac during those last few days was when Theo showed up to report that Cormac had been denied a boon and was publicly tortured for his transgressions against her. Malfoy had led it, and it had been so brutal that he had secured his position within Voldemort's inner circle.

Hermione didn't feel sorry for Cormac at all, but it was a bitter feeling to know that Malfoy had managed to use the thing that had happened to her to rise higher in the ranks. Of *course* he would find some way to benefit himself from it.

Still, Malfoy was feared now, and she knew that was valuable. It meant that her death would go precisely as planned, and nobody would think him soft for using a basic killing curse to end it.

After arriving at that conclusion, Hermione thanked Theo for letting her know, told him she didn't want him to mention it again, and then focused on repressing it. She shoved every

single thought about Malfoy and Cormac and torture aside to focus on her two elf companions instead. She was determined to die in peace.

Hermione woke on the fifth of June to sunlight streaming through the few ventholes in her cell. From what she could see it was a glorious day, and her heart stuttered to think that the sun would rise again tomorrow, but she wouldn't be there to see it.

She had been calm and composed up to this point, but now that the moment was coming upon her she began to get nervous. She picked at her breakfast, which was some sort of interpretation of a last meal. It was everything she loved to eat, but she tasted nothing as she sampled it. Poppy gave her a dismayed look, but for once didn't press her. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. She wasn't going to starve to death in the next few hours.

The morning passed more quickly than she wished, and Hermione felt her nerves begin to fail her as the hour approached. She tried to breathe and focus on her friends.

Harry and Ron. Harry and Ron. Harry and Ron.

They would greet her with open arms, she was certain of it. They would say kind things to her and take her on a grand adventure and introduce her to Harry's parents and Ron's uncles who were killed in the first war. If she was very lucky they would say nothing about Malfoy or any other wizard who had caused her pain. The afterlife shouldn't be painful at all.

She closed her eyes and focused on their faces, and Poppy gave her the space to do it. Poppy had become her friend over the past few days. She liked Flinky too, but he always took the night shift, and Hermione hadn't gotten to know him quite as well. Still, she was gratified when Flinky appeared a few minutes before it was time to hug her and wish her well.

"Flinky is liking Miss," he croaked. "Miss is giving Master Draco much to think about."

Hermione gave him a wry smile. "I'm sure. And Flinky... promise me you'll ask for your freedom once it's safe for you to be unbound."

"Flinky will think on it, Miss," he replied.

Before she knew it, Malfoy was opening the door to her cell, looking very pale, with Theo following behind him.

"It's time," he said shortly. "We'll be escorting you to the Ministry."

Hermione blinked. "They are executing me in the Ministry?"

Malfoy inclined his head. "Yes. The Dark Lord has the Ministry firmly in his grasp now."

Hermione felt sick as she contemplated it, but she supposed it made sense. If Malfoy was willing to commit murder in public it must mean that Voldemort's reign was secure.

She tried to breathe through her nerves and just nodded.

“Very well,” said Malfoy. “I’ll admit you’ve been more cooperative than I was expecting these last few weeks. But we’re at the end, and nothing can go wrong today, do you understand me?”

Hermione just stared at him and didn’t respond.

“Right,” he said a bit awkwardly. “In that case, I hope you forgive us, but it needs to be done.”

“What needs to be –” she started, but she was cut off by Theo’s voice.

“*Imperio*,” he whispered.

Hermione felt her mind go blissfully blank. All of her nerves and anxiety melted away, and she just looked at the two wizards in front of her with mild bemusement. She didn’t even try to fight it, because why would she? She had never been able to break the curse consistently like Harry could, and she was about to be executed. The sliver of her brain that was still *her* knew that. This little trick of Theo’s would let her walk to the gallows in peace. It was sensible, really, and the small part of her that was aware was even thankful for it. Her courage would not fail her at the very end.

“You will stay still,” said Theo, now raising his wand to her face, as Malfoy did the same. “This won’t take long.”

They both began to mutter spells, and Hermione felt her features shifting. Out of the corner of her eye her hair shortened and straightened.

“Don’t make her *too* pretty,” muttered Theo.

The hair she could see in her peripheral vision changed from light blonde to a mousy brown.

“Better,” said Theo. “Make her clothes a bit dirty too.”

Some distant part of her brain was alarmed by this change of plans, but she didn’t have the presence of mind to demand an explanation. The cool blankness of the *imperio* curse was occupying too much space.

Theo looked at her and said firmly, “You will tell anybody who asks that your name is Amalie Beumont. You are a pureblood, aged eighteen years old, and you were educated at Beauxbatons. You came back to England after finishing your education, and you were recently caught and imprisoned for smuggling muggleborns with your blood traitor family. Draco Malfoy captured you and brought you here last night. You will not reveal that you are Hermione Granger. You will not tell anybody that you are under any spells or enchantments. You will follow my orders and those of the Dark Lord and whoever becomes your master until I release the curse. You will not interfere with the ceremony today, regardless of what you see. You will remain silent and will not speak unless somebody asks you a direct question. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” muttered Hermione dully, though inside her alarm bells were ringing. Theo seemed to notice this, because he tightened his grip on his wand, and he seemed to send a wave of calmness through the curse, as her mind quieted.

“Good,” he said. Then he looked at Draco. “I’ll keep her close.”

Draco nodded. “Take her then. I’ll be along shortly.”

Theo gripped her by the arm, and she obediently followed him out of the door and into the hallway where she found Zabini escorting Ginny and Luna, both of whom had absent expressions on their faces as well. Hermione felt no excitement to see her friends for the first time in a month, nor did they register any surprise to see her as Amalie Beumont. Instead, all three girls turned to Theo and Zabini and followed serenely as they made their way through a corridor in the dungeons, before coming to a halt in front of a blank wall.

“We will floo from the Slytherin common room,” said Theo. “They’ve added a special connection for this.”

Sure enough, Zabini muttered the password, and the wall slid open to reveal a number of Death Eaters and prisoners lining up to floo. Even through the fog in her mind Hermione could see that many of the prisoners had not fared as well as her. Several were struggling, but most seemed to have given up, as they were escorted one by one to the fire.

Theo and Blaise herded Hermione and her friends toward it, and before long she was floo’ing with Theo to the Ministry of Magic. There, he gripped both Hermione and Ginny by the arm and led them through the atrium and into an event hall that Hermione knew was often used for speeches by the Minister. There was a stage with a low platform and large blade on it, along with a throne. Behind it was an enormous cage, where Hermione and the others were led. Before they were placed inside, Theo looked at them both.

“You will not acknowledge any other prisoners. You will not speak to them. You will only answer questions if asked by a Death Eater or the Dark Lord himself.”

“Yes,” muttered Hermione and Ginny at the same time.

Theo looked nervous, but nodded and ushered them in, before shutting the door behind them. Then he stepped to the side and tightened his grip on the wand.

Stay calm. Relax. Don’t react.

He seemed to be sending this message to Hermione through the curse or some other means. She couldn’t be sure how he was doing it, but something about it felt so familiar that she implicitly trusted it. Her curiosity and willingness to fight evaporated, as she was wrapped up in Theo’s calming presence in her mind.

It took nearly twenty minutes for the cage to fill and the Death Eaters to take their place on stage. The seats in the event hall were filled with rank and file Ministry officials, and soon the crowd fell silent as the lights dimmed and the stage was illuminated. Voldemort strode out to raucous applause.

He raised his hand for silence.

“My friends,” he said in a chilling voice. “You all know why you’re here. Today we mark my ascent and complete it with a blood offering from the last of Harry Potter’s closest friends. My protege, Draco Malfoy, is young but ambitious. He has brought me followers, and he has brought me prisoners, including Hermione Granger herself. He has proven devotion beyond his years by locating the ritual that will be performed today and serving in the critical role of executioner. As some of you know, I rose again with the blood of Harry Potter. And now, I seize greater power with the death of Hermione Granger. Draco, if you please...”

Voldemort moved to the throne, and the door to the event hall was flung open, and Draco Malfoy came striding into view. He was dressed in robes of pure white, his face unmasked, like most of the Death Eaters on stage. Beside him, he was escorting *her*. Even through the haze in her mind Hermione registered shock to see herself approaching the stage, with hands tied behind her and dressed in a gown of diaphanous white. She had white fairy lilies woven into her hair. Her curls were loose, and it looked like she had bathed. Her expression was accepting, but distant. She was not fighting it.

She looked like a bride out of some sort of mad fairy tale.

There were whispers as Malfoy led her up to the stage, where the fake Hermione was told to kneel in front of the low table.

The real Hermione began to panic, as she realized what was about to happen. She had been swapped. Some other person was going to be killed in her place.

No, no, no, no, no!

She was chanting it in her head, trying to find a toehold to fight the curse and reveal the truth, when Theo’s magic pulsed so hard Hermione felt breathless.

You will not interfere.

Theo’s magic was pushing down her resistance while Malfoy approached Voldemort and bowed. Voldemort placed a hand on his head as though offering some sort of prayer over him before Malfoy kneeled and drank from a flask that Voldemort handed to him. Soon Malfoy moved back to the fake Hermione and began chanting, as he lifted a knife from the platform and sliced his palm. He smeared the girl’s lips with blood and ordered her to taste it, which she did. Then he smeared the blood across the top of her chest, right over her heart.

Hermione’s own heart was pounding, as she was struggling with Theo’s magic. His was strong though and so oddly familiar that Hermione couldn’t find the grip she needed. Every time she started, Theo’s magic intervened, and it felt so much like her own she didn’t know where one started and the other stopped.

Malfoy began chanting again, and before Hermione knew it the crowd was chanting too. And then Malfoy positioned himself behind the kneeling girl and placed the same knife against her throat. Hermione was screaming in her own mind, but Theo was not letting her go, as Malfoy's free hand gripped the girl's bound hands from behind and held her in place.

There was the tiniest flash of green at her back, so close to the girl that Hermione was certain Voldemort hadn't seen it. Malfoy's hand did a little flick, and the tip of his wand disappeared up his sleeve just as he wrenched the knife across her throat and slit it, spilling her blood on the platform.

No, not a platform. An altar.

As soon as the girl's throat was slit, Hermione stopped fighting Theo in her mind as she stared in horror at what had just happened. Malfoy had killed the girl that looked like her without compunction or hesitation. She desperately hoped that the tiny flash of green had been the killing curse right before she was sliced open, but she couldn't be certain. He hadn't shouted the words, and it had been so subtle she was sure it went unnoticed.

The fog she had been fighting rolled across her brain again as Malfoy blooded himself from the altar and then used the knife blade to scoop some of it into a goblet, which smoked the moment the blood hit it. He walked over to Voldemort and knelt before him, offering the goblet up for Voldemort to drink.

Hermione scarcely noticed Malfoy's white robes that were sprayed with the girl's blood or the triumphant expression on Voldemort's face as he drank. She was too preoccupied by staring at *herself*, very dead with her throat slit, blood still leaching out of her onto the altar and the white gown. Her eyes were open and dead. So dead. The fog started to roll away again as panic gripped her through the curse.

Theo must have felt it because he was sending his magic to her stronger than ever.

Breathe. Stay calm. Don't panic. It's almost over.

But it wasn't working. All Hermione could see was *herself*, dead and mutilated, and it was so much worse than if it had actually been her. Seeing herself like this made her truly fear death for the first time in ages, and she feared Malfoy now too. He hadn't even hesitated as he butchered her.

Hermione had been placed on one end of the cage, a bit behind the others, and she felt a shock as the same calming spell Malfoy had used when first presenting her to Voldemort washed over her. Paired with the *imperius*, her mind truly left her again, and she was in a daze as the ceremony concluded and the girl's body was removed from the stage.

It was only as the Death Eaters were moving forward to select their boons that Hermione started to become aware of her surroundings again, though she was still in the shroud of the *imperius*.

Malfoy was allowed to go first, his selection predetermined. He strode to the cages and grabbed Ginny, who went with him with slightly jerky movements. He held her at his side as he rejoined Voldemort. Several of the older Death Eaters went next, and they picked young girls Hermione barely recognized from Hogwarts. Then it was Theo's turn, and he picked Luna, who went to him willingly.

Hermione registered some relief at this. She knew Theo would not harm Luna. He was magically powerful, but had always struck her as the gentlest of her captors.

Yaxley and Dolohov stepped forward, and they picked Hannah Abbot and Susan Bones, respectively, and then it was Zabini's turn. He marched up and down the cage, as though considering the available options, before he stopped directly in front of Hermione.

"You," he said. "Tell me your name."

Theo's magic pulsed hard, and Hermione said, "Amalie Beumont."

"Did you go to Hogwarts?" he asked.

"Beauxbatons," she ground out, though she was fighting it.

"And your blood status?" he asked.

"Pureblood," she said through clenched teeth.

"A continental pureblood then," he said with some convincing surprise. "I am most fortunate. Very well. I choose Amalie."

The part of her brain that was still her registered this as odd. It was true Zabini had looked in on her from time to time, but he rarely spoke except some very minimal small talk. He usually approached her with detachment. The notion that she belonged to him now was strange, though at least he didn't seem cruel.

Then again, perhaps he didn't know who she was? Theo and Malfoy had been the ones to change her appearance, not Zabini.

Theo pulled her back under the curse with a strong nudge, and Hermione rose to follow Zabini out of the cage, as he took a place near Malfoy. Hermione looked at Malfoy with dull eyes and saw him staring at her intently. She dropped her gaze, fear of what she had just witnessed penetrating her fog for a moment.

Hermione knew she should pay attention to who was going where, but she couldn't. Every time she felt herself starting to break through the curse, horror and fear threatened to drown her, and for a moment she just allowed the magic of the *imperius* curse to wash over her instead of trying to fight it. It would smother her feelings, and she desperately needed that blank blissfulness to cope with everything that had just happened.

She was alive. Against all odds, Malfoy and Theo, at least, had saved her life and killed somebody else in her place. And what about Zabini? Was he aware, or would he get a

surprise as soon as her transfiguration wore off? Human transfiguration never lasted very long. She would have a day, at most.

Hermione felt the grip of panic again, and Theo sent another pulse of soothing magic to her.

Blaise knows, it will be fine.

How was Theo speaking to her? How was he reading her thoughts? Hermione didn't know. She didn't think that was how the *imperius* curse normally worked, but then again she had never cast it on anybody herself.

She felt another surge of Theo's magic, and Hermione's curiosity waned as she let her own mind retreat again. Soon Zabini was gripping her by the arm and quickly escorting her out through the hall and toward a floo that was away from those being used by most of the guests. He was walking quickly, pausing to speak to nobody. Theo and Luna were behind them, with Malfoy closing in as well, though his progress was slowed a bit by other guests. Zabini jerked her arm to indicate that she should keep up, and soon he threw some powder into the floo and stepped in with her.

"Malfoy Manor!" he said softly, and Hermione's panic spiked again as they arrived at the place where she had been tortured.

"Fucking hell," declared Theo, as he stepped through with Luna moments later. "I can barely control her."

He was sending calming waves through the curse, but Hermione's panic was so strong that she felt his grip on her truly fracturing.

"Use that spell," muttered Zabini.

"I already did!" insisted Theo. "It's too soon to do it again and..."

He was stopped by the floo turning green again and Malfoy stepping through with Ginny.

"Thank Merlin," Zabini breathed, as he moved forward and took Ginny from Malfoy.

Malfoy stepped toward her, but Hermione's panic reached a fever pitch when she saw him with her blood on his face and robes, and she backed against the wall and started to shake.

"Theo!" said Malfoy.

"I'm trying, but she's fucking panicking, even through the curse!"

"But your bond..."

"I know," he said through gritted teeth, "it's the only thing that's keeping me connected. I think she would have thrown you out in the first five minutes. Hang on..."

Theo closed his eyes, and seemed to wrap Hermione in his magic. She felt the *imperius* strengthen, and something else was pushed toward her as well. It filled her from the inside,

and slowly her panic subsided.

“I’m getting there,” said Theo. “But take her now before it breaks again.”

Malfoy nodded and moved forward. “Granger, you’re coming with me. I have a room all ready to go. You’ll be safe there, nobody is going to harm you.”

“Zabini,” she gasped, pushing through the curse for a split second.

“He’s taking Ginny,” said Malfoy cautiously, as though speaking to a scared animal. “He and I have swapped, as it were. Now listen, I know today was a lot, but we *must* get you into your room, okay? The Manor hosts random guests all the time, and people will wonder why I’m keeping you here since you’re supposed to be Blaise’s boon. We need to give it a little time before we let the others know we swapped.”

Hermione was still shaking, but Theo was continuing to do that odd thing through her magic that was soothing her nerves. As panic rose, he seemed to be pulling it away from her. Over and over again, he drew it back.

“Hermione, go with Draco. He’s not going to hurt you. I’ll release you from the curse once I know you’re warded in.”

Hermione gave a jerky nod, and Malfoy held out a hand. She twitched hard as she fought taking his hand, and disappointment flashed across his face for a moment, before he gave up and lowered it. He gestured for her to follow instead. Hermione followed slowly behind him as he led her toward a nearby staircase to move to a different wing of the Manor. Hermione’s pulse was still skipping, and it was only the waves of Theo’s magic and the haze of the *imperius* that were keeping her calm enough to climb the stairs after him. She dimly noticed that the others were following too.

Soon Hermione felt a shuddering as she passed through some wards, and once they were through it Zabini and Ginny split and moved a different direction, leaving just Luna and Theo behind them. They approached a door and Malfoy used his bloody palm to open it before they all moved through into a small corridor.

“This way,” said Malfoy, leading Hermione toward a door, which he opened to reveal a beautiful bedroom and small parlor. The moment the door was shut he turned to Theo. “Can you release her?”

Theo looked at her skeptically. Hermione’s stomach was rolling, and when she turned to look at Malfoy squarely all the blood on his robes made the part of her brain that was still her emerge again.

So much blood. My blood. Muddy blood. It’s red just like his. He did it to that girl. What will he do to me?

“No,” Theo finally said. “Not yet. You need to go change and get cleaned up. Your appearance is frightening her.”

Malfoy's expression showed a flash of surprise at this, and he looked down at himself as though he had forgotten he was covered in somebody else's blood.

"Oh," he said, "right. Stay here, I'll be right back."

As soon as Malfoy left, some of Hermione's panic receded as the curse and Theo's magic washed over her once more. Then Theo turned to her and said, "You can speak to Luna if you wish."

At this, Hermione focused on Luna for the first time.

"Luna!" she cried, as she turned to hug her friend, who patted her calmly on the back.

"Hermione, you were brave."

"My name is Amalie," she said, the *imperius* curse prompting her to lie about her identity.

"Oh, did you change it?" asked Luna curiously. "You look a bit different, but your aura is still your own. I would know you anywhere."

Something about the familiarity of this made Hermione find a crack in the curse.

Let me go! she practically shouted into her head.

Theo winced. "Fuck, don't yell. I'll release it as soon as Draco gets back."

He sent some more of his calming magic to her, and Hermione's stilled as they waited for Malfoy to return, and he raised his wand toward her face and muttered, "*Finite incantatum.*" Hermione saw her curls materialize in her peripheral vision.

Within fifteen minutes a door to the parlor opened and Malfoy walked through it, looking much less sinister in clean robes. His hair was wet as though he had just showered, and his skin was pink from being scrubbed.

His gray eyes flicked toward Theo who nodded.

"Alright. But get ready..."

Hermione felt the fog from the curse fully lift, and she blinked as she stared back at Malfoy. It took only moments for the memory of what she had just seen to hit her without any barrier from the curse to dull it, and she turned around and wretched.

"Granger!" he cried in alarm, and he started to move toward her.

Hermione stumbled in her panic to get away, and she tripped and fell, but turned to see him closing in on her and she scooted back against the wall.

"No," she gasped. "Stay away..."

Malfoy came to a halt and looked down at her with concern and hurt. "But I..."

“You *murdered* her! You murdered me! That girl... oh God and she looked just like...”

Hermione felt panic clawing up her throat again, and she flinched as Malfoy drew his wand to vanish her sick. He saw her reaction and placed the wand down on a nearby dresser and raised both hands in the air.

“Granger, you need to breathe,” he said slowly. Then he looked at Theo. “Can’t you... you know?”

“You’re sure you want her to —”

Malfoy nodded, and Theo sighed before sending another wave of calming magic toward her. Hermione pulled it around herself like a blanket, but then registered that he had done it to her outside of the curse. Now she looked at Theo in fear too.

“What was that? What are you doing to me? How can you...?”

Theo glared at Malfoy for a moment before turning back to Hermione. “We have a bond, Hermione. It’s too much to get into right now, but just know that we have one. It’s not dark or ill intentioned or anything like that. It can be used to siphon off troubling emotions, and we can communicate through it with enough concentration.”

“You can read my mind?”

“Only if I focus very hard on the bond,” he said. “I’m not just hanging around in your head.”

Hermione’s gaze pierced him. “But why? How?”

“Later,” said Malfoy firmly. “Not today. We’ll explain everything to you in time, but today has been too much.”

At this Hermione felt something inside of her snap.

“Don’t speak to me,” she insisted. “I want nothing to do with you. I can’t believe you murdered some innocent person in my place. And it was just... just...” the bile rose in her throat again. The memory of seeing herself dead and slain was replaying in her mind on repeat.

Malfoy closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before opening them again. His expression had gone flat.

“I will leave you alone soon, but I need to make a few things clear first. You are going to be warded in here. You can go anywhere in this suite, but you will not be able to leave it. Poppy will be taking care of you, and you can call her if you need something. That portrait will be watching you around the clock.” He gestured toward a portrait of a young woman. She was blonde and beautiful.

“She won’t speak to you,” Malfoy added, “but she will be reporting everything to me. As for what happened today... I’m sorry that it distressed you, but it was the only way. Please know

she was a volunteer, and I killed her with an *Avada* before slicing her throat. She didn't feel it."

Hermione blinked. "A volunteer... a *volunteer*? And that makes it fine that you..."

"You seemed perfectly willing for it to be you!" he snapped. "So why does it surprise you that some other person was willing as well?"

Hermione shook her head hard, in disbelief at what she was hearing.

"No..." she whispered. "No, no, no... it should have been me. It shouldn't have... all that blood... my *face*..."

Theo sent more magic her way, and now she looked at him and glared.

"Stop DOING that!" she cried. "Let me feel it! You've taken away my freedom and my choices and now my feelings! Don't you dare try to calm me down because *he* sliced open somebody who looked just like me right in front of me!"

Theo's face fell, and Malfoy looked pale and as though he was starting to panic too.

"Granger..." said Malfoy desperately.

"NO!" she cried. "Get out! Just get out, all of you!"

She turned her face away and began to sob as she heard hushed, frantic voices, and then footsteps moving away. A door shut, and then she heard a distant crash in the next room that made her flinch.

Tears were streaming down Hermione's cheeks. She had been saved, yes, but at what cost? Malfoy had murdered somebody else in her place, and now she was trapped here in this beautiful, gilded prison until further notice. And there was that odd bond with Theo... what was it? How could her secrets be safe if both he and Malfoy could dip into her head whenever they pleased?

Was she safe here with Malfoy? He was a murderer and obviously comfortable with violence. Would he eventually lose control and try to touch her like Cormac or would he just snap her neck? Could he get around Nita's spell? He was the one who called her, after all. Who was to say he wouldn't bring her in again to remove it while Hermione was asleep?

She didn't trust him, she knew that much. He had saved her, yes, but he pulled the wool over her eyes for weeks as he allowed her to believe she was going to die. She had accepted it. She had been nervous, but she had also been looking forward to seeing Harry and Ron again. As odd as it sounded, it had given her last few weeks some sort of purpose to know she was marching toward that moment, hour by hour, when she could be reunited with her best friends. She hadn't even properly grieved for them because she was so certain she would be seeing them again soon.

But now she was here, alive and tucked away somewhere in Malfoy Manor. Hermione had no idea what her purpose should be.

She raised her head and finally allowed herself to look around the room. It was enormous, but she felt little curiosity about it. She would explore it eventually, but not right now. Not today. Today she was drowning in her own mind, replaying the events of the past week and especially the past couple of hours in her head. She couldn't stop seeing it.

She jumped when she heard a *CRACK!* and Poppy appeared.

"Miss is alive!" she cried, and she moved over to clasp Hermione's hand.

"Poppy, did you know?" she asked softly.

Poppy frowned. "Poppy is suspecting it when she is told to arrange Miss's room, but Master is not telling Poppy directly. Poppy is happy Miss is not dead."

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this and dropped her gaze as she nodded.

"Can Poppy offer Miss a bath? Then perhaps some dreamless sleep? Master is telling Poppy that Miss had a difficult day."

Anger shot through Hermione with this news. "Malfoy murdered somebody who looked like me right in front of me, Poppy. Then he sliced her throat open. I would say it was a very difficult day, but he will not be medicating me against my wishes."

Poppy's eyes were huge. "Master is doing it to keep Miss safe, surely!" she cried. "And Master is not ordering Poppy to medicate Miss. He is just telling Poppy to offer if Miss would like it. Miss can choose."

Some of the fight left Hermione at this, and she just nodded dully.

"Fine," she said. "Let me have a bath first. I haven't felt properly clean in ages. Then we'll go from there."

Poppy looked relieved that Hermione was cooperating and reached out a hand to pull Hermione to her feet. "The wash room is just over here," she said. "Poppy will help with Miss's hair. Miss should bathe as long as she wishes."

The little elf fussed over her as she filled the tub with warm water and the scent of orange blossom. It was a scent Hermione had discovered at Hogwarts after nicking some of Lavender's bath products during her first autumn there, and after that Lavender had always given her some for Christmas and her birthday. She and Lavender hadn't been close. They were just token gifts from one roommate to another — always the same and never terribly personal — but Hermione had secretly loved it. She had never asked Lavender where she purchased them, and she had turned to muggle alternatives when she and the boys went on the run. The scent immediately took her back to happier days at the castle with her friends.

Hermione sank down and closed her eyes as Poppy began to gently work some product into her hair. It was so soothing, so wonderful, especially after the terrible day — no *year* — she had had.

"Poppy," Hermione sniffed, as tears welled up.

“What is it, Miss?” she asked gently.

“Poppy, I’m sad,” she confessed.

“Then Miss should cry. It will help.”

At this, Hermione’s tears spilled over, and she finally, *truly* cried. She cried for her parents. She cried for her best friends. She cried for the wizarding world. And she cried for herself.

As the scent of orange blossom filled her nose and the gentle fingers of the little elf worked the tension from her head and neck, Hermione sobbed until she had no tears left.

She didn’t know what to do next.

Chapter 5: Dollhouse

Hermione awoke to the sounds of birds chirping, the sky streaked with pink and gold as the sun started to rise. It took her a long while to remember where she was and how she had gotten here.

The bed she was next to was decadent, enormous, and the mattress was surely perfect. But after a month sleeping propped against the wall in her cell Hermione was perfectly fine sleeping *anywhere* else but the bed that had been provided for her. It was silly, perhaps, but it was one of the few things left that she could control. Poppy protested, but Hermione insisted upon it and ended up wrapping herself in the green and gray blanket she had been using in her cell for the past week. Poppy had retrieved it for her and even cast a charm on it to preserve that cedar and spice scent Hermione found so soothing. She knew now that it must have belonged to Malfoy at one point, but she still thought of it as hers. It had comforted her after one of the worst moments of her life, and it did so again after she emerged from the bath the previous night, utterly exhausted and emotionally wrung out.

She had only paused long enough to don a soft and surprisingly demure nightgown and eat a few bites of dinner before reluctantly accepting the dreamless sleep Poppy offered her. After deciding to put her foot down about sleeping on the floor, Hermione moved to the softest bit of rug she could find and downed the potion. Based on the morning sky she must have slept at least twelve hours, and she hated to admit that she felt much better for it.

She slowly rose to her feet and pulled the blanket around her shoulders a bit tighter as she took stock. She was barefoot, hair surely wild from sleep, and the faint scent of orange blossom and cedar lingered around her. She left the blanket on the floor and padded to the toilet to relieve herself before glancing in the mirror, where she came to an abrupt halt.

She had not gotten a good look at herself in a mirror since she left Shell Cottage, and she was surprised by what she found. The last time she saw herself she had looked gaunt with mottled injuries and scars. The girl she was seeing now had a healthy complexion. Her cheeks were pink and her skin was smooth, her lacerations and scars faded to almost nothing. Her curls were rioting of course, but whatever Poppy had done the previous day had tamed them into tight spirals that still held for the most part. Poppy had even taken the time to contain it a little by tying half of it back with a pale blue ribbon, which was a small frippery Hermione had always enjoyed. It was one of the few feminine things she had allowed herself, always feeling more confident in her ability to tie a bow than applying extensive makeup. Her mother had cut dozens of ribbons for her in every shade of the rainbow, and Hermione typically used one whenever she wore her hair up at Hogwarts. It was a small thing to be sure, but it was an indulgence she had not afforded herself in over a year because there was no space for things like hair ribbons when fighting in a war. To wear one again was as odd as it was nostalgic. And this one, she saw, perfectly matched the line of blue lace on the edge of her white nightgown. She had the oddest thought that she looked like Wendy from *Peter Pan*.

Then again, Wendy was innocent, and Hermione was haunted. Despite the fact that Malfoy had taken care to physically heal her and feed her while she was a prisoner, the things she had been through over the past month were etched on her face. Hermione looked like a doll – so beautiful, but so sad. She wondered how she would ever smile again.

She sighed as she glanced down at the counter and froze again. Hermione recognized a number of products she liked to use before she ever went on the run, including her favorite moisturizer and muggle toothpaste. Once again she had been too distraught the previous day to notice, but she was certainly taking note of it now. She hesitated, but then opened a drawer and found the sparse makeup she used to wear when feeling particularly brave, along with several magical equivalents that she knew Lavender and Parvati used to obsess over.

Hermione furrowed her brow at this, a suspicion growing as she looked at the toiletries she hadn't seen in a year. As she considered them, she moved out of the bathroom and decided it was time to explore her new prison.

It was an upgrade from the Hogwarts dungeons, Hermione could certainly acknowledge that. There was an enormous window, with a spectacular view over the extensive gardens and the countryside in the distance. There was even a door to a large balcony, though of course it was locked. Beneath the window was a window seat, both long and deep. Hermione was drawn to it, and she knew she could spend hours there reading if given half a chance.

If Hermione had guessed, she would have expected the Malfoy home to be filled with dark woods and Slytherin green and silver. That was certainly how the first floor had been decorated, or what little of it she had seen when brought in with the Snatchers that day. But this room was surprisingly light and decorated in French blue and white, with a hint of gold. The parlor contained a fireplace, sofa, and chaise lounge, along with a dainty escritoire, and a small, but ornate marble-topped table that could comfortably seat four. Near it was the door to the loo and next to it the door to a closet.

She felt a slight chill as she looked around the room critically for the first time since she was brought here. Something about it reminded her of the dollhouse she used to play with as a little girl. She and her parents had spent hours together building it and then decorating it. The wallpaper was similar to the miniature blue and white toile Hermione had selected. It was installed above wainscoting painted white, and the trim work was even familiar. The furniture filling the space looked formal and antique and of a similar style to the tiny pieces she and her mother had so lovingly selected and placed. She had played with it for hours as a young child, imagining a place filled with family and friends before her Hogwarts letter arrived. Hermione had been a lonely child. She was bookish and strange things happened around her when she became emotional, and she had no real friends until she went to Hogwarts. Her dollhouse and her books filled the void of her imagination. It was the one thing from her childhood she never got rid of during her years at Hogwarts, even as she grew and no longer needed it for entertainment. Of course she didn't have it anymore. It had been left behind during the war, just like her parents. Hermione abandoned it along with them.

But this room was...

No. It was just a coincidence, surely.

She shivered and pushed that thought away as she turned to the closet and opened it with some trepidation.

Her jaw dropped when she saw what was inside: an entire wardrobe, both muggle and magical, in every shade, though she noticed a very limited amount of red or green. Malfoy, it seemed, was determined to be neutral in that respect, and there were only two dresses that Hermione saw to be in these colors. Both of them appeared to be almost medieval in style, which was truly baffling. Hermione walked in and ran a hand along the robes and dresses which were in a more modern design, all of which were finer and more beautiful than anything she had ever worn before. They were for every season and every occasion. She saw fur trimmed collars and sequined cocktail dresses and professional pencil skirts. It was absurd.

Some part of her wondered if these had ever belonged to anybody else – a previous girlfriend or even his mother. But instinctively Hermione knew they had not. He had purchased them and brought them here for her to wear... but why? What was she to do with dozens of robes, dresses, and gowns, when she was a prisoner in this beautiful cell?

Her sense of unease was growing as Hermione closed the door quietly and then moved to a nearby dresser, which was filled to the brim with more nightgowns, underthings, and even some casual muggle clothing that looked like athletic wear, but was obviously very expensive. Hermione's hands ran along the dozen bras that were precisely her size, all made of satin and lace and in a range of pastels and neutrals. They were more feminine than sexy, but still delicate in their rendering. Each had a matching pair of knickers and several even had matching garter belts, presumably for the acromantula silk stockings she found in the next drawer over.

Another drawer contained items that could only be described as lingerie. The pieces were more sensual, though not quite as revealing as she knew they could be. They looked very much like slips or some other sort of nightwear, but they favored silk instead of cotton and most pieces had bras sewn in. It was not at all like something Hermione would ever wear, though it did contain far more red and emerald green than anything else in her wardrobe. She furrowed her brow at this.

She reached for the last drawer on the bottom and froze when she opened it. There were *her* clothes — the few things she had packed to wear on the run. Here were her ratty jeans and Gryffindor sweaters and even a hoodie from Oxford that she had worn constantly the previous winter. None of the boys' clothes were there of course. They had been the type to leave everything strewn about whatever room they last inhabited, and more often than not she had packed the tent with their shirts and underpants shoved under various pieces of furniture. Hermione, however, was neater than that and had used her beaded bag to hold her clothes through the entirety of the previous year. She hadn't packed much, and she never liked things being untidy and out of order.

Malfoy had taken her beaded bag.

She had asked him about it at Hogwarts a few times, but he never deigned to respond, and she had given up. But here was proof staring her in the face that he had taken her bag and searched it.

Hands shaking she closed the drawer with a snap and continued her search. She moved to the bookcase, which was filled with books, and as Hermione read the spines, her jaw dropped. They were nearly all muggle and quite a few looked very old. She hesitated before she randomly plucked one off the shelf, only to discover it was a first edition of *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in excellent condition. She gulped and quickly closed it before placing it back on the shelf and staring at the others.

Surely not. Surely, *surely* this wasn't an entire case full of valuable muggle books. But as her eyes roved over them and she checked a few others, she eventually concluded that this was *precisely* what they were.

It was only the bottom shelf that contained any magical books, and as Hermione surveyed them she saw that they were the ones from her bag — though certainly not all of them. He had left her *Spellman's Syllabary*, but of course there were no books in runes for her to translate, so it was entirely useless. He had left her *Hogwarts, A History* as well as *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

But none of her books on horcruxes were there, nor any books that might help her do actual *magic*. Even stranger, her copy of *Tales of Beedle the Bard* was not there. Hermione wondered if he had somehow learned that Dumbledore left it to her.

Hermione's heart was racing as she turned away from the bookcase to compose herself. But then her gaze fell on one of the nightstands, and her heart stopped. She blinked in disbelief at what she was seeing, and she approached it slowly before lifting it up with shaky hands, hardly daring to believe her eyes.

There was no doubt about it: Malfoy had framed a picture of Hermione and her parents, one that she had never even seen before. It was magical, which was an incredible surprise to her, and she appeared to be twelve or thirteen in the photo. They were in Diagon Alley enjoying an ice cream together at Florian Fortescue's. Her pulse started to race as she thought back to that day: it was just before third year, before her parents dropped her off at the Leaky Cauldron to meet with the Weasleys. Hermione had not seen Malfoy that day, but he — or someone else — must have seen her and snapped this picture. In the photo her mother was teasing Hermione while her father had an amused but slightly pained look on his face, and Hermione blushed with a shy smile. She remembered that day so clearly. Her mother had been interrogating her about Harry and Ron and which one of them she had a crush on. Her dad had begged her mother to have mercy on him because he couldn't stand the thought of his little girl liking boys.

Hermione sniffed and tears filled her eyes at how innocent and happy the three of them looked. She placed the photograph back down on the nightstand and opened the drawer to see if there was anything inside. Here she covered her mouth as she let out another sob: the photo album she had made of her parents before she obliviated them was there. All of the photographs were muggle of course. Hermione had spent a full day collecting them and casting a preservation charm on them before she performed the obliviation. She knew it had been a risk to bring it with her, but she hadn't been able to bear to leave these memories of them behind. It was the only thing she still had of theirs. Hermione knew that Malfoy must

have removed this from her bag as well. She traced a shaky finger across the top of it and then took a deep breath and shut that drawer too.

She then moved to the last thing she hadn't explored yet: a dressing table.

This was located between the parlor and bedroom, near the closet and loo. The table was large, with a trifold mirror and soft stool. It was exceptionally feminine and reminded Hermione of those regency era films, when the lady of the house would sit at something like this to ready herself for a ball. She slid open the drawer and found several combs and brushes, a filigreed handheld mirror, and any number of potions with labels in French in such an ornate script that Hermione struggled to read them. On the top of the dressing table was a jewelry box that Hermione opened, and by now she wasn't terribly surprised to find it filled with earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and even brooches and hair combs. The pieces were uniformly delicate and less ostentatious than she would have expected coming from Malfoy, but there was no doubt she was staring at a small fortune of gold and gemstones, along with more casual pieces for every day. Hermione even recognized a few things of her own that she knew had come from her beaded bag. Evidently Malfoy deemed them safe for her to have back.

Hermione's hand was shaking as she closed the jewelry box and then moved to the sofa to compose herself.

The clothes, makeup, books, jewelry, and even the very room she was staying in all carried with them a sense of permanence. She instinctively knew he did not intend for her to be here on a temporary basis. Why else would he have gone through the trouble to procure all of this for her? It was obvious that he intended for her to live here for months or even years.

It was an unsettling thought, and it was confusing.

Why? Why on earth had he bothered? When had he arranged all of this? It was true he had a full month to prepare for her arrival, but this was still far more than she would ever have expected. And how had he known about the products she favored, the colors she liked, the type of furniture and decor that drew her in? And if he was intending to just use her for sex eventually – because that was truly the *only* thing Hermione could believe he might want from her – then why bother with anything except for lingerie and underwear? Why give her a full range of muggle and magical clothing too?

Bloody hell, some of the clothes in her closet were appropriate for a *boardroom*.

The whole thing was odd, and Hermione was sure she was missing some critical point that could explain it. She waffled with herself about it, because after the previous day she had no desire to speak to him. He had terrified her at first, and even though she felt a little calmer after a good cry and full night of sleep, she still wasn't interested in engaging with him. In fact, she would be happiest if she never saw him again. After the things he had done and the lies he had told she certainly didn't trust him.

And yet, she was warded into his home, settled into a room that was so obviously meant to be *hers* that she knew she would have to address this situation with him one way or the other. How else would she get to the bottom of all this? How else would she discover what had

happened to the rest of the things in her beaded bag? She also had many questions from the previous day, and she knew she wouldn't get answers to them unless she sought him out. Besides, diamond-encrusted hair combs and rare first edition novels aside, Voldemort was still in power. Hermione was one of three people who knew how to end it. It was only now that she remembered her ruminations from a few weeks ago when she determined that Ginny might be able to get the job done and kill the snake. At the time, Hermione had believed Ginny would be going to Malfoy Manor, where Hermione now found herself.

In an surprising twist, it was now *Hermione* who was warded into the same home that Voldemort liked to use as a base. She had no idea where Ginny and Luna were now. Presumably they were with Zabini and Theo, but neither of them were as close to Voldemort as Malfoy was. That was incredibly obvious.

Hermione was at war with herself. Should she engage with Malfoy and learn more about whatever had caused him to go to such lengths to keep her comfortable? Should she castigate him for the things he had done and probably would do in the future? Should she just ignore him and trust that eventually she would be able to escape and go after the snake alone?

Hermione turned these options over and over in her mind, until eventually she called, "Poppy!"

The little elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Yes Miss?" she said with concern.

"Poppy, I have questions for Malfoy. Do you think he would be willing to see me?"

Poppy looked ecstatic. "Poppy is certain, Miss. He is having a full schedule today with the celebrations of the Dark Lord's triumph and has already left the Manor, but I can tell him you is wanting to speak to him as soon as he is returned."

Hermione swallowed, and nodded. "Yes, please. It's no great rush, I am obviously not going anywhere."

Poppy bobbed. "Yes, Miss. I will let him know. Now then, shall I fetch Miss breakfast? And perhaps Miss would like to dress too. Poppy can assist Miss with her hair."

And so it was that Poppy took over Hermione's morning, and Hermione allowed her to do it. After all, what else was there to do in this dollhouse of hers while she waited for her so-called master to arrive?

Hermione was sitting on the window seat, wrapped in her favorite blanket and absorbed in *Little Women* when the knock came on her door. To her surprise it wasn't the door to the hallway that drew her attention, but a different door off the parlor that had been locked when

she explored earlier that day. She thought Malfoy had disappeared through it the night before, but she had been in such a state of shock that she couldn't be certain.

"Come in," she said cautiously.

At her invitation the door opened and Malfoy stepped through it. Hermione stared at him in surprise.

He was dressed in something that looked like formal military regalia that looked to be a hundred years out of fashion. He wore polished boots, with trousers that could only be described as breeches, a tailored coat in sharp black with several gold bars attached to the breast. He even had a cape over one shoulder, lined in emerald green satin. It was utterly ridiculous.

"What are you wearing?" she blurted out.

Malfoy glanced down at himself and raised an eyebrow. "The Dark Lord's new dress uniform for his inner circle. There is a ball tonight to celebrate his victory."

Hermione gaped at him.

"A ball?"

Malfoy nodded. "Yes, and it's a command performance. But I won't be missed just yet, and Poppy said you had questions for me."

Hermione nodded and slipped a bookmark into her book before placing it on the window seat, unwrapping the blanket, and getting to her feet. She glanced at Malfoy to find him staring at her, and Hermione supposed she knew why. Poppy had convinced her to wear a sundress in canary yellow – a color that always made her honey skin glow. It was conservatively cut but more feminine than anything Hermione had worn since going on the run a year ago. She felt faintly embarrassed to be so dressed up when she had nowhere to go, but the garment was surprisingly comfortable and Hermione had eventually decided that she could happily spend all day in it. Besides, Poppy had been so thrilled to dress Hermione that Hermione couldn't bring herself to say no. She had even deigned to sit at the dressing table for a full hour while Poppy fussed with her hair, eventually tying it up in a knot on top of her head, with her stray curls arranged just so. Of course, she produced another ribbon in precisely the same shade of yellow, and Poppy had delighted in tying it around the knot of her hair, declaring Hermione's proclivity for ribbons to be the most charming thing.

"Ignore it," said Hermione, gesturing to her clothes. "It's Poppy's fault."

A small smile passed over Malfoy's face at this as he approached her, but then she raised a hand to halt his progress.

"I want to speak with you, but to be perfectly frank I'm still not comfortable being close to you after the things I saw yesterday. You can sit on the sofa, and I'll sit over here, if that's alright," she said, gesturing to the vanity chair, which was as far from the sofa as she could get without sitting on the bed.

Malfoy's face turned blank at this, but he swallowed and nodded as he made his way to the sofa, while Hermione perched on the vanity stool.

"I have about a hundred questions and scarcely know where to start," she said slowly.

Malfoy nodded. "I'm sure you do."

"First, I want to say that if you plan to lie to me, you should just leave now. I have no interest in talking to you if you won't be truthful."

Malfoy studied her. "I won't lie," he finally said. "I may not answer all of your questions, but I won't tell you any lies."

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. Of course he could be lying to her *now*, but there was nothing she could do about that. At least she had made her position clear before beginning.

"Very well," she said. "The biggest question first: why pretend to kill me?"

He looked at her like she was dense. "I would have thought that was obvious. The Dark Lord made it clear that he wanted you dead. He's wanted you dead for the past several years. There was absolutely no possibility that he would let you live once you were caught. Pleading for your life would have accomplished nothing and would have angered him unnecessarily."

Hermione huffed in annoyance. "Sure, but why stage something like that? Why not just kill me?"

He looked irritated by this. "Because I didn't *want* to kill you. Obviously," he added, gesturing around the room. "But the Dark Lord needed to see you die or he would have continued looking for you."

Hermione felt her cheeks heat a little. "Fine, but you still arranged it didn't you? Why bother? Why get involved at all?"

Malfoy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, I know my motives might be a little mysterious to you, but suffice to say I don't want you dead. I know that probably surprises you, given the way I behaved before the war, but it's true. Given that I went to the effort to kill somebody else in your stead, hopefully you can believe me when I say that I value your life. I offered to kill you because it gave me the opportunity to save you instead. Most of the others would have just gone through with it to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes. Inserting myself into it and asking to do it gave me oversight into how you were treated in prison. It let me concoct the plan to get you out without making the Dark Lord suspicious. And it had the added benefit of making me closer to the Dark Lord than even my father used to be. I'm one of his favorites now, and that gives me a lot of leverage over the others and allows me to arrange things as I see fit."

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she turned his words over in her mind.

“Why not tell me about it in advance?”

“You wouldn’t have cooperated, and your mind is a fucking open book. You’ve never learned even a drop of occlumency, that was very obvious the couple of times I searched you. I tried to restrict the Death Eaters who went to your cell, but I couldn’t be certain that I would be able to stop everybody who is a legilimens from visiting you. There are several besides me. You couldn’t know about the plan.”

Hermione’s cheeks burned. “You should never have searched my mind.”

He gave her an irritated look. “You should have learned occlumency. I know Potter was hopeless, but you are not. What did you *think* would happen if you were caught by the Death Eaters?”

Hermione gritted her teeth. “It’s a violation.”

“That may be so. But it’s also the fastest way to get the truth out of somebody who is unconscious or near-so. That was the state of you both times I searched.”

Hermione scowled. “What did you learn then?”

“It doesn’t matter. I learned enough. It was nothing I didn’t already know or suspect.”

Hermione’s stomach flipped. She wanted to ask about the horcruxes because she strongly suspected Voldemort had figured it out. But then again, perhaps he wasn’t aware that they were all gone except for the snake. Maybe he thought the locket was just missing or the diadem had been moved before the fire in the Room of Requirement. She didn’t dare ask Malfoy about it, so she switched subjects.

“So you searched me, told You-Know-Who it was everything he expected, and then claimed Ginny as your boon.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Sure, and that’s a perfect example of the things I can do with the Dark Lord’s favor. I was given the privilege of claiming her because I turned you over at the same time. The Dark Lord would never execute a female member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. He has some long-term plans that involve repopulating the pureblood ranks, and he needs as many pureblood witches as he can get for it. But she was still a blood traitor, an honorary member of the Order of the Phoenix, and Potter’s former girlfriend. She would have been one of the first picks, if not *the* very first pick if I hadn’t claimed her for myself when I had the chance. It saved her from going to somebody like Dolohov.”

Hermione shuddered as she considered this.

“You gave her to Zabini though,” she pointed out.

Malfoy looked a bit bored by this. “I have no interest in Ginny Weasley. But Blaise has always had a crush on her, and he would treat her well. We knew the Dark Lord would start allotting prisoners once the dust from the battle settled, and there was no chance whatsoever Ginny would be available by the time his turn came. Blaise is a talented Death Eater, but he’s

fairly new and doesn't have the pedigree to rise as high as I can. We agreed that I would claim her for myself if I got the opportunity."

Hermione gaped. "Blaise has a crush on her?"

Malfoy smirked. "For years, though he was in denial about it until fairly recently."

Hermione blinked at this surprising news. That wasn't at all what she had expected, but then again if he actually cared about her it made Hermione more confident that he wouldn't hurt her.

"I'm fairly certain Ginny doesn't reciprocate his feelings," she muttered.

Malfoy actually laughed. "She doesn't. The only wandless spell she knows is the bat-bogey hex, and she's hit him with it a half dozen times over the last month. It hasn't changed a thing though, he's more smitten than ever."

Hermione was surprised to feel the smallest smile cross her face at this.

"Alright then, I suppose I can see why you saved Ginny for Blaise. But what about Theo and Luna?" she asked.

Malfoy smirked. "Theo is ranked high enough that we knew he would get a chance to claim Luna if he made it clear that he wanted her. She's a pureblood, but a bit odd and everyone knows it. She's not as big of a prize as Ginny, so he didn't have to fight very hard to get the others to back off. As for why... it's because Theo and Luna are dating. Didn't you know?"

Hermione spluttered. "Excuse me?"

Malfoy inclined his head and chuckled at her expression. "Yes. They kept it very quiet of course, but they got together at Hogwarts last autumn before Luna was kidnapped and brought to the Manor as a prisoner. She had no objections to playing along with our little scheme to save you, and she's a natural occlumens. Her mind is totally bizarre, and I can never get anything out of her. She was aware of what we were doing the entire time."

Hermione just shook her head in amazement. "And me? Am I just collateral or are you like Blaise with a lingering crush?"

Hermione surprised herself by asking this, but she was suddenly desperately curious to know. If Blaise and Theo had arranged their selections with romance in mind, then perhaps Malfoy had too. The things in her room certainly implied it, but then again, Malfoy had always treated her horribly, at least until the last month. It seemed impossible to believe he actually cared about her.

Malfoy gave a bitter laugh at Hermione's question. "I can assure you, Granger, it's not a crush."

Hermione wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or disappointed by this.

"Collateral then," she said. "But for what purpose?"

Now he stared at her squarely. "I'm working with the Order."

Hermione blinked as her jaw dropped. "*Excuse me?*"

Malfoy shrugged. "I'm not Severus. I'm not a double agent. But I do have connections within the Order. The fighting didn't end at the Battle of Hogwarts, you know. As much as the Dark Lord wishes the war ended with Potter's death, it didn't, and he knows it. As long as he is in power, I am rising in his ranks. And if the Order ever succeeds and actually ends him, I have arranged pardons for myself, my mother, and my two closest friends."

Theo and Zabini, she deduced. But then she realized somebody obvious was missing from this list.

"And Lucius?"

"Dead," said Malfoy curtly. "Battle of Hogwarts."

Hermione blinked awkwardly at this and glanced at his signet ring. She had noticed him wearing it over the past month on occasion, but didn't realize it was because Lucius was dead. She considered it for a moment and decided she didn't feel at all sorry for Lucius Malfoy's death, and Malfoy himself seemed relatively unbothered by it. Hermione didn't know what else to say, so she chose to ignore it.

"So what... you're playing both sides then?"

Malfoy gave a negligent shrug. "Wouldn't you?"

Hermione scowled. "No. I wouldn't."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Your moral superiority needs a serious adjustment, Granger. Make no mistake, the powers that be in the Order were more than happy to trade you for a pardon."

"What do you mean?" she asked, as a sinking feeling opened in her stomach.

"I mean that you, Potter, and Weasley went rogue. The Order wanted you contained. Ginny Weasley too, for that matter. Blaise and I are keeping both of you out of the way while the more senior members take stock and regroup."

"There is no way the Weasleys would agree with that," she insisted.

Malfoy shrugged. "Most of the Weasleys are just cannon fodder, surely you know that. I believe they've been told that she was smuggled out to a safe house. According to my sources they are relieved she's safe and seem willing to let sleeping dogs lie for now."

"And me? Do they know about me?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "The circle of people who know you're alive is very small, and the Weasley's are not included. The whole family is far too reckless and liable to get themselves caught to be trusted with information like that. It's just a few Order members

who know... the ones who don't throw themselves in front of every curse that comes their way."

Hermione just stared at him, as the truth of her situation sunk in. "So there are members of the Order who know I'm alive and here? And they aren't going to help me escape?"

"That's correct," he said. "I am keeping you safe while providing a few other pieces of intelligence now and then. If they ever manage to win, I'll be able to stay out of Azkaban, regardless of what I do while in the Dark Lord's service."

Hermione felt all the air leave her body as she thought about it. She wanted to believe he was lying, but his words had the ring of truth to them. Malfoy didn't truly care for her. He cared for his mother, his friends, and himself. Of course he would keep her here in this pampered cage to fulfill the terms of his agreement. But who in the Order was he working with? Kingsley? McGonagall?

She felt her anger start to build as she thought about it, and her magic crackled.

"Who traded me?" she asked bitterly.

"I'm not going to tell you that."

"Then who died in my place?"

"I'm not going to tell you that either, not yet," he said.

"Then what on earth was Theo doing to me yesterday?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"When will I see him again?"

"I couldn't say. He's surely busy rekindling his relationship with Luna."

His flippancy made her angrier than ever, and she got to her feet and glared at him.

"Where is my beaded bag? The one I'm sure you *took* from me after you captured me?"

"Confiscated," he said carelessly. "I already removed the things you're allowed to have from it. Perhaps you've noticed?"

Her blood was boiling now.

"And my wand?" she hissed.

"You meant Aunt Bella's wand," he corrected. "It's been returned. And before you ask, Potter's special cloak has been gifted to the Dark Lord. Potter was cowering under it when he died."

Hermione felt herself blanch at this. How had she forgotten about the Invisibility Cloak?

Because you've spent the last month assuming you would die.

But this was terrible news. She still wasn't sure if she believed that the Deathly Hallows were real, but if Harry had been right then Voldemort now had two out of the three.

"And Harry's bag?" she asked in a brittle voice, remembering the mokeskin bag he wore all the time — the bag where he kept the snitch that he was sure housed the ring and Resurrection Stone. "He was wearing it around his neck when he died."

Malfoy was eyeing her suspiciously now, but his answering drawl still sounded bored and had that same air of carelessness about it that felt like a slap in the face.

"I would assume it burned up with his body."

Hermione thought her heart was failing her.

"His body was *burned*?" she said in a strangled voice.

"Surely you didn't want him to become an inferius. I rather thought I was doing him a favor. The Weasel too."

Hermione felt faint as she stood and started backing away from him. His expression darkened as he watched her.

"You disgust me," she whispered, as she started to shake. Whether it was from anger or fear, she wasn't certain. "I can't *believe* you... desecrating the bodies of my best friends... enhancing You-Know-Who's power... working with the Order behind my back to keep me prisoner..."

"I think you mean, working to keep you *safe*," he said, his own eyes flashing now as he got to his feet too. "You seem to forget that you, Potter, and Weasley just disappeared and allowed the Order to spend months wondering what the fuck you three were doing. And then you finally reappeared only for Potter to die, because none of you involved the Order in your plans while you were on the run. So does it really surprise you that they want you out of the way? And does it surprise you that I offered to be your jailor when I found you that night? You have a fucking death wish, Granger. Over and over again you were prepared to die — you were even prepared for me to kill you! It's entirely unstrategic, and it makes you unpredictable and a liability to them. It shouldn't surprise you that I played the games I needed to play to make the Order happy and save my own skin if they ever pull off the impossible and kill him! That included burning the bodies of as many Order members as I could find so the Dark Lord couldn't use them to make another army of inferi or parade their severed heads through the streets! And yes, I went behind your back to arrange your imprisonment here because I couldn't give you the opportunity to interfere and place yourself in even more danger or risk fucking up the Order's plans yet again!"

He was breathing hard, and he was shouting at her by the end of it. Hermione felt a mixture of shame and rage. Some part of her knew he was right. Of *course* he was right. She and the boys had just hauled off and done their own thing without keeping the Order informed, and it resulted in a very last minute and haphazard battle plan at Hogwarts that killed her two

best friends and so many others. And rationally she knew that a burned corpse was better than a reanimated one. Of *course* it would be preferable for Harry and Ron to be cremated than used as symbols of Voldemort's win. But Hermione wasn't feeling rational. She was feeling terrified, hurt, and betrayed.

She hated him in that moment.

"Get out," Hermione demanded.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, get out! I can't even look at you! I certainly don't want to talk to you!"

Malfoy sneered and strode toward the door he had arrived from. Before he left, he turned to glare at her.

"Get your shit together, Granger. Stop being so fucking morally superior and realize that we are still in a war. It's not like your side is blameless. They aren't exactly communing with the unicorns and shitting rainbows. There are people in your precious Order who would rather have you out of the way than making stupid decisions that could pull them into another battle where half of them die. They will go to great lengths to make sure you don't fuck it up for them again. You need to get your head out of your own arse and realize that the world isn't black and white."

Then he strode through the door and slammed it behind him. A moment later she heard another enormous *CRASH*, and she flinched. It was a long while later that the fight finally drained out of her, leaving Hermione to stare at the door and wonder how it had all gone so wrong.

Chapter 6: Knife

Chapter Notes

TW: Flashback to sexual assault in Hermione's dream. Skip the italics at the beginning if you don't wish to read.

TW: Depiction of torture with blood in Draco's section in the middle.

Hermione was being led to an altar while Voldemort sat on a throne and watched.

"We are willing to trade her, my lord," said the smooth voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt. "She has been a liability to us."

"Very good," he hissed. "Draco, prepare the prisoner."

Malfoy strode forward wearing robes of pure white. He waved his wand and transformed Hermione's prisoner garb into a nightgown.

"You need a ribbon too," he insisted, with another flick of his wand.

Hermione felt blank nothingness as she approached the altar and then laid down on it.

"It's my turn now," said Cormac McLaggen's voice, and he flicked his wand and secured her to the altar and then vanished her clothes.

The blankness in Hermione's mind evaporated, and she began to struggle as she realized what he was about to do. She was panicking, fear blooming inside of her as his fingers clawed at her most intimate parts. Then he raised a knife and started to slice her throat, as her entire body lit on fire with pain. It shouldn't hurt this much. It shouldn't feel like the cruciatus.

Bellatrix's cackle echoed as Hermione felt hot blood spill and her vision swim. She was screaming and thrashing and...

THUD.

Hermione's eyes flew open, her cheeks wet with tears. She was on the floor, having tumbled off of the window seat where she was dozing, tangled up in the green and gray blanket.

She looked up to find Malfoy's worried face watching her, and she gasped and scrambled back a little as she reached up to touch her hair, finding a ribbon there.

"Don't make me," she blurted out.

"Granger," he said slowly. "You're alright. It was just a dream."

"Just a..." she said softly, as the realization that he was right swept over her. A few more tears spilled out in relief. "Thank God."

She leaned back against the window seat and shut her eyes for a moment.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked carefully.

She opened her eyes again to look at him.

She hadn't seen Malfoy in a week, not since their last argument. She had deduced that his room was attached to her parlor because she occasionally heard him slamming drawers shut and stomping around in there, and he was the only one who had ever walked through that door. But she hadn't asked to see him again, still smarting from his comments about her recklessness and need to be contained.

She had passed the last week allowing Poppy to play dress up with her, which was entirely ridiculous. She saw nobody but the little elf and the portrait of the blonde woman who never spoke. But Hermione reasoned that having the small elf on her side could only benefit her, so if Poppy wanted to give her long baths and choose her outfits, Hermione would let her do it. When Poppy wasn't pampering her, Hermione read books on the window seat. It kept her mind engaged and was more entertaining than Hogwarts had been, but it was also entirely useless.

She had all but decided the previous day she would have to shelve her pride at some point and speak to Malfoy again, because there was no way for her to glean the information she needed about the snake while she was stuck here. Poppy was chatty, but was obviously in the dark about most of the going ons of the Manor, having been tasked to care for Hermione almost exclusively, ever since the Battle of Hogwarts. She occasionally dropped tidbits about Malfoy's schedule, but that was all. She explained that Hermione was her main duty now, and Master Draco had not spoken to her in detail about anything else going on in the outside world or even the other guests who were dropping by the Manor. He had other elves for that.

Poppy seemed to be oddly proud to be tasked with Hermione's care, but Hermione suspected Malfoy intentionally kept Poppy in the dark. If she knew nothing, then she couldn't accidentally share anything with Hermione that might cause Hermione to snap and try to run. That meant Malfoy was entirely in control of the information Hermione received.

Hermione knew she could never escape if her entire world was pretty clothing, muggle novels, and Poppy. She needed to learn Malfoy's habits. She needed to learn who else was in the Manor with her and where Voldemort was spending his time. Perhaps she would even discover the wards he had used to keep her prisoner. That meant she would have to let her anger burn out and move past her fear of him in order to speak to him.

Still, she hadn't expected to see him again like this. It was the middle of the night and moonlight was streaming through her window. His pale face and hair looked ghostly. She glanced down and realized he was wearing a simple muggle T-shirt and joggers. He looked entirely normal like this, not like the Death Eater from her dream. Even the small glimpse of the Dark Mark she saw on his left forearm just looked like a regular tattoo. It made him less scary and more like the prat she knew from Hogwarts.

"Why are you here?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"You were screaming," he said wryly.

"Oh," she replied, looking down at her knees for a moment in embarrassment. Then she looked back up at him. "You should put a silencing charm on my room. I have nightmares now and then."

He settled himself on the floor near her. She hadn't been this close to him since that day with Cormac, but he wasn't intimidating like this so she didn't object.

He just shook his head at her. "I can't do that. My wards should be impenetrable, but if someone manages to find a way into your room, I need to be able to hear you scream."

Her heart sped up at this, and some of her residual fear must have shown on her face.

"Hey," he said soothingly. "I told you, they should be impenetrable, and besides... anybody who would harm you thinks you're dead. Absolutely nobody is looking for you."

"Not even Cormac?"

She didn't mean for the question to slip out, but he terrified her even more than some of the others whom she rationally knew were more dangerous. In the moonlight Hermione could see Malfoy's face darken at this.

"No."

"What about your mother? Does she know that I'm here?"

It was something Hermione had been wondering for the past week. Did Narcissa know of all the things her son had done?

He cocked his head. "She's aware, but she's warded out too for plausible deniability. The Manor is large enough that she has no need to come here."

Hermione absorbed this.

"And you're sure Cormac can't find me?" she asked again. She was still feeling ill from her nightmare, her body felt dirty from phantom fingers touching her like...

She shuddered.

He frowned and studied her.

“Is that what you were dreaming about?”

Hermione looked down and swallowed hard. “Partially. That was the worst bit.”

Malfoy looked grim.

“He won’t look for you. Even if he wanted to, I’m afraid it would be impossible. He’s currently enjoying an extended stay in the Manor dungeons.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at this. “Are you still torturing him? I thought he was already punished!”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Why do you assume it’s me?”

“Because Theo told me you handled it... rather publicly,” she said a bit nervously.

Malfoy snorted. “Fine. I’ve had my time with him, you’re right. It’s Theo’s turn now though.”

“Theo? He would never!” she insisted.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Theo is not as close to the Dark Lord as I am, but he’s fairly high up, Granger. You don’t get there by keeping your hands clean. He’s endlessly creative and has always been the type to seek revenge when he thinks it’s warranted. You two have that in common.”

Hermione felt a bit faint.

“So all of that is because of what he did to me?”

“That’s part of it. The other part is the fact that he blatantly disobeyed my orders. I may be young, but I’m in charge of quite a few people now, including him. I made it clear that you were not to be touched, and he ignored me. I need to make an example out of him to keep the others in line, and the Dark Lord agrees. That little fucktard has to learn there’s a hierarchy, and he can’t break rank without suffering extensive consequences. And the others need to see that I show no mercy when my orders are not followed. The Dark Lord was in full support of his punishment — both the public and the private bits.”

“And it endears you to You-Know-Who,” she said slowly. “If you continue to torture him, I mean.”

“Now you’re getting it,” he said approvingly.

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“After what he did to you? Not even a little bit. It was one of those times when the Dark Lord’s wishes perfectly aligned with my own.”

Hermione bit her lip.

“So what did you do to him?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. Rest assured he’s appropriately terrified of me.”

Hermione thought about this and decided she really didn’t want to know.

“How much longer will you hold him?”

“I’d say a few more days should do it. Blaise needs some practice too.”

Hermione’s stomach turned at this.

“And when he’s out he won’t find me?”

Malfoy’s eyes softened. “No, Granger. McLaggen will never feel secure around me or the others again. He wouldn’t dream of searching my private wing, even if the wards permitted him... which they don’t.”

Hermione’s curiosity piqued at this. “I’m in your private wing?”

Malfoy nodded. “Yes. The only people I would allow in already know about you.”

“Is it just this room then or is it others?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Others. Yours isn’t the only one. But I can’t let you out to explore the rest of the rooms until you are settled and we understand each other a little better.”

Hermione made a frustrated noise at this.

“I know,” he said soothingly.

“No you don’t!” she insisted, her temper getting the better of her. “This is a prison, Malfoy! I can’t spend my life reading muggle novels and seeing nobody but Poppy! I’m useless like this!”

“You’re safe like this,” he insisted.

She glared at him. “Safe and miserable! Why didn’t you just kill me when you had the chance? It would have been kinder!”

Even in the moonlight Hermione saw something harden on his face. “You wish I had killed you?” he said in a tight voice.

“At least I would have seen my friends!” she burst out, as the tears started again. “I would have been with them again, and I wouldn’t have been stuck here with *nothing*...”

“You would rather be dead with Potter than alive in this suite? When you have every luxury a woman could ever want? When you are cared for and kept safe?”

“I don’t care about luxury!” she declared. “I care about my friends! I care about the war! And if I can’t participate, then *yes* I would rather be dead so I can see my best friends again!”

Hermione knew she was getting hysterical, but she missed Harry and Ron *so* much. She had only begun to properly grieve for them during the past week, once she realized she wasn’t joining them. She had spent hours crying and then becoming angry and then moving to listlessness. It was an endless loop of misery she couldn’t seem to break from. Even the books had not been a sufficient distraction. Her emotions were all over the place.

Something dangerous flashed on Malfoy’s face at this. “I thought you weren’t romantically involved with Potter.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I was never romantically involved with him! But he was my best friend, practically my brother!”

Malfoy’s jaw twitched. “Weasley then? Is that whom you wish to be with forever?”

Hermione scowled. “Why does it matter?”

“I’m trying to understand you, Granger, and I confess, I’m struggling. Wishing for death so you can spend an eternity with Potter and Weasley when you could be here instead is not something I can rationalize. You have never struck me as the type to give up. I never would have dreamed that you might be suicidal until I found you starving yourself. At least that time you thought you were saving yourself from a more painful death. I didn’t like it, but I could understand it. But now here you are with all of my resources at your disposal, and you are telling me you wish I had killed you. I don’t get it, unless you were so in love with one of them that you can’t bear to live without them.”

He said this last part a little bitterly, and Hermione slumped, trying desperately to get a grip on her emotions. She needed him to talk to her and maybe even trust her with information or a little more freedom. He would never do that if he believed she was truly suicidal, because her safety was the key to his pardon with the Order. He was holding her for them, and if she was gone he would be out of luck. She was saying things to him that she didn’t really mean and that could make her captivity worse if she couldn’t get a handle on herself. She just missed her friends terribly and hadn’t fully processed their deaths yet.

“It’s not that I wish to be dead,” she said slowly, closing her eyes to try to exert some control back into her voice. “And no, I wasn’t with Ron. I kissed him exactly one time in the middle of the Battle of Hogwarts when we both thought we were about to die. It wasn’t exactly mind-blowing.”

Some of Malfoy’s tension eased slightly at this.

“So what is it then, if you aren’t in love with one of them?”

Hermione sighed, feeling exhausted and wrung out. “I wish to have some purpose. I’m not made to just sit around reading novels all day.”

“Aren’t you?” he asked wryly.

She shot him a dirty look that made his lips twitch. “No, I’m not. I’m made for action, or at least research. I have to be in it to be happy. Regardless of what the Order may think, I am *not* as reckless as Harry and Ron were. I held them back quite often, and I’m probably the reason they made it as long as they did. But when I was with them I was still *doing* something. I had problems to solve. I was valuable. Being stuck in here with no purpose is driving me mad, and it means that I have nothing to distract me from thinking about them or Cormac or that horrible execution.”

“So now you *don’t* want to die?” he asked, and she heard the skepticism in his voice. God, but she had bollocksed this up.

“No, I don’t. I just... you have to understand, I spent a month after the battle that killed my best friends believing I was going to join them. I never properly grieved them because I knew I would see them soon. I think I had one really good cry as soon as I woke up, and that was all. Once I was sentenced to death and it became clear I couldn’t escape, my grief went on hold. Part of me was relieved by it. I’ve been fighting a long time, and I never thought I would be the one left behind without either of them. And then the thing with Cormac... it happened less than a week before I was supposed to die, and it was.....”

She gulped. “It was truly the worst thing that’s ever happened to me, and that includes being tortured in the Manor a few months ago. But casting that *cruciatus* and Nita helped in the very short term — it purged enough of the fear to get me to the execution day at any rate — so I didn’t allow myself to think about that either, because why would I when I only had a few days left? I buried it.”

“But I didn’t kill you,” he said slowly.

“No,” she said quietly, “you didn’t. And I’ve spent the last week trying to comprehend a world where I am alive and Harry and Ron are not. I’m trying to understand what Cormac did to me because now I don’t have an obvious death date when none of it matters any longer. All of it is hard for me, and it’s just now hitting me that they are both gone, and I’m left behind to deal with everything alone. I miss them like...” she trailed off and put a hand against her heart.

She glanced at him, and his eyes were softer now. She hoped he was starting to understand.

“I wasn’t in love with either one of them,” she continued. “I’m not some tragic Shakespearean heroine who wants to kill herself to join her true love in death or any nonsense like that. I’m grateful to be alive, truly. I just don’t know how to exist without them yet. I don’t know who I am anymore. Who is Hermione Granger if she’s not the calm, sensible witch whose chief concern is nagging Harry Potter and Ron Weasley about their school work and deplorable table manners?”

She gave him a weak smile as she said this last bit, and she saw him studying her. He was weighing everything she had just said.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that she’s a rather brave and brilliant witch who has some impressive wandless magic and who is willing to mete out her own justice when the

circumstances warrant it. I think she's having a pretty rough go of it right now, but I also think she's strong enough to survive and find her purpose."

"I hope so," she said sincerely. "But that's just it, isn't it? I need some purpose. I can't just play dress up with Poppy while the war rages on and the world passes me by. I will never fully process what happened to them or to me if I'm stuck here with nothing but a few books and my own thoughts."

He was silent for a long while as he considered this. Finally he said, "I'll make you a deal."

She raised her eyebrows curiously.

"I will give you a few things to study... *magical* things that might give you some purpose while you are here. And I will also allow Poppy to give you copies of *The Daily Prophet* so you can see what is going on in the outside world. But in exchange I want you to talk to me about what you're reading so you have some context for it. You will read things about me and the others that you won't like and may frighten you, but you can't shut me out if I give you access to that information. We play many roles, and sometimes that means we do terrible things. But I need you to trust that I will never do terrible things to *you*, nor will Theo or Blaise. Finally, I want you to do your best to settle in while you are here. I understand that everything has been turned on its head and very difficult recently, but you are safe here and can allow others to take care of you for once. Poppy can tell you aren't enthusiastic about her attention, and it distresses her. Please accept her help and try to enjoy it. And for Salazar's sake, no more protesting your captivity by sleeping on the floor."

Hermione's heart was racing, as she considered this offer. Truly, it was more than she could have hoped for as a first step. She still wasn't sure she trusted him to tell her the truth, but she had to admit she was starting to believe that he wouldn't harm her. No doubt the papers would give her a glimpse of what he had been up to as a member of Voldemort's inner circle, and he knew she might react poorly to it. It wasn't unreasonable to request a chance to explain himself as part of the trade. She found that she couldn't begrudge him this, especially knowing that *The Prophet* rarely printed the whole truth.

He also wanted her to accept the luxury he was providing her instead of fighting it. Hermione felt a small burn of shame to learn that she had distressed Poppy. She thought she had done a credible job of playing along to make Poppy happy, but evidently the small elf sensed that Hermione was reluctant.

"Alright," she finally said. "That's fair. Maybe you can give me the papers in the morning, and we can take tea to discuss them. Or dinner. Or any time that works for you, really, I'm obviously not going anywhere."

She thought she saw his eyes light up at this suggestion, and he nodded.

"That works. I won't be able to do it every single day, but we can do tea whenever my schedule permits it. I'm usually free then."

Hermione nodded. "Okay. And I promise I will try to be more... enthusiastic... about Poppy's attention."

At this he smirked a little at her expression. "It's not so bad, Granger."

She groaned. "It's the hair, Malfoy. She insists on making it perfect, and I swear she spends an hour on it every damn day..."

He chuckled at this and rose to his feet, reaching down to offer her a hand. She gave him a questioning look.

"No more sleeping on the floor, remember?"

Hermione sighed in resignation, but put her hand in his and allowed him to pull her to her feet. As she rose the blanket pooled at her feet, and she bent to place it back on the window seat. She turned to find Malfoy staring at her, his hand still grasping hers.

Hermione blushed, only now remembering that she was in a nightgown. Again, it was fairly conservative, but the fabric was thin, the neckline showed off her shoulders and collarbones, and she was wearing very little underneath. She felt her face flame, and she just hoped Malfoy couldn't see very much in the darkness.

He seemed to snap out of it and tugged on her hand, leading her toward the bed, which Poppy continued to turn down for her each evening even as it went unused.

"In you get," he said in a slightly strained voice.

Hermione climbed in and sat down to settle herself before turning to look at him.

"Try to sleep," he said. "No bad dreams."

She swallowed and nodded a bit awkwardly.

He gave her a tight smile and started to turn to head back to his own room when she said, "Malfoy."

He paused and turned back.

"Thanks," she said quietly. "For listening I mean."

He nodded. "Just make sure you stay with me and don't go to them. I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but those two never really appreciated your magnificence."

Hermione blinked in surprise. "I thought you said it wasn't a crush," she blurted out.

He gave her a faint smile. "It's not."

Then he turned and walked through the door to his room, closing it behind him.

Later on, after Hermione had sunk back into the world's most perfect mattress, she found herself on the very edge of sleep. It was that hazy place where dreams began and blended with reality, where consciousness drifted in and out. So Hermione was certain she had

slipped into the barest edge of a dream when she heard a faint sound, only audible because nothing else was awake in Malfoy Manor except for her, and even that was debatable.

It was a man, and he was screaming with a kind of terrible pain, as though he was being slowly bled.

No bad dreams, she admonished herself, repeating the thing Malfoy had told her with her last bit of awareness before finally letting sleep claim her.

Draco stared down at the form of Cormac McLaggen, who was whimpering on the floor of his cellar.

"Nott will be back for more tomorrow," he said coldly, "but I wanted to visit you again tonight."

McLaggen raised his head to stare at Draco. There was fear in his eyes, pain. He smelled of dried blood and excrement. Draco breathed it in. The stench was terrible, but it also calmed him. He needed something to calm him. Hermione had looked so frightened tonight. She was dreaming about this bastard at Draco's feet, trapped in nightmares so severe she screamed.

Draco had very few nightmares himself, but Hermione Granger's screams featured in every single one of them. He had been triggered almost as much as she had.

"Why?" rasped McLaggen. "Why won't you let me go? I didn't fucking *do* anything!"

Draco knelt down and looked at McLaggen's wand hand with a critical eye. It was mutilated. It was destroyed. It was one of Draco's finest masterpieces.

"You know why. But if you need a reminder..."

Draco pulled out his knife, and McLaggen's eyes widened in fear again. "No! No, you've already..."

"Shhh," said Draco softly. "I'm just refreshing your memory so you don't forget who is in charge. Let's call it... course correction."

Draco moved in a flash and slammed McLaggen's head against the stone wall to daze him before kneeling on his chest and neck. McLaggen gasped, and his eyes bulged as he started to turn purple. Draco studied him for a moment. Purple was good. Blue was the color that meant imminent death. But if he was purple he would still feel it and be alive for more practice tomorrow.

Excellent.

Draco shifted position ever so slightly and then pulled out his wand to secure McLaggen's arms and legs to the floor, much like he had done to Hermione that day. Satisfied that he wouldn't be going anywhere, Draco tossed his wand aside and then shoved McLaggen's grimy shirt above his navel, exposing a clear expanse of belly. He was pasty, and Draco frowned as he took it in. It was too pristine. It reminded Draco of a blank canvas, when it should be marred by Draco's handiwork. Then again, Draco considered himself an artist, and there was so much he could do with this. He just needed some inspiration.

McLaggen was struggling, making muffled choking noises as he felt the cool metal from Draco's blade touch bare skin.

"Keep quiet now," said Draco calmly. "We wouldn't want to disturb my boon with your screams. She had some bad dreams tonight, and I just got her settled again. I'm very concerned about the amount of sleep she has been getting recently. She requires her rest, and I won't be pleased if you wake her up."

Draco took a moment to think of Hermione. She had been so sad tonight, but so pretty. Her white nightgown gave her an air of sweetness that made Draco want to carefully tuck her away, cocooned in something soft and delicate. Then again, it was also sheer enough to tempt him.

But no, he would be good. She hadn't been on speaking terms with him recently. At first it disappointed him and even angered him a little bit. But he gave her some space, and then she explained herself to him tonight. Of course he could forgive her for pushing him away at first. She had been through a terrible ordeal and needed time to adjust. He had made excellent progress with her tonight though, and tomorrow he would be able to join her for tea and perhaps give her something to do that would settle her mind.

The prospect of daily teas with her was nothing short of thrilling.

Another groan made Draco snap out of it. But his thoughts of Hermione had given him all the inspiration he needed for McLaggen's exposed stomach. Draco just needed to ensure McLaggen stayed quiet enough so that his screams wouldn't reach her room. It was a few floors away, but sounds could carry in the night.

Draco paused for a moment to retrieve a dirty rag nearby. He couldn't be certain what McLaggen had used it for, but he could guess. It was filthy. Draco stuffed it in McLaggen's mouth and then wrinkled his nose as he *scourgified* his hands. He didn't mind blood at all, but he wasn't keen on touching anything *else* that had come out of McLaggen.

Draco then picked up his knife again and began to carefully carve a pattern into McLaggen's flesh. It wasn't so deep that he would die from it, but it would scar permanently. It was a rendering of the Malfoy crest. Draco had learned to draw it as a child of course, at the behest of his father and his tutors. But this version of it had a small twist. He encircled it with ribbons that reminded him of Hermione. It was subtle to be sure. Nobody but him would understand it, but then again he would never put her in danger by being too obvious with the reference. Draco finished one section and sat back to admire his progress.

It was beautiful, but there was a lot more to do.

The smell of blood filled his nose and McLaggen's muffled screams flooded his ears. Draco finally relaxed as he continued to work. This was what he was good at. This and keeping Hermione safe.

He would check on her once he was done here. He checked on her every night.

He couldn't help it.

Hermione took her time waking up the next morning. She was a bit sore from sleeping in a new place, but the mattress was like a cloud, and the linens surely had a higher thread count than she had ever experienced in her life. It was truly decadent, excessive, and while she felt guilty for enjoying it she told herself it would make Poppy happy to see her like this.

Sure enough, Poppy made an appearance soon after Hermione woke, and her eyes filled with tears to see Hermione nested in the large bed.

After the conversation the night before, Hermione was determined to turn a new leaf with the little elf. Embarrassing luxury or not, pampering Hermione was something that gave Poppy great joy, and Hermione knew this was an easy concession for her to make in her quest to learn more about what was going on with the war. Malfoy evidently cared about the elf's feelings, and as surprising as that might be, Hermione knew that she did too. It was a small alignment to be sure, but it was a start. And if it convinced Malfoy she was being cooperative he might loosen the reins even more.

"Poppy," she said. "Could you help me dress please? Perhaps another sundress like the yellow one from a week ago? I quite liked that one, but I'm not sure if any of the others fit the same way."

Poppy perked up at this, obviously pleased Hermione was taking some interest in it. She bustled into the closet and pulled out several options, encouraging Hermione to wear one that was the palest shade of blush pink.

"I've never really gone for pink," said Hermione frowning.

"It will be perfect with Miss's skin though," insisted the elf. "Try it, and if Miss does not like it, we can select something different."

Hermione shrugged and donned the dress before turning to stare at herself in a long mirror that was attached to the back of her bathroom door. She gaped.

"Wow," she said. Poppy was absolutely right. It was incredibly flattering on her, and she nodded at the elf. "This will do. I never would have picked it myself, but I'm impressed."

Perhaps she was laying it on too thick, because Poppy's eyes began to water again with pleasure, and she shoo'd Hermione to the dressing table where she stood on a small stool and began to arrange her hair.

Today she twisted several strands back off of Hermione's face and, as always, secured it with a ribbon.

"Poppy, where did all of these ribbons come from?" she asked idly.

Poppy gave her a toothy grin. "Twas a challenge to find exact matches, Miss, but Poppy and the others have been shopping since Miss was first caught. They is from all over England and France. Master Draco insisted Miss must have one for every outfit."

Hermione blinked in surprise and fell silent as she considered this. It was true she wore ribbons frequently at Hogwarts, but she was surprised he had noticed. She was certain Ron and Harry never did. It reminded her that she still had not asked Malfoy about some of the very personal things she found in her room, but other questions had taken priority. Perhaps she would get to the bottom of it soon.

After Poppy finally wrapped up, she left Hermione alone for a few minutes to collect breakfast, and she soon returned with a meal and *The Daily Prophet*.

Hermione snatched it eagerly before her jaw dropped in disbelief at the article on the front page.

Unregistered Mudblood Sightings on the Rise. The Dark Lord's Knife at Work to Secure Britain's Wizarding Population.

by Barnabus Cuff

Reports of unregistered mudbloods reached an all-time high last week, ever since the Mudblood Registration Commission (formerly known as the Muggleborn Registration Commission) went into effect nearly a year ago. The public is asked to remain calm as the Dark Lord's Knife – Draco Malfoy — and his special team of Death Eaters work to discover their hiding places and prevent them from stealing additional magic from pureblood witches and wizards.

"Our methods have proven effective at discovering and tracking mudbloods who have stolen magic illegally," said Mr. Malfoy. "As you know, the Dark Lord and the Ministry of Magic require them to be registered so that they may be rehabilitated for their crimes and reintroduced to magical society in a more appropriate position, such as servants or laborers. Once caught, those who are unregistered shall be marked so that they may be tracked again in the future."

As readers of The Prophet may know, Mr. Malfoy's title of 'the Knife,' was granted to him by the Dark Lord himself, thanks to Mr. Malfoy's personal blades that have been used in the service of the Dark Lord since his rise.

“Malfoy’s knife skills are second to none,” reported his close friend and fellow Death Eater Theodore Nott. “He has several that are enchanted, including the blade that was used for the ceremony on the fifth of June. He is an expert in blood magic.”

When asked if his enchanted knives are being used to keep purebloods safe from mudbloods, Mr. Malfoy confirmed that they were.

“I am using all resources at my disposal to ensure the safety of the pureblood population, including several enchanted objects that have been in my family for centuries. My team and I will continue to work with the Ministry, including the Head of the Mudblood Registration Commission Dolores Umbridge, to ensure peace for purebloods in our world.”

In the event any pureblood or half-blood witch or wizard encounters a mudblood they are asked not to engage as the mudblood may be armed and dangerous. Any sightings should be reported to the Ministry of Magic. Mr. Malfoy’s team will be responding as quickly as possible.

Hermione gaped at the article, fury starting to build as she read it a second and then third time.

She then ripped the paper open to see if she could learn any more, and she discovered that Zabini had apparently led a team to “victory” in a small skirmish with the “terrorist resistance,” though no casualties were reported. Dolohov had evidently executed a prisoner whose name Hermione did not recognize after Bellatrix oversaw his “punishment.” Grayback was the newly appointed leader of the werewolf faction and had been given a job at the Ministry of Magic as the new Head of the Dark Creatures Liaison Office. Malfoy was reported again in the society pages of all things, thanks to the fact that he had danced with one Astoria Greengrass at Voldemort’s Victory Ball. Theo’s name made an appearance in that column as well, with speculation about a romantic entanglement with Daphne Greengrass. Finally, Pansy Parkinson was evidently engaged to marry Marcus Flint. They had completed something called a tying ceremony the previous day, and Hermione stared at the picture of Pansy with disbelief. She looked beautiful.

Absolutely disgusted, Hermione threw the paper aside, as she found herself fuming. She couldn’t believe it had gotten this bad. *The Daily Prophet* had always been biased, but this was beyond the pale. How on earth could Malfoy justify his actions to her? He said he had to do terrible things, and he played many roles. But *this*? She was furious with him and, though she was doing her best to trust her safety to him, she was also frightened. What if he decided to turn her over too?

Hermione was agitated as the morning slipped into the afternoon. Poppy had informed her that Malfoy would be joining her for tea, and Hermione was on edge as she waited for the appointed hour to arrive. She wanted to rage at him. She wanted to hide from him. She was both appalled and scared. She knew she needed answers to settle her mind, and she was regretting waiting until tea to get them.

Hermione heard a knock on her door, and her heart started to race. Tea was set out on her table, but Hermione wasn't seated. She was standing, waiting for him to enter, and warring with herself about which emotion should win.

She told him to come in, and he opened the door. He took a moment to look her up and down, and he smiled a little at what he found. The expression on his face irritated her so much that fury won.

"What the fuck is this?" she demanded, as she threw the paper in his face. "Umbridge? You're working with that *horrible* woman to round up muggleborns and force them into slavery or what... some sort of caste system? She's terrible! One of the worst! How could you possibly do that?"

Malfoy blinked in surprise, as Hermione planted her feet, breathing hard. He contemplated her for a moment and said, "I'll be honest, I didn't think Umbridge would be the thing that got you bent out of shape."

"She's not," said Hermione automatically, as she unconsciously rubbed the back of her right hand. Though Umbridge had only used her quill on Hermione one time, she still remembered the feeling of it slicing into her skin. She had never told either of the boys about it, not trusting their tempers around her.

Malfoy noticed the gesture and cocked his head to study her. "Are you sure about that?"

"Of course," said Hermione. "It's the whole rounding up muggleborns thing that bothers me, not so much Umbridge. I just don't understand how you can *stand* her and—"

"Come sit," he said, cutting her off and gesturing toward the table.

"No," said Hermione.

He sighed. "Granger. You promised you would listen. Come sit so we can talk about it."

Hermione worried her lip for a moment, but finally approached him slowly and sat stiffly. "I'm not sure what you could possibly say to justify this," she said as Malfoy sat too and began to prepare tea. To her slight surprise he didn't ask her how she took it, he simply prepared a cup exactly how she liked it and pushed it over to her.

"Before I got involved, Umbridge was imprisoning all of them in Azkaban," he said simply. "I went to the Dark Lord and explained that this was inefficient and a poor use of magical resources. The magical population simply isn't large enough to imprison everyone of muggle birth, and it was something that drew sympathizers to the resistance. I explained that mudbloods could be registered and tracked, but they should be given jobs that kept them beneath purebloods. That would keep our economy functioning and would remove a key piece of propaganda the resistance was using to entice followers. It would also allow loyal purebloods to keep an eye on them. In the end, several hundred people were released from Azkaban thanks to me."

Hermione stilled, not expecting this.

“Alright,” she said slowly. “I’m listening.”

He shrugged. “I’m not saying it’s great. But it’s better than Azkaban, and neither the Dark Lord nor the Ministry bothers to track every single one of them. If a few disappear into Order safe houses or leave the country, it goes unnoticed as long as it’s just a slow trickle. Those who don’t disappear have various employment opportunities that are relatively safe.”

“Like what?” she asked skeptically.

“Shop clerks. Laborers. Staff for parties and the Dark Lord’s revels. Other jobs like that.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Prostitutes?”

“Some,” he admitted. “Though my team certainly doesn’t force any woman into it. Those who do want to sell their bodies are doing it voluntarily.”

Hermione snorted in disbelief. “Right. Sure.”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “It’s true, Granger. They are paid far more generously than those who opt to simply serve the Death Eaters food and drink. Right or wrong, it takes money to leave the country and set up somewhere new. Most of the women who opt for it only work for a few weeks or months before they disappear to the continent or America.”

Hermione felt ill as she thought about it. “And you’re telling me your waitstaff and laborers aren’t sexually assaulted? They’re somehow protected from Death Eaters like Cormac?”

Malfoy looked grim, as though he really wished they were discussing something different. “Nita helps protect the women,” he said. “The laborers are sent to work in Blaise’s vineyards or my apothecary company or other places like that – they don’t draw notice. The waitstaff are rotated through the parties and other social events that are held for the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord. While it’s true the waitstaff serve as eye-candy of sorts, the Death Eaters know they aren’t there for pleasure. If they want easy sex then they have to earn a boon or pay a prostitute for it. The wait staff are off limits except for flirting and very minor touching, unless the staff member is willing to go home with one of them on her own time. It doesn’t happen while she’s being paid by me.”

Hermione fell silent as she considered this.

“So what... you’re funding an economy of low-paying jobs for muggleborns like me?”

Malfoy raised one eyebrow. “I’m just one of the Death Eaters putting up the gold for it, but yes... in a manner of speaking. While the war is still ongoing, it has moved underground with Potter’s death. The Dark Lord knows he will never fully secure his position if the wizarding world is in a state of open warfare like it’s been for the past year. He is trying to return some semblance of normal to pureblood and half-blood populations to make them see that his version of the world is tolerable. It will make them complacent and unwilling to seek out the Order or directly challenge him. And at a practical level, that means our shops have to be open and our wine has to be poured. Those are ideal jobs for muggleborns.”

“What about me then?” she asked, and again she rubbed the back of her hand. “I never did register with that foul Umbridge woman.”

Malfoy’s mouth thinned. “What did she do to you?”

Hermione’s heart sped up a little. “Pardon?”

“You heard me. I’m sharing secrets with you. Now I want something in return. Tell me what she did to you, Granger.”

Hermione pursed her lips for a moment, but then sighed. “Nothing much. Just a blood quill. It wasn’t as bad as Harry’s. I mean, mine didn’t scar like his did, but...” she trailed off as she noticed the slightly terrifying look on his face.

“How many times?” he said softly.

“Just once!” she said quickly, feeling inexplicably nervous at the expression on his face. “It was a detention, you know, and it made me so angry I set the damn thing on fire by accident. She gave up on me after that.”

A muscle in Malfoy’s jaw twitched for a moment before his face went completely blank. “Very well. Any other questions for me?”

Hermione hurried to ask him something else, watching him warily now. His reaction to Umbridge had unnerved her.

“This moniker of yours... the Knife. What is that about?”

“I’m skilled with knives,” he said. “The Dark Lord has taken note of it, that’s all.”

“How skilled?” she asked uncomfortably, as she twisted her napkin in her lap anxiously.

He was watching her carefully. “I can almost always hit my target within fifteen meters.”

Hermione blanched, and Malfoy hurried to calm her. “Don’t worry about it. It’s just something I learned growing up, and I’ve practiced extensively in recent years. Have I given you any reason to think I would harm you?”

“No,” she said a bit nervously.

“Exactly,” he said soothingly. “You are perfectly safe with me.”

“This marking muggleborns thing though...” she said.

Malfoy waved her off. “It’s a small cut on the bicep to note they have been registered. It’s nothing more than that. The tracking is really overstated. The knife I use leaves a magical residue behind, but the minute they pass through standard wards I can’t find them anymore.”

“But the knife you use is cursed?”

Hermione now rubbed her neck a little as she stared down at her plate. She barely remembered Bellatrix holding that cursed knife to her throat because she was nearly unconscious when it happened, but she had a nasty scar for weeks. It was now nothing more than a very thin white line, and she suspected she knew why. It was incredibly disconcerting, having tea with this young man who was now a senior Death Eater. Two years ago she had not believed it, but now she was certain he was telling the truth. Something about him had changed and grown, and he was dangerous. *Very* dangerous. And yet, he seemed determined to protect her, *heal* her. Even knowing about his pardon, she was struggling to reconcile it.

She chanced a glance at him, and he was looking at her with uncharacteristic concern. “Yes it is cursed, but with the countercurse the scarring is very light.”

Hermione frowned, feeling distressed. “So you’re branding them. Like cattle.”

“Granger...”

“No, Malfoy, I want to hear you say it.”

He sighed. “Yes, I’m branding them. I had to come up with some way to convince the Dark Lord they would be identifiable and trackable. I can assure you it is very small, just a scar that’s hidden most of the time. It’s not even a tattoo.”

“But—”

“Granger, you know I’m a Death Eater. I’m actively working for the Dark Lord, and the things I am doing help keep you and others safe. I’m not saying it’s perfect, but giving a muggleborn a small scar and a job is much better than letting them rot in Azkaban.”

Hermione felt herself deflate at this. Malfoy was silent as he watched her process this. She knew he was right, but she hated it.

“I feel so useless,” she finally said.

He looked surprisingly sympathetic. “You won’t be for long,” he said.

Hermione felt an unfamiliar jolt of excitement. “Oh?”

“Yes. After our conversation last night I considered matters closely. I am willing to let you and the others help gather information for the Order, but there will be conditions. You will all be under my supervision. You will also need to train in several discrete skills before I let you out of the wards. And you *must* let go of some of your idealistic notions about saving everyone before I let you do anything more than read the papers. You have to understand that the Dark Lord is largely in control. The Order is still a force to be reckoned with, but they operate in the shadows. Not everyone can be saved. Difficult decisions have to be made. Those of us who work with both sides have to act like loyal Death Eaters in public, and that means we will do things you won’t agree with. You will need to convince me that you won’t break any of my rules if I let you help.”

Hermione was staring at him in shock. She hadn’t been expecting this at all.

“Why?” she finally asked.

He sighed. “Because as much as I wish I could keep you locked away in this suite forever, I know you’ll be miserable if I do that. Besides, you’re incredibly talented, and it’s a waste of your skills if we aren’t using you. That being said, my methods aren’t at all like Potter’s. I’m more than willing to torture and kill to get what I want and keep my cover. I’m willing to watch innocent people be hurt, traumatized, and die in front of me. I’m willing to wait and bide my time for revenge when somebody I care about is wronged. It’s the only way to stay in the Dark Lord’s good graces, and that’s how I’m most valuable to the other side. You will have to convince me that you can do the same thing before I let you out of here, because you’re supposed to be dead. That means you will *never* see the light of day as Hermione Granger while the Dark Lord is still alive, and I have to believe that you will guard whatever cover I give you above all else.”

Hermione’s heart was pounding as she absorbed his words. She knew he was right of course – he and the others were valuable to the Order precisely *because* they were willing to get their hands dirty in Voldemort’s service. Malfoy publicly executed that girl, and who knows how many others he had tortured and killed. Harry and Ron would never have done that. Neville wouldn’t have done it either. They would all rather die first.

And they did die, she reminded herself. They all died, and the war wasn’t over. Harry, of course, *had* to die, but Ron and Neville did not. They were brave and righteous, but it all came to nothing.

“You’re saying I need to compromise on my morals,” she said slowly. “Perfection is the enemy of good enough, and I may have to lose some personal battles to win the war.”

“Precisely,” he said.

“It’s not like me,” she confessed.

“I know it’s not,” he said simply, and he sounded surprisingly gentle as he said it. “But those are my terms. You have plenty of time to think about it while you train. Like I said, I’m not letting you out of here until you have a few more skills under your belt in any event.”

Hermione’s interest was piqued. “Alright. And what do I need to learn?”

“The basics of occlumency to start. You don’t have to be an expert because I’m not going to put you in a position where your mind would be actively searched, but if somebody pokes you with some passing legilimency, you need to be able to hide your identity and the fact that you’re assisting me.”

Hermione inclined her head. “That’s fair.”

Malfoy nodded. “Also self-defense.”

“I know self-defense,” she said.

He shook his head. "Not without a wand you don't. And you won't be allowed a wand while you are undercover, so you will be limited to wandless magic and hand-to-hand combat."

"Do you think I'll need it?" she asked a little nervously.

Malfoy looked at her intently. "I certainly hope not, but I'm not willing to risk it."

Hermione exhaled. "Alright then."

"And finally... I want you to consider becoming an animagus."

Hermione's eyes widened. "That can take years!"

"It can, but it doesn't have to," he said. "Your wandless magic is so good I think you will manage it fairly easily. The hardest part is finding clear instructions about how to do it because the Ministry keeps most of that information locked down so they can track who is attempting a transformation. The good news for us is the Malfoys secured a copy of those instructions in our private library years ago, along with a few other books on it that should help. We can select an animal that will make you the perfect spy and give you a way to escape if you are ever caught."

"But I thought you *can't* select your animal. It's usually the same as a wizard's patronus, remember? My patronus is an otter. They're small, but not exactly useful for spying."

Malfoy seemed to be weighing something. "You actually *can* select your animal if you're willing to do a ritual first. It's blood magic using blood from the animal you pick."

Hermione glanced down at *The Prophet*. "Theo said you are an expert in blood magic."

"I am," he said, "and I won't lie to you, the ritual is messy and rather dark. You won't like it at all. But it does allow you to select your animal. That's how Skeeter chose to become a scarab beetle. It wasn't an accident."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I'm not turning into an insect."

Malfoy was amused. "I wouldn't ask you to do that. But we'll find some other animal that's appropriately discreet."

"A cat?" asked Hermione hopefully.

Malfoy snorted. "No."

Hermione's face fell. "Well what then?"

"I haven't decided yet," confessed Malfoy. "I'm still thinking about it, but I want you to read up on the process in the meantime. Since you're supposed to be dead, nobody will miss you when you spend time in your animal form."

"That's what Pettigrew did," acknowledged Hermione. "He spent thirteen years as a rat."

“I know, and that’s what gave me the idea,” admitted Malfoy.

At this he pulled out a stack of books, two on occlumency and three on animagi transformations, and passed them across the table to her. She took them and couldn’t help the small spark of excitement.

“Read these,” he said, “and we’ll go from there.”

“You’re serious?” she said.

Malfoy nodded. “Yes. But you’ll play by my rules, Granger. I’m not going to compromise on that.”

She just nodded. “And you’ll keep taking tea with me so I’m not perpetually angry with you every time I read *The Prophet*?”

He flashed a grin at her. “That’s why I’m here. Call it a trust-building exercise.”

She rolled her eyes at this and grabbed another sandwich from the tea tray.

“Fine. Then tell me about this ball you attended and what on earth You-Know-Who was thinking with those ridiculous uniforms. Build some trust with me by telling me what the world is like outside of my gilded cage.”

At this, Malfoy launched into a story about a quadrille and Bellatrix stepping on his toes, and Hermione just shook her head to herself. She could never have imagined this even a couple months ago, but here she was. And for the first time since she had been captured by Malfoy she thought she might have found real purpose.

She just needed to let her morals go first.

Chapter 7: Bond

Chapter Notes

TW: Referenced premature birth, stillbirth, and miscarriage (not depicted)

The loss of Harry, Ron, and the others continued to hit her at odd times. When her mind was busy she could occasionally forget that they weren't there. She had spent so many years in solitude with her studies that she was accustomed to feeling alone when learning something new, even when they were sitting with her. Then again, her comfort within the walls of her own mind wasn't always enough, because the oddest things could set her off.

The animagi books contained a paragraph about owls, and she sobbed for half an hour, remembering Harry and Hedwig. The occlumency text talked about visualizing fields of flowers, and she was desolate as she remembered happier days spent at the Burrow. Even the occasional photograph in *The Daily Prophet* would catch her off-guard, as she remembered Colin and the hundreds of pictures he had taken of Harry and the others over the years.

His loss was even more poignant when Hermione learned that the photograph on her nightstand had been taken by him. He had seen Hermione and her parents in Diagon Alley that day and snapped it. Malfoy told her he found it when searching the Creevey family home after the Battle of Hogwarts, and he took it for Hermione to keep.

Malfoy, and especially Poppy, seemed to fret over her grief. It was entirely odd seeing looks of worry cross Malfoy's face whenever he caught her crying, and she couldn't rationalize it. He was a murderer for heaven's sake. He had killed and tortured other people in front of her. And yet, he seemed preoccupied by her sadness and was constantly plying her with tea or telling Poppy to draw a bath for her whenever she was upset. The third time he woke her up from a nightmare Hermione nearly had a panic attack as she dreamed of Cormac again. After getting her permission to touch her, Malfoy squeezed her tight to force her to breathe in time with him. She was enveloped by him, and he held on for what felt like ages.

It wasn't his breathing that finally calmed her down that night as much as his scent. It was identical to the green and gray blanket she so loved.

When she was finally calm, Malfoy cupped her face and studied her intently. "Would it help you relax if I killed him?" he asked her very seriously. "I already took a few fingers, but I can send him through the veil if you wish."

Hermione knew her eyes were huge as she stared at this baffling man. It made her afraid to hear him speak of murder so easily, and when he noticed her fear he spoke in that same,

soothing voice he liked to use whenever she became anxious.

“Don’t worry yourself about the details,” he insisted. “Just tell me if it would help you sleep. You are working very hard on your new projects, and you need your rest.”

God, he was calmly offering to murder a man because he thought it might help her be more rested. Hermione swallowed and shook her head, thinking quickly about what she should say to this.

“No, don’t hurt him any more than you already have. And besides, it’s not just him, it’s also Harry and Ron and the others. I dreamt about them too. It was just... a lot tonight.”

At this his expression softened. “Very well. Don’t hesitate to ask for dreamless sleep if you need it. And do let me know if you change your mind about him. You shouldn’t be afraid here.”

He left her to her own thoughts after that, and Hermione found herself more confused than ever by his behavior. He was gentle, almost caring, whenever she was anxious, but when he caught her on a good day he often reverted to his old self and became sarcastic and biting. They bickered constantly, especially when it came to her occlumency, which they had been practicing for a few weeks now.

The trouble with occlumency was that Hermione couldn’t meditate. She had never enjoyed a still mind, and no matter how much she read about it she couldn’t visualize a meadow or a pond or the ocean or any other single thing she was supposed to be thinking about for more than a couple seconds before intrusive thoughts began. Instead, she found the best way to keep Malfoy out was doing the opposite of meditating and allowing her brain to run rampant. She could simply overwhelm him with stray thoughts and odd connections, often reciting magical theorems in her mind or mentally rambling on about obscure facts of history or even magical trivia. When he pressed with more than just a light brush, however, something about it reminded her of Cormac trying to intrude into her body, and it tended to cause an anxiety spiral. She was learning to control her panic until she pushed him out, but the fact that she reacted that way at all never failed to put Malfoy in a foul mood.

“You need to think of something *still*, Granger! Sending yourself off the deep end with worry is not a healthy way to do this!”

“You said yourself I don’t have to be an expert, and we both know this *works*. I don’t reveal anything about my identity or you or what I’m doing for the Order. And didn’t you say I wouldn’t be actively searched?”

“That may be true, but the training is upsetting you. What if somebody *does* push? Will you be able to hold it together until you get them out of your head?”

“Yes! I can do it to you, can’t I?”

“Only barely, and then you start to panic afterwards. It makes you so afraid.” He seemed angry with her, but also very worried, and Hermione groaned in frustration.

“It’s fine! It just.... feels wrong, you know? When you push it’s like you’re seeing all of my thoughts under a microscope. It feels very exposed, even if I can hide the thing I’m keeping away from you. I just need a moment to compose myself afterwards!”

“You may not have moments.”

“Well I don’t know what to say about that, because my brain isn’t a still place, and if my method works well enough then why do you have such a problem with it?”

“I don’t like it when you’re anxious,” he insisted, frowning at her stubbornness.

“Have you met me? I’m an anxious person! For good reason!”

“Then you need to find a way to relax. Occlumency is easier when you’re relaxed.”

And with that, he cut off their practice and called Poppy to draw yet another bath for her and to send her to bed early.

The next day he proposed a solution that made Hermione’s jaw drop in disbelief.

“Here is what we will do. If anybody presses against your mind with more than a light brush, you’ll simply signal to me, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Take care of it how?” she demanded.

He didn’t answer, but drew his knife from an arm holster and flipped it through the air a few times before catching it and casually resheathing it.

“You can’t be serious,” she said.

“I’m entirely serious.”

“But how am I supposed to signal you? I don’t even know what you plan to have me do or where I will be. What if you aren’t around?”

“Then you call for Theo, and *he* will take care of it.”

“Call him how?”

“Through your bond.”

“Oh, right, how could I forget? I have a bond with Theo that nobody will explain to me.”

He nodded, as though it was the most obvious thing. “All in good time. Anyway, that plan should work. If you have to occlude and start to get too anxious, one of us will just find the right moment and handle it. We’ll make sure they forget anything they saw in your head.”

He said this as though he was Father Christmas presenting a gift to her.

“Malfoy, you can’t just *maim* people every time they do something to me that makes me upset!”

“And why not?” he demanded. “I’m responsible for your safety, yes? If you have a panic attack in the middle of a mission then that is the very definition of *not safe*.”

Yes, he was truly maddening, and Hermione often felt like she was getting whiplash when she was with him. He was exceedingly gentle whenever she became upset, but at times it was almost too much as he hovered over her. He often turned sarcastic when they bickered, but occasionally he crossed a line and it felt a little cruel. He was incredibly observant, but it also bordered on creepy. Hermione soon learned that the very personal things in her room were based entirely on Malfoy’s observations of her for the first six years at Hogwarts, and yet he *still* didn’t seem to understand why his own casual talk of murder and torture might bother her.

“We will never harm you,” he would always say whenever she expressed how uncomfortable it made her. “I know it’s upsetting to think about people dying, but you’re safe now. You don’t have to be frightened.”

There were times she wondered if he was a sociopath, but there seemed to be too many people he cared about for that label to really stick. Besides, he showed such empathy whenever she was upset about her friends’ deaths that it was clear he had *some* ability to emotionally relate to others. And yet, he also wasn’t bothered by harming or even killing other people if he felt it was the best way to achieve his goals. Hermione logically knew that she should be terrified of him, but instead she was just... on edge. And though she continued to fight it, that edginess she felt around him slipped further and further away the more time she spent with him.

She still wasn’t sure if he really *trusted* him, but she started to believe he would never harm her. He had proven to her over and over again that he wanted to keep her safe and content. She rather thought he would be the type who was perfectly comfortable leveling a building with the intent to kill everyone inside of it, but only after he made sure she was tucked away, preferably en route to a lingering bath and a calming draught just in case the violence made her anxiety worse.

He seemed determined to make sure she wasn’t scared of *him*, and as part of this she thought he might be trying to desensitize her. He never gave her details, but he also didn’t hide what he was doing from her. *The Daily Prophet* followed him quite a bit, and he always filled in any blanks for her when they debriefed over tea.

Sometimes it was gratifying, like the time *The Prophet* reported that the Dark Lord’s Knife had uncovered a plot to illegally traffic mudbloods who had been promised to the service of the Dark Lord. Madam Dolores Umbridge was held responsible and was punished most severely for her traitorous acts.

The evidence, he told her, was entirely fabricated, but it gave him a chance to get even with the evil bitch. Evidently Zabini had some serious complaints about her as well, as Ginny had also been a target of her blood quill.

But then there were other times it was unsettling.

After reading that he had performed another execution, she asked if it was true, and he said, “Yes of course.”

Then she asked him how many people he had killed in total.

“Seventeen at last count,” he said as he took a bite of scone.

“And do you feel bad about it?”

“Maybe a little bit the first time,” he admitted, “but I got over it pretty quickly. Besides, I only kill people when it’s necessary. Most of the people who die have tried to fuck with me, my family, or my friends. Other than that, I only kill when I have to fulfill a command from the Dark Lord or the Order.”

He was so matter-of-fact about it that Hermione unconsciously found herself justifying his behavior.

It’s for the war, she told herself. He’s not just slaughtering innocents. He helped the muggleborns in Azkaban! He uses Nita to protect the women he employs! He’s not a monster!

But then she would remember that compared to his seventeen deaths, Hermione was responsible for precisely zero. As far as she knew, Harry, Ron, and Neville had been responsible for zero as well.

And yet they’re dead, and Malfoy is not. And the only reason I’m still alive is because of him.

She felt like one of those cartoon characters with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. The angel always looked like Harry, telling her to be uncompromising with her morals. The devil, of course, was the spitting image of Malfoy, explaining with chilling rationality that people die in a war, and isn’t it better if those people are *not* your friends and family?

Hermione was torn, but she found herself listening to the devil more and more often as their teas continued. And then he pulled out an ace she never expected.

She heard a familiar knock on the door to her parlor, though it was not at their usual time.

“Come in,” she said curiously, as she rose to her feet.

The door opened, and Hermione heard a squeal and saw a blur of red as Ginny came sprinting through the door and then collided with her.

“Gin!” she gasped, hugging her friend hard. Immediately tears sprang to her eyes, but this time they weren’t from grief. They were from relief and happiness. She hadn’t seen Ginny since the mock execution weeks ago, and they hadn’t spoken then, having both been under the imperius curse.

“It’s good to see you again Hermione,” came Luna’s voice, and Hermione peeled herself away to find Luna humming to herself as she looked around the room with mild curiosity.

“You too, Luna,” she said, as she pulled Luna in for a hug. Over her shoulder she saw Malfoy, Theo, and Zabini watching the girls with some amusement, though there was an undercurrent of tension too. She was sure she knew why.

“It’s been a long time,” she added, staring pointedly at Malfoy, who just raised a defiant eyebrow at her.

“Hermione, tell me something so I know for *sure* it’s you,” demanded Ginny. “Blaise insists the person Malfoy killed during the ceremony was somebody else, but I need to be certain.”

Hermione frowned a little at the use of Zabini’s first name, but she didn’t comment on it as she thought of something that would reassure Ginny.

“Harry did not have a Hungarian horntail tattooed on his chest,” she finally said.

“What the fuck?” she heard Malfoy mutter under his breath, but Ginny just squealed again and clamped Hermione in another hug.

“Merlin, I’ve missed you,” she breathed. “Can you believe those three prats? First they kidnap us and then they save us? I never know if I should thank them or hex them.”

“I know what you mean,” said Hermione seriously as she cast another eye over the young men.

“Any chance you three can give us some privacy?” she asked. “It’s been ages.”

They exchanged a glance, but then nodded.

“You can have a few minutes, but not long today. Blaise has guard duty coming up,” said Malfoy, before he gestured toward the door and Theo and Zabini disappeared through it.

The moment the door shut, Ginny turned to Hermione and said, “Tell me, then. Is Malfoy evil?”

Hermione hesitated. “I... don’t know. He’s not evil toward *me*. Not at all. I mean, he can be irritating and sarcastic, but he treats me fairly well I suppose. Then again, he’s killed a lot of people.”

“So has Theo,” admitted Luna.

“And Blaise,” added Ginny.

“It’s Blaise now?” asked Hermione with a questioning look.

Ginny blushed a little, but nodded. “Yes. I’m... still figuring things out. But he’s let me hex him over and over again, and he’s never lost his temper with me a single time. He’s been really kind while I’ve been adjusting to everything.”

“And Harry?” asked Hermione.

Ginny looked a little perturbed by this. “Harry is dead, and he hurt me a lot before he went on the run with you. I waited for him for an entire year, but...”

“I get it,” said Hermione softly. “You need to move on.”

“Yes,” said Ginny. “I’ve struggled with his death, don’t get me wrong. Ron’s too of course, and Fred’s and Neville’s and the others... some days all I’ve done is cry. But they aren’t here, and Blaise is. The war is not over. I can’t afford to completely fall apart.”

“Have you heard from your parents? Or anybody else in the Order? Malfoy is very vague whenever I ask for details about the others.”

Ginny nodded. “I’ve exchanged a couple letters with Mum. She doesn’t say much, mind you, but she and Dad are alive. So are Bill and Percy and George. Charley is missing, but they are hopeful he isn’t dead because they think the Death Eaters would have announced it if he were.”

“God, I’m sorry, Gin.”

Ginny nodded glumly. “I tried to prepare for it, but it’s very hard.”

“Are your parents... okay with you being here?” asked Hermione delicately.

Ginny shot her a knowing look. “They don’t know where I am. Evidently the Order told them I was smuggled away into safety, so I told them the same thing. Frankly, it’s the truth, though it obviously wasn’t done in the way they would expect. I told them I’m safe, but it’s too dangerous for me to leave right now, so the best we can do is the occasional letter. I think they’re just relieved I’m out of the fighting and unharmed.”

“And you, Luna?”

“I’ve let Father know the same thing,” said Luna lightly. “He misses me of course, but he trusts me.”

“And did either of you tell them about me? Or each other?”

Both girls shook their heads. “Our mail is being monitored before it’s sent. Blaise insisted your survival has to remain top secret for your own safety.”

“Theo said the same thing,” added Luna. “And I wouldn’t betray him or put him in danger like that.”

“I didn’t know you and Theo were together,” said Hermione with a soft smile toward Luna.

“We are. It was a long time coming, and he’s very kind to me.”

“And Blaise has a crush on you,” said Hermione, now turning to Ginny. “Malfoy told me the first day here.”

Ginny's cheeks turned pink. "I've figured that out for myself. It's the only explanation for his behavior. He treats me like a damned princess, though he hasn't given me *everything* I've asked for. Malfoy hasn't allowed it, and apparently he's in charge."

"Like what?" asked Hermione curiously.

"Like seeing you and Luna, of course. At least not until today."

Hermione smiled a little at this. "And you're actually considering some sort of relationship with him?"

Ginny shrugged. "Like I said, I can't help but like him. He's been very kind to me."

"Just like Theo has been to me," added Luna. "He's a lovely person."

"They are kind even though they kill people?" Hermione pressed.

Luna nodded. "Yes. We're in a war. Theo has a dark side like all of us, but he is devoted to the people he loves. That's enough for me."

Hermione fell silent as she thought about this. Was that really enough? Could that be enough? It was certainly enough for her to no longer feel unsafe around Malfoy. But was it enough for her to accept his actions and even do similar things herself if the need arose?

Maybe. I did cruciate Cormac afterall.

It wasn't lost on her that Malfoy drew out Hermione's own darkness at one of her lowest moments. She knew she should feel bad about torturing Cormac, but she didn't. He had hurt her, so she hurt him back. It was terrible, but also empowering. And if she hadn't done it, she knew her panic surrounding her dreams and occlumency training would be worse than ever. She didn't regret it at all.

Perhaps a dose of darkness was necessary in war. It could keep the people she loved alive. It could even keep her sane.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by Ginny's teasing voice. "So has Malfoy tried to have his wicked way with you yet?"

"Pardon?" asked Hermione, totally nonplussed.

Ginny looked at her like she was an idiot. "I'm asking about Malfoy. Obviously Theo and Luna are together. Blaise is openly smitten with me, and I'll admit I'm starting to fall for him though I've been taking it slow and haven't even kissed him yet. But then there's Malfoy. He's giving you all this and killing people in your place. Don't you think he cares about you?"

Ginny gestured around the large room and parlor.

"I'm just collateral," said Hermione. "He's made a deal with the Order. If he keeps us safe, then they will give him, his mother, Theo, and Blaise a pardon if they ever take down You-

Know-Who.”

Hermione almost tripped over Blaise’s name, but she decided she couldn’t be the only one who called him ‘Zabini’ in private. While she was at Hogwarts she had noticed that the men often reverted to surnames with each other when there were other Death Eaters around. In private, however, they usually called each other by their first names.

“Blaise told me about their agreement with the Order, but I don’t think that’s his only motivation,” said Ginny skeptically. “I’m locked away in Malfoy Manor too, you know.”

“As am I,” said Luna.

Hermione gaped at them, not expecting this. “Pardon? We’ve been down the hall from each other this whole time?”

“Evidently,” said Ginny. “And don’t get me wrong, my room is very nice and comfortable. There is plenty of space, and Blaise took the time to prepare it for me. But it’s nothing like yours.”

Luna shook her head in agreement. “Nor mine. That’s why they brought us here today. You have the most space by far.”

“To be fair, Blaise did say there’s a large training room in this wing that we will be using soon,” said Ginny.

“Oh yes,” said Luna, “that’s true. Theo took me there the other day. But it’s not nearly as comfortable as Hermione’s room for a chat.”

Hermione blinked at their expectant faces, and then she shook her head slowly. “No... no, I don’t think that’s right.”

“But—” started Ginny, but Hermione shook her head harder.

“No. I’ve actually asked him a couple times if he has a crush on me, and he insists he doesn’t. I think I’m in here because he and Blaise traded us,” she said, looking at Ginny. “His room is just through that door. I think it’s just proximity.”

“But why bother to trade at all?” pressed Ginny. “Blaise could have managed both of us.”

Hermione shrugged. “Maybe he just wanted to separate us into our own rooms? And besides, something happened to me... at Hogwarts...” she trailed off and looked down for a moment. When she glanced back at her friends, Luna was looking sympathetic and Ginny’s eyes were narrowed as though she was trying to work out a puzzle.

“Don’t tell me it was—” she started, and Hermione quickly interjected.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it, but let’s just say it involved Cormac McLaggen, and Malfoy caught him and tortured him for it. I’ve... had a rough go of it. I think he traded with Blaise and put me in here so he could keep an eye on me, that’s all.”

Both of her friends rose to hug her, though when they pulled away, Ginny was still looking thoughtful.

"I still think—" she started, but Hermione cut her off again.

"Save it, Gin," she said. "It's not like that. We argue way too much for it to be like that."

Ginny sighed.

"Fine," she said. "But if it *does* turn into that..."

Hermione scowled, as Ginny smirked.

"Look, Luna and I each have our own Death Eater. You could too. We certainly can't judge you for it."

Hermione rolled her eyes at this before turning serious.

"I really struggle with what they are doing. It's not right."

"No, but war isn't right either," said Ginny firmly. "And the Order *did* practically trade us, didn't they? To get us out of the way? And they must have offered somebody in your place for that sacrifice. Their hands aren't clean either, Hermione. We have to look at the bigger picture and be willing to compromise now and then to take out You-Know-Who."

Hermione slumped.

"Maybe you're right. I've been wondering if I wasn't going half mad to consider it. I mean, Malfoy is the *only* human I've seen for weeks now, and he makes the things he does sound so sensible. A few months ago I don't think I would have found a way to rationalize murder, and now I'm nodding along whenever he tells me he killed somebody. I keep thinking he must be brainwashing me."

"But you dance on the edge yourself now and then," pointed out Ginny. "Have you forgotten Rita Skeeter? Or Marietta Edgecomb? You may not have killed anybody, but that doesn't mean you can't be ruthless and do cruel things to get your way. If the things that Blaise and the others are doing save more lives than they hurt, I've decided to support it, whatever it is. Blaise has said they could use our help, once we're trained a little."

"That sounds an awful lot like Dumbledore's 'greater good' argument," pointed out Hermione.

"Perhaps," chimed Luna. "But Ginny isn't wrong. Peace will be purchased with the deaths of You-Know-Who and his most fervent followers. That will require sacrifices along the way, and we may have to do some terrible things to get there."

Hermione stared at her two friends and wondered if all three of them hadn't been brainwashed by their respective Death Eaters. Then again, did it even matter if it was true? Ginny and Luna were the only friends Hermione had left. She had nothing to prove to anybody, and most of the world believed that she was dead.

Hermione took a deep breath and said a silent apology to the angel on her shoulder who looked so much like Harry.

“Alright, you both win,” said Hermione. “I’ll go along with whatever they ask us to do.”

Hermione and her friends caught up with each other for another thirty minutes or so before the wizards came back in and told them it was time.

“I have to take Ginny back,” said Blaise. “I need to leave for duty very soon.”

The girls rose, and Ginny hugged Hermione one more time before giving her a kiss on the cheek. Then she did the same to Luna before accepting the hand Blaise held out for her and moving out of the room.

“I’ll take Luna back too,” said Theo, “but then I’d like to come back and talk to Hermione about something if that’s alright.”

Hermione’s heart leapt, hoping this meant he would finally explain whatever bond they supposedly had. Malfoy had categorically refused to speak about it, always saying that it was Theo’s story to tell. This was the first time Hermione had seen him since that horrible day she arrived.

Malfoy exchanged a look with Theo and nodded.

As soon as they left, Hermione pounced.

“Can I see my friends again soon?” she begged. “I’ve missed them so much.”

Malfoy studied her. “Did it help? It didn’t make you anxious?”

“It helped,” she said instantly. Then she remembered Ginny’s suspicions about him and decided to test that theory a little.

“It made me happier than I’ve been in ages.”

She watched him carefully, and his face seemed to smooth at her words.

“Perhaps we can do it again,” he said slowly. “It took a few weeks to arrange this. We needed to make sure all three of you were starting to settle in before allowing it.”

Hermione wasn’t sure if she really bought this excuse for keeping her away from her friends, but she decided not to openly question him.

“Being able to see them will make me settle more quickly,” she said. “They are the only friends I have left.”

Malfoy looked like he was weighing her words, and Hermione wondered if she was laying it on too thick. Then again, she rarely asked him for anything directly, and she sensed that he wouldn’t tell her no if she truly wanted something that wouldn’t hurt her.

“Please,” she added. “I need them.”

“Alright,” he said, no longer hesitating. “I’ll make sure you get to see them more often.”

Hermione’s face split into the first true smile she could recall since the Battle of Hogwarts, and she strode toward him and grasped his hands.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. “Thank you *so much*.”

Malfoy looked stunned by her reaction and nodded mutely, though he gripped her hands firmly. He couldn’t seem to tear his eyes from her face.

Hermione felt herself blush unexpectedly, though she was still smiling broadly as she dropped her eyes for a moment in embarrassment and then looked back up at him through her lashes.

He inhaled as he stared at her, not blinking, and for a brief moment Hermione wondered if Ginny might be right about him. He had always watched her, she knew that. He usually didn’t speak to her at school, choosing instead to target Harry and Ron with his bullying. The classes he shared with her that didn’t include those two had been uneventful. In fact, there were entire school years that passed when he never said a single word to her while he was harassing her best friends. But despite his silence, she had caught his silver gaze on her frequently, usually accompanied by a sneer. The rare times he *did* speak to her were uniformly hostile, at least until he captured her.

And yet, he obviously noticed many things about her. He made note of her likes and preferences. Evidence of this was scattered all around her room. And now she had really smiled at him for the first time *ever*, and he seemed transfixed.

It’s not a crush.

For all of her doubts about him, she had never doubted him whenever he said *this*. That meant Ginny must be wrong about him. Then again, it had been a few weeks since she last asked. So much had happened between them, and they had been interacting almost daily. He certainly seemed to care about her safety and mental well-being. Maybe his feelings about her had changed.

“Is it a crush now?” she asked, and she tried to make it sound like she was teasing him a little to calm her inexplicable nerves.

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “No,” he said in a rough voice. “It’s definitely not a crush.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling oddly disappointed, and then puzzled. Perhaps he was simply shocked that she was treating him as a friend and not an adversary.

She opened her mouth to say something else, but Theo strode back in alone, and Hermione jumped back, wrenching her hands away from Malfoy. Theo halted, looking between them curiously, as Malfoy cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck a bit awkwardly. He said nothing more but just made his way to the sofa and gestured for Theo to do the same. Hermione lowered herself on the chaise lounge opposite the sofa and pulled her favorite green and gray blanket on top of her as she waited. She sensed that whatever this was could be important, and she found herself growing a little nervous. She needed that comforting scent of cedar and spice.

She couldn't help but notice Malfoy's gaze lingering on her, taking in everything: her expression, her foot jiggling as she waited, the blanket she was pulling up near her face.

Theo took a deep breath. “I owe you an explanation about a few things,” he said. “And it's... a lot. It's crazy, actually, but just bear with me.”

Hermione frowned, but nodded cautiously.

“I'm Theo Nott,” he said.

“I know,” said Hermione in confusion.

Theo sighed. “Theo Nott is an only child.”

“So am I,” commented Hermione.

“Are you?” he asked shrewdly.

Hermione furrowed her brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you have any siblings?”

“No,” she said slowly. “I mean, I guess *technically* I do, but it doesn't really count.”

Theo had an inscrutable expression on his face. “Oh? Tell me what that means.”

Hermione shrugged. “It means I was born a twin. But twin births are high risk in the muggle world, and we arrived early. My brother passed away before we ever left the hospital, and my parents never tried again. Obviously it was upsetting to them so they rarely talked about it, but my mother did tell me about it once. Twins run in her family, and she wanted to make sure I was aware of it. For all practical purposes though, I'm an only child.”

Theo nodded slowly.

“Well that's the thing. You see, when my mother was pregnant, the first war was in full swing. Father was a Death Eater and wasn't around all that often, including the night she went into labor. Father was a harsh man, and my mother was rightfully terrified of him. He

never saw that the little boy she delivered that night was stillborn. Father would have killed her if he knew.”

Hermione was staring at him, her heart starting to race as she sensed where this was going.

“All magical babies are identified by the Ministry of Magic once magic presents during pregnancy,” added Theo. “Muggleborns included. There’s a book in the Department of Mysteries that records the name and address of the mother so the Ministry can keep an eye on it as children grow. It helps them keep the accidental magic contained, especially within the muggleborn population, because muggleborn children don’t acquire the Trace until they enter the magical world for the first time. The book is confidential, highly classified, but it can be accessed with enough influence and money.”

“No...” she whispered, but Theo plowed on.

“When my mother saw that her baby hadn’t survived she called her best friend Narcissa Malfoy.”

“Who called my father,” Malfoy chimed in.

“And together they bribed the keeper of that room in the Department of Mysteries to scour the book for muggleborn pregnancies,” said Theo.

Hermione felt faint, and she closed her eyes as she listened.

“They found a registered twin pregnancy, both a boy and a girl, due about six weeks after my mother had given birth.”

“Theo...” said Hermione softly.

He looked very upset, but determined to finish it.

“They found the couple and cast a spell on the mother that caused her to go into labor. It was early, but she delivered two healthy babies, and my mother’s deceased child was swapped for the boy after they took him away to be checked out. They obliviated the muggle doctors, changed the medical records, and even spent a small fortune to modify the book in the Department of Mysteries to make it look like the muggleborn boy had died and Theodore Nott had lived. That allowed them to keep the secret from everybody, including Dumbledore. The headmaster at Hogwarts gets a notice of magical children directly from the Department of Mysteries before each school year.”

Hermione had tears in her eyes as she stared at him. He had curls that were just like hers. They had the same nose. She had always thought they looked very much alike, though she had her dad’s hazel eyes and he had...

“You have mum’s eyes,” she said simply. “They are bright blue.”

Theo swallowed hard, and he stared at her almost longingly.

“You believe me then?”

Hermione nodded slowly.

“You should hate me,” he insisted.

“You were a newborn.”

Theo looked down at his lap and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Tell me though, how did you find out?”

He gave a mirthless laugh. “At first? Luna.”

Hermione was startled. “Pardon?”

He shrugged. “Luna says our auras look the same. After Father and the others tried to kill you in the Department of Mysteries, she overheard me saying some... unkind things about you on the train. She confronted me and asked me why I would ever want my sister to be hurt. She said the man who I thought was my father was obviously not related to me, and she was sure my real parents would be ashamed to hear me speak about you that way.”

Hermione blinked in surprise. “And you believed her?”

“Not at first. But Mother was dead by then, and I never looked like either one of my parents. Mother and the others hid plenty of things about me, but they couldn’t hide the way I looked. Polyjuice and transfiguration wears off too quickly, you know. It never would have worked for long so they didn’t bother to try. Anyway, Father and I had a...complex relationship because of it. He died next to Lucius in the Battle of Hogwarts, so he never discovered the switch. But he also didn’t like me very much while he was alive, and a few times I overheard him accuse my mother of performing some magic to make him accept me. I think he believed she had an affair, but he never found evidence of it other than the way I look. My mother and godparents did some very obscure blood magic on me right after the switch so the wards at Nott Castle and Gringotts would acknowledge me as his flesh and blood. Mother always threw that back in his face whenever he questioned her about it. He never found the spell they used so he had no proof of anything at all, but the point is I always knew he was suspicious. And after the thing Luna said... well of course I noticed we looked like siblings. I saw you at the Sorting Ceremony in first year and was totally dumbfounded by it. I always chalked it up to coincidence, but when she said that, I just... got this feeling.”

“So what did you do?”

“I asked my godmother about it. She was Mum’s best friend, and I’ve been very close to her my whole life.”

“Narcissa...” Hermione murmured.

“Precisely,” said Theo. “She told me everything, but insisted it needed to be kept secret, especially from my father and the Dark Lord. She taught me occlumency that summer.”

“Because you’re muggleborn,” said Hermione in amazement.

“Yes, but not only that. My sister was Harry Potter’s best friend,” he added.

“God,” muttered Hermione, as she fell silent and thought about it. Theo gave her a moment to process it, and she glanced at Draco to see him watching her worriedly.

“I can’t believe they did that to Mum and Dad,” she said softly. “To *us*.”

Theo sighed. “I know. I... really let Narcissa have it, actually. Her only justification was that it saved my mum’s life at the time. Father would have blamed her for the stillbirth and probably killed her for it. They chose your — or I suppose *our* — parents because the timing of the stillbirth was close enough to our due date that they could pull off the swap, and our parents would still have you after they took me. They would still be able to raise and know at least one child.”

Hermione felt a lump in her throat. “Theo, they don’t know me anymore, nor you,” she said quietly.

He frowned. “What?”

“I... obliviated them. More than a year ago now, before I went on the run. I removed their memories of me and the few they had of you. Mum had a couple of early miscarriages before she had us, and I made her and dad believe they stopped trying after the second one. She doesn’t remember ever being pregnant with us. I thought it would be too painful for her.”

He looked stricken by this news.

“I’m sorry, I—”

He was shaking his head. “No, you shouldn’t apologize to me for anything, I just—”

“It’s to keep them safe,” she said hurriedly. “I couldn’t be there to protect them, so I obliviated them and sent them out of the country. If England ever becomes safe for them again I’ll bring them back and try to reverse it, but I thought it was just *me* who would care if it didn’t work and... oh God...”

Hermione started breathing hard, as she realized she may have taken her parents away from their other child... her *brother*; whom she could barely believe was her brother, except that everything he told her made sense. Hermione had survived birth with only a short stay in the neonatal ward and always thought it strange that her brother had not. They looked just alike. His magic felt so *familiar*. They had always been ranked first and second in their classes at Hogwarts. He had never been as openly cruel to her as the other Slytherins.

Oh my God, what did I do?

She distantly realized she was on the verge of another panic attack as she began to shake. She pulled the blanket around her more tightly and squeezed her eyes closed, but then she heard some movement and a familiar voice say, “Granger...”

Instinctively she reached out for him, and Malfoy’s large arms pulled her to him, squeezing tightly again, just like that night he offered to kill Cormac for her.

“Breathe...” he whispered. “Deep, calming breaths... it will all work out... he’s not cross with you... you did the right thing...”

She buried her face into his shoulder, inhaling that scent and cataloging the notes. And then, for the first time since that day she arrived at Malfoy Manor she felt Theo’s magic envelop her too, and she slumped. He was siphoning away her fear and anxiety. Only now did Hermione realize she was practically clutching the front of Malfoy’s shirt. She loosened her grip a little as she pushed back to look at Theo again. Malfoy shifted position to let her do it, but he stayed next to her and didn’t move away.

Theo was watching her with concern and a little wariness.

“That thing you can do...”

He cleared his throat. “Our bond. Right.”

“It’s because of this isn’t it? Because we’re siblings.”

“Not just siblings, but twins,” he said. “Magical twins all have bonds like ours.”

Hermione furrowed her brow. “Really? I never heard of such a thing. And I roomed with Parvati Patil for six years and obviously knew the Weasley twins well...”

Theo shrugged. “Most magical parents block the bond when twins are young. It makes their accidental magic more volatile. It lends itself to mischief because they can communicate with each other when they figure out how to work it. The magic to block it is arguably a little dark, but it’s fully reversible so almost everybody does it. Based on what I know, I’d guess the Patil twins had their bond blocked. The Weasley’s though...”

“Didn’t,” finished Hermione, as she remembered Fred and George’s uncanny ability to know what the other was thinking and finish each other’s sentences.

“I was actually going to say they probably *did*, but I’d wager they broke into the Restricted Section at Hogwarts and reversed it themselves within a month of arriving during their first year.”

Hermione unexpectedly caught herself smiling a little at this theory.

“I’d bet you’re right,” she acknowledged.

Then she looked at him again and said, “So our bond...”

“Blocked at birth. Mother and my godparents knew we would be in the same year at Hogwarts of course. They didn’t want to risk us figuring it out for ourselves if we ended up sensing each other’s magic. I found the spell to reverse it and unblocked it after we captured you, while you were still unconscious. I wish I could have used it to help you after McLaggen, but I didn’t dare use it until the execution day in case somebody else noticed what I was doing. We were relying on it to help you stay calm and fully submit to the imperius. We were worried you were powerful enough to break out of it.”

"I still can't believe you imperiused me," she muttered.

"It was for your safety," came Malfoy's voice next to her, and she heard a stubborn tone that told her he fully supported what Theo had done. A glance at Theo's face told her he was in agreement and wouldn't be apologizing for it either.

She sighed and nodded a little and slumped. She knew she would have blown their whole plan if they hadn't used every resource they had to subdue her. Hell, she had *tried*.

"So what does it do? How do you work it?"

Theo frowned a little as he thought about it. "It's mostly what we've already done. We can send emotions to each other and absorb the other's feelings to diffuse them. We can communicate if we focus very hard. It's a bit like a muscle. It takes exercise, and it's supposed to get easier to use with practice. Most of it has been one-sided so far, but you have shouted in my head a couple times."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I'd like to learn how to use it. It could be helpful."

"You will," said Theo instantly. "*We* will. It's a unique advantage that absolutely nobody would ever suspect. Besides, if the Weasley twins can become experts then surely we can too."

Hermione gave him a genuine smile at this and reached a hand out for him. Theo blinked in surprise, but pleasure also flashed across his face as he rose and walked over to her to take her hand and settled himself on the other side of her from Malfoy. Her magic recognized his instantly at the touch, and she rather unexpectedly found herself nestled between two members of Voldemort's inner circle, both of whom were much larger than she was. Surprisingly, it made her safe instead of scared.

"My brother the Death Eater," she mused out loud.

"My sister, the swottiest member of the Order of the Phoenix," he retorted.

Hermione found herself smiling a little at this before turning serious.

"I suppose I truly have nothing to fear from you then," she said quietly.

Theo jiggled her hand to make her look at him, and she saw him staring at her earnestly.

"Nothing at all," he said seriously. "I know you've just learned about it, but I've had a couple of years to get used to the idea. Perhaps I should have told you before now, but we all thought it best to keep it quiet while Potter was alive because it would have made both of us targets if it had gotten out. But no, I would never hurt my sister. If anything, I'm afraid of what *you* will do to *me*. I've followed news about you closely ever since I found out, and I swear you're going to send me to an early grave from stress."

Hermione smiled a little at this and put her head on his shoulder.

"It's been a rough couple years, that's true."

“Especially that day at Malfoy Manor,” he said softly.

She raised her head to look at him. “You know about that?”

“Of course,” he said. “Draco contacted me as soon as he could. He and Narcissa had to play along in front of the others, but they would have tried to extract you if Potter and Weasley hadn’t arrived. Bella moved to the very top of my shit list after that. I’ve had to bide my time with her though — she’s dangerous.”

“What about Lucius?” she asked.

She heard Malfoy sigh. “He would have given you to the Dark Lord. Mother and I were... not pleased.”

“Lucius only cared about Draco and me,” clarified Theo. “He probably would have been relieved if you had died. Any temptation to disclose the secret would have died with you.”

“But he’s gone,” Malfoy reminded her gently. “You have nothing to fear from him either.”

The knot in her stomach eased at this.

“And the great blond prat to my right?” she asked Theo. “I suppose this all means I’m truly safe with him too, despite his propensity for murder?”

Malfoy made an offended sound, but she heard Theo chuckle. “Like I would *ever* allow my baby sister to room next to a bloke I didn’t trust.”

Hermione lifted her head and scowled at Theo.

“*Baby* sister?” demanded.

“Of course,” he said easily. “Aunt Cissy says I’m four minutes older than you.”

Hermione scoffed at this, and Theo just nudged her playfully. “You’d best get used to it. You’re my little sister, and that means I will claim big brother privileges for the rest of our lives. That includes getting revenge against anybody who hurts you and thoroughly vetting potential boyfriends to make sure I approve.”

“You are ridiculous,” she said, though a small part of her was thrilled at the declaration.

Theo had accepted it, had accepted *her*. She believed him too, as she remembered his warmth and kindness while she was imprisoned at Hogwarts. Malfoy’s comments about Theo taking his turn with Cormac also made perfect sense now. Theo must have been enraged by what Cormac had done to her. He was very dangerous, just like Malfoy, but she had nothing to fear from either one of them.

“And you?” she asked, turning to Malfoy. “How long have you known?”

“Since Theo found out,” he said, “but I’ll admit I suspected something like it for years beforehand. I always assumed it was reversed though, and you were the pureblood who had been lost or hidden during the first war. You and Theo are just so much alike, even beyond

your appearance, that I always wondered if you were actually siblings or at least cousins. It's uncanny sometimes."

Hermione nodded slowly. "So that's why you were always watching me at Hogwarts then? You were trying to figure out if I was secretly a pureblood and related to Theo?"

"Mmmm," he said noncommittally.

"Well what do you think now that you know Theo's blood is just as muddy as mine?"

He rolled his eyes. "I decided most of that was bullshit before I learned the truth, Granger. The Dark Lord is a half-blood, you know. He's the most powerful wizard alive today, and his father was a muggle. Obviously none of it matters."

Hermione was so shocked her jaw dropped.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," he said in amusement.

"But you still called me a mudblood while I was locked up at Hogwarts!"

He rolled his eyes. "Obviously I had to."

"Theo didn't," she pointed out.

"I know, and I told him he was being an idiot by not playing along. It's all a show, Granger. I told you we play a lot of different roles. I haven't called you that word since you came to stay here, have I?"

She stilled as she thought about it. No, he hadn't. He just called her Granger, and he didn't refer to other muggleborns as mudbloods either.

"This is all so crazy," she said.

"It is," agreed Theo. "But I'm glad we finally found each other."

Hermione smiled slowly at this and squeezed his hand one more time.

"Me too."

Chapter 8: Stiletto

Malfoy gave it one more week before he announced it was time to start training in self-defense. This, she learned, would take place in the elusive training room that Luna and Ginny had both mentioned.

The previous week had been like some kind of dream. Malfoy seemed to be feeling generous, because while she still saw him for tea each day, she now took breakfast with Theo and usually had dinner with Ginny and Luna. Even Blaise dropped in to eat with the girls from time to time, where he stared at Ginny with a positively sloppy expression on his face.

She hadn't been this socially engaged since she was a student at Hogwarts.

It gave her some of her lightness back, if only for a short while. It was a balm to her soul, eating with her friends and getting to know her brother. She and Theo swapped stories over breakfast each day, where he regaled her with countless adventures alongside Malfoy as young children, exploring the farthest reaches of the Malfoy estate. She learned that Theo and Malfoy had been each other's best friends for as long as either of them could remember, having practically been raised together. Blaise, he told her, was an addition that came from Hogwarts, as were the others in their extended friends group. Crabbe and Goyle, Theo said with an eye-roll, were simply Malfoy's lackeys that he used to bully Gryffindors. He had never considered them close friends.

As for Hermione, she answered what felt like a thousand questions from Theo all about the muggle world and their parents. It felt good to talk about them because nobody who knew what she had done to them ever did. It was as though they died, and for the last year she had hardly spoken of them. But talking to Theo about them was different. They were his parents too, though they didn't know each other. He was intensely curious about what his life would have been like if he hadn't been taken and introduced to magic as an infant.

"I've done a lot of research on muggle things since learning the truth," he confessed. "That IV bag we stuck in your arm at Hogwarts... it was my idea to keep muggle medical things around because they are easier to acquire than many potions. And I've learned about muggle currency and banking and things like that. I'm the one who gave Draco a book list and bank card to go shopping for those muggle books on your shelf, you know. Of course the git was too poncey for regular books and insisted on first editions. He owed me an absolute fortune when he was done, and I had to obliviate the book shop owners because of how much money he spent.... Well, you know what you have, so I'm sure you can imagine it. I have to be careful not to reveal just how much I know about the muggle world around the other Death Eaters, but I know a lot."

Hermione also told him about some of her adventures with Harry and Ron, and he shuddered to hear about the three-headed dog and scoffed when she described degnoming the Weasleys' garden and became angry when she told him about Ron walking out on her and Harry in the

forest that day. Hermione had always thought of Harry as her brother, and she told Theo so. Thankfully, he didn't seem to resent it, having always felt the same way about Malfoy. All four of them – Harry, Theo, Malfoy, and Hermione – had believed themselves to be only children. Naturally they had self-selected their own siblings before they learned the truth.

“I've learned that families can be adopted. It's not always about blood,” he said simply.

She knew he was right of course, but that didn't mean she was any less thrilled to discover she had a true blood sibling – a twin who was her other half.

During their breakfasts she learned that Malfoy was absolutely correct when he said that she and Theo were very much alike. They shared the same favorite subject in school (Arithmancy). They took their tea the same way (with a splash of milk). They both despised heights. They laughed the same way and talked with their hands when they got excited and both slept on their left sides. Occasionally Malfoy would wander in while they were eating together and just shake his head in amusement to see them interacting together. But all the teasing in the world from the likes of Draco Malfoy couldn't do a thing to quell her enthusiasm for her mornings with Theo. They had years to catch up on.

When breakfast was over, they would spend another hour testing the limits of their bond before going their separate ways. Malfoy, it seemed, had arranged Theo's schedule to accommodate this because he encouraged them to practice daily. Hermione quickly learned how to tap into it and send emotions to Theo and absorb his in return to bring him back to equilibrium. Talking to each other was more complicated, and she still had a tendency to shout in Theo's head, but they were improving day by day. She also learned how to peek into his head to read his train of thought, and now she could feel it whenever he did it to her. It was comforting to know they could do it when necessary, but they would never be able to truly spy on each other.

Working on the bond with Theo also improved her occlumency as she got increasingly used to having another presence in her mind. Malfoy was still not thrilled about the method she used to hide sensitive information from him, but she had adjusted and the panic attacks diminished with more practice.

During the lulls in her day, Hermione caught up on the news and continued her reading about animagi and occasionally a muggle novel to give her brain a break. Malfoy had told her she didn't need to have the transformation complete before her first mission for him, but she was still keen to work on it as soon as possible. Now that she was learning more about it, the process fascinated her, and she spent more time than she cared to admit weighing the advantages and disadvantages of various animal forms.

Even the pang of the loss of Harry and Ron was lessening. She still grieved them, and there were moments when she was caught off guard by her sadness, but she could see some light again, and it was the thing she needed to begin the arduous process of truly moving on. She knew it would still be months before she had truly accepted their deaths – if not years – but she could feel progress being made. It was a relief to finally believe that she would recover eventually. She wouldn't be sad forever. And right now, that was enough.

Through all of it, Malfoy seemed to watch her. It was similar to the glances she used to catch at Hogwarts, but this time he usually smirked at her instead of scowled. She rather thought he was aware of her ever-increasing good mood, and he was giving himself full credit for it. Under normal circumstances she knew this would annoy her, but it was so needed after the recent months she had that she couldn't even bring herself to be irritated by it. In fact, she threw more than one genuine smile his way that week, and each time he blinked in delighted surprise.

That was especially true when he dropped the news that she would finally be allowed to leave her room.

"It's time to start training you three in self-defense," said Malfoy at one of their teas. "This wing has a large room I've set aside for it, so it's only the six of us who can use it."

"Do you mean..." she said breathlessly, hardly daring to hope.

"It means you will get to leave to visit the training room," he said.

Hermione actually squealed, and she knew her smile must have been blinding because Malfoy appeared almost worried by her reaction.

"But you can't leave the wing," he hurried to say. "You absolutely cannot leave the wards yet."

Hermione rolled her eyes, still smiling broadly. "That's fine, I don't care about that. I'm just excited to get out of this room!"

"Alright..." he said, looking at her as though she was going mad. "But I'm telling you right now, if you give me the slightest hint you might try to escape I'll lock you back in here until the damn war is over."

She huffed in annoyance. "I'm not going to try to escape."

"Aren't you?" he challenged.

"Of course not," she insisted. "Where else would I go? And *why* would I go anywhere else? I have everything I need here, and all the people I care about under one roof. With the exception of my parents – who don't know I exist – I have nobody else."

It was true. She had her two living friends, her actual *brother*, and even Malfoy and Blaise were starting to grow on her. She was safe here in this private wing of Malfoy Manor, and she had rather quickly gotten used to the luxury afforded to her by Malfoy and Poppy. As much as Hermione tried to fight it, she had never been one who enjoyed roughing it, and Malfoy Manor was the opposite of all things rough. Hermione had even fully adapted to Poppy's hour-long hair and skincare routine, and it had now become a soothing daily ritual while she read the papers.

Besides, even if Hermione wanted to escape, where on earth would she go? Her parents' old house was entirely without wards and had been sold. The Burrow and Shell Cottage were

under strict surveillance. And Grimmauld Place – she recently learned – was now owned by Malfoy too as the eldest male Black. Harry had died without a will, so it reverted back to the Black family.

Even Hermione's money was inaccessible at the moment, so it wasn't like she could leave and buy some place of her own. Hermione had inherited at least part of the Potter fortune thanks to a beneficiary form Harry signed just before their second year of Hogwarts. It was the only provision he had ever made for his assets if he died. She strongly suspected that part of it was supposed to go to Ron too, but since he died the same day she wasn't sure if his portion had been passed to the rest of the Weasleys or if Hermione had gotten it as well. Hermione's own share was just sitting in a vault in the belly of the earth waiting for her to withdraw it, but she knew it would be a suicide mission to go there and retrieve any of it. Malfoy, in a true stroke of luck, managed to intercept the key that Gringotts owed to her the day after the Battle of Hogwarts. That meant none of the other Death Eaters knew about her inheritance or thought to check with Gringotts to see if she was still alive after Malfoy purportedly executed her. Hermione was relieved when he told her about it, but she knew nothing could come of it just yet. Being rich on paper meant very little until she could show her real face in Diagon Alley.

No, everything Hermione wanted and needed was currently housed at Malfoy Manor. She wanted to leave her *room*, certainly, but she wasn't stupid enough to cross Malfoy's wards without having a very good reason to do it.

Malfoy must have seen that she was being honest, because his eyes softened a little.

"Alright then. We can begin training tomorrow."

Hermione looked at the black ribbon that Poppy presented her a bit askance.

"Poppy, they are training me in hand-to-hand combat," she said, gesturing to the muggle athletic wear she had donned for her first lesson with Malfoy and the others.

"Miss should still wear it," insisted the elf. "Tis perfect!"

Hermione sighed but didn't fight her about it any longer. "Fine. But if it gets in the way this time, it will be the *only* time."

"Very well," said Poppy unconcernedly, and she gave a fond look at Hermione's hair as she tied the bow with a flourish. Hermione really couldn't fathom why. Her curls were gathered into a high ponytail and doing their best to spring free.

A moment later a knock came on her door, and she called for Malfoy to enter. He came to a halt when he saw her, and she blushed just a bit as his eyes traveled over her form.

Honestly, what was he expecting?

He was the one who had gotten her these clothes. She wasn't sure why he seemed so surprised to see her in muggle spandex and trainers. She let out a small huff of annoyance, and amusement flashed across his face before gesturing toward the door that led to the hallway – a door she hadn't walked through since the day she entered Malfoy Manor.

“Shall we?” he asked a bit mockingly as he turned the knob and opened the door for her.

Hermione hesitated for only a moment before walking forward and cautiously crossing the threshold.

“The training room is at the end of the hall,” he said, gesturing several doors down. Hermione saw that she was in what appeared to be a corridor with doors on either end.

“That door,” he said, pointing to the opposite end from the training room, “leads to the rest of the Manor. The special wards that keep you and the others safe end there, so you will not be able to walk through it without me, Theo, or Blaise helping you.”

“Evidently you don't have to be that worried about our escaping then,” she said as she followed him toward the training room.

He just gave her a skeptical look. “Right.”

As they passed several other closed doors, Hermione looked at them questioningly.

“And these are...” she started.

“Doors to my bedroom and the others' rooms as well. All six of us are living in this wing at the moment. My personal study is also up here. There's a larger office on the main level, but I only use it when hosting meetings.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this. He was speaking about it as though he had an actual *job* other than being a Death Eater. Then again, perhaps he did. His father was gone, and she knew how patriarchal wizarding society could be. She remembered him mentioning a family apothecary company. Perhaps he was the one running it instead of his mother.

It was a strange thought.

Malfoy opened the door to the training room, and Hermione's jaw dropped when she walked through it. It was enormous and surprisingly modern. It reminded her of a yoga studio with blonde wood floors and an entire wall of mirrors on one side. Then again, a yoga studio would never have a wall of knives, chains, and other devices of torture displayed so prominently on one end or targets lining the wall on the other. Nor would it have something that looked like a wrestling mat filling a large portion of the floor or mannequins that Hermione strongly suspected were magical. Hermione eyed it a bit nervously. She wondered if Malfoy was intending to have her fight them.

There was a table to the left as they walked in with various knives and holsters spread out. Ginny and Luna were already examining them, while Blaise and Theo seemed to be

measuring their forearms.

“We haven’t discussed this, but I will have to touch you for training,” said Malfoy under his breath. “Theo and Blaise too. Is that alright?”

Hermione spun to look at him watching her with some concern.

She just bit her lip and nodded. “Yes... I assumed as much. You don’t have to ask while we’re in here.”

He nodded and seemed to be steeling himself for something. “In that case, let’s get you fitted with a knife and holster, shall we?”

He gestured toward the table, and Hermione approached it a bit cautiously. Malfoy didn’t bother to measure her, but instead he reached across the table and grabbed a small holster that he began to secure to her left forearm.

“You’re right-handed,” he said. “So this needs to be on your left arm.”

She wasn’t sure when he had noticed this, but she nodded and let him tighten it.

“The next one is a bit more... personal,” he said with a small grimace. He reached for a much larger holster and crouched down in front of her right leg.

“Step into it,” he said.

Hermione looked at him questioningly. “Pardon?”

“Step into the circle so I can tighten it.”

Hermione balanced on one foot as she did so, and then to her utter shock Malfoy moved the holster as high up on her thigh as it would go. He was kneeling in front of her, his face far too close to her crotch for comfort, and she turned crimson as he began to tighten the straps on it.

“Seriously?” she asked a bit weakly.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “It’s the best way. The blokes and I can wear knives in our boots, but women generally do not have that luxury because your footwear won’t allow for it. Even your forearm would require long sleeves to stay hidden, and that’s not always possible for you like it is for us. Your inner thigh is discrete and should always remain covered, regardless of what we have you doing.”

He looked pointedly at her as he said this last bit.

“So what, I’m supposed to reach down into my trousers and –”

He choked a little, but hurried to say, “Trousers will not be involved. You’ll always be in a dress or skirt.”

“And you *still* won’t tell me what you are planning?”

“Not until I absolutely have to,” he muttered.

Task completed, he rose to his feet and then surveyed the knives for a moment before selecting a short, thin one to sheath in her arm holster and a slightly longer one he slipped next to her thigh. "These are stilettos. Italian, of course, they make the best. They're thin, very sharp, excellent for close knife work and suitable enough for throwing with some practice."

Hermione looked at the knives cautiously.

“You also need these,” he added, now pointing below the table to a pair of very strappy, very high gold heels.

“Pardon?” she asked in disbelief.

“The shoes. You need to wear them.”

She glanced at Ginny and Luna and saw they were already wearing heels.

“Why?” she demanded.

He rolled his eyes. “Because you will be *dressed up* when we let you out of here. If you need trainers to fight then you won’t be able to properly defend yourself when wearing shoes like these. You will be unbalanced and unstable if you don’t practice in them.”

Hermione eyed them skeptically for another moment before sighing. “Fine. These are called stilettos too, you know.”

Malfoy just smirked as she kicked off her trainers and peeled off her socks before slipping on the heels. They must have been four inches high. At least they had a cushioning charm on them.

She stood and looked at herself in the mirror. She felt ridiculous in her muggle spandex, knife holsters, and high heels.

“The ribbon’s a nice touch,” said Malfoy, now giving her a teasing smile in the mirror as she surveyed herself with some dismay.

“Shut it,” she muttered.

“Why?” he said, approaching her from behind and reaching up to tug on it lightly. “It’s very pretty.”

Without even thinking about it, Hermione gave a half-hearted ram with her elbow, fully intending to shove it into his stomach in a mocking way. But to her utter surprise he caught her arm, twisted it behind her before gripping her other arm too and trapping her wrists in one hand. Then he had his own knife to her throat with his other hand before she could blink.

She was staring in the mirror in shock, breathing hard and shaking just a little. She was frozen, terrified, and trying to calm her panic.

“You’ll have to be faster than that,” he said before releasing her and casually throwing his knife toward a target against the wall that was about five meters away. It sank into the very center with a thud.

Ginny and Luna were staring at them both, eyes wide.

Hermione swallowed hard and reached up to touch her throat, but there wasn’t a single scratch on her. She willed her racing heart to slow down as she rubbed the same spot just a little bit.

He was just proving a point. He won’t actually hurt me.

She glanced at Theo and Blaise, and to her consternation neither of them looked at all surprised by what Malfoy had just done. Theo actually winked at her.

“Let’s get started,” said Malfoy. “Come over here so I can show you how to properly hold a fucking knife.”

The training was fast-paced. They started by Malfoy demonstrating different grips. Hermione learned there was a right way and definitely a wrong way to hold a knife when trying to stab something. The wrong way could lead to serious injury for the holder, as demonstrated by Ginny when she wasn’t paying close attention and inadvertently sliced her palm open when her knife slipped.

A quick healing spell later, all three witches were taking Malfoy’s lessons much more seriously.

The grips for stabbing were different than the grips for throwing, and Malfoy made them switch between the two over and over again before moving on to the next lesson: unholstering and reholstering.

“You have to do it instinctively with the correct grip the first time. It has to be muscle memory. The holster keeps you and your blade safe. But you can’t use your knife while it’s put away, and if you need to defend yourself you can’t spare any time to ponder the right grip.”

He made them draw from their forearms first before moving on to drawing from their thighs. This was a bit more precarious as all three witches were very cautious about slicing some important bits on the draw, and it was a holstering method none of the wizards had used very often.

“This one is more important than the arm,” insisted Malfoy. “It’s the only place we are certain you will always be able to hide a knife.”

And so they practiced. By the time Malfoy called it all three witches were drawing more quickly, but still not fast enough to satisfy him.

“We’ll keep working on it tomorrow,” he said. “Blaise is up next.”

Blaise called them over to the mat to begin lessons in hand-to-hand combat.

“The first lesson is throwing a punch,” he said. “Keep your thumb out if you don’t want to break it.”

He pulled out his wand and waved it, and the mannequins moved in front of each of the girls. Over and over again they practiced. The mannequins felt surprisingly lifelike, and they glowed green for light strikes, yellow for moderate, and red when there was enough force to incapacitate someone. Hermione supposed it was a bit like boxing, but the witches weren’t allowed gloves, and Hermione’s hand was soon aching. They took periodic breaks for healing spells on their knuckles, much to her relief.

It was unsurprising that Ginny was clearly better than Hermione or Luna at this station. She explained that the twins had shown her how to punch when she was just a child, and she had plenty of practice growing up with her big brothers.

They ended with dodging and wandless magic, led by Theo. He cast light stinging hexes toward them, and they were required to either dodge or try to disarm him with magic. Hermione’s attempts at *expelliarmus* were largely unsuccessful, and Malfoy’s mouth became a grim line as she turned an ankle trying to dodge in high heels. Then again, she was the only one of the three who produced anything wandless at all, until Ginny got frustrated and bat-bogeyed Theo.

“All three of you need to practice basic defensive spells with wandless magic,” said Malfoy curtly, as Hermione rubbed her throbbing ankle. “For now, that will be your homework between sessions. Start with *expelliarmus* and work your way up. I want to see some basic shields and stunning spells that are strong enough to at least slow down your opponent before we let you out of here.”

With that he dismissed them, and all three girls wearily began to trudge toward the door. As Hermione passed Malfoy, however, he suddenly reached out and grabbed her, spun her around and pinned her to the wall with his knife against her throat for a second time.

Ginny and Luna tensed, while Hermione stared at him in fear. She could clearly see his face this time, and it reminded her of that day he had executed the girl who looked just like her. It was cold, harsh, and he looked perfectly capable of slicing her throat open. Her heart started racing, and she felt panic begin to overtake her as her breathing went shallow. Malfoy could slaughter her, just like that girl. She was pinned to the wall, just like that day with Cormac. He could harm her, he could touch her, he could overpower her, he could...

“Last thing to remember,” he said casually, his mask falling away and melting back into his normal expression. “Never turn your back on your opponent.”

He released her again, as he sheathed his knife and stepped away. Hermione was barely holding it together as she swallowed hard. She was trembling, as her eyes dropped to the floor.

“Come,” he said, holding out a hand for her to take. “Let’s return to your room.”

She didn’t take his hand, but clenched her own in a fist and stepped away from the wall. They walked side by side saying nothing, as her friends turned and began to follow Theo and Blaise.

“Same time tomorrow,” called Malfoy after them. Luna and Ginny cast slightly worried looks back at Hermione, but they said nothing as they disappeared into their own rooms and Malfoy led Hermione to hers.

She was silent as she moved into her room and sank down on the sofa, rubbing her throbbing ankle. She could barely look at him. She was too shaken.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing toward her ankle.

“No,” she said curtly, chancing the briefest glance to see how he would react.

Malfoy paused, and a look of surprise flashed across his face.

“Granger, you need —”

“I’ll be fine,” she said curtly, looking away again.

“Granger,” he tried again, “you know I had to —”

“I’d like to be alone,” she said, finally looking squarely at him so that he could see just how serious she was. She couldn’t stand to be here with him. She could still feel that terrible rush of adrenaline, and she needed some space to come down from it. Over and over again the memory of herself being sliced open was playing in her mind. It was on a terrible loop, and she didn’t think she would break out of it until he left.

His face turned to stone at this, but she saw something stirring in his eyes made her shrink away a little. She had just been reminded of exactly how dangerous he could be.

“I’ll see you for tea then?” he said, with a bit of a question in his voice.

“I’d rather not today, thanks.”

She started to look away again, but his face seemed to crack, and she caught a look of slight desperation pass across it.

“Granger, I didn’t mean to —”

“Please,” she said softly, but firmly, closing her eyes and trying to center herself as much as she could while he was still standing too close. “I just need some space to think.”

He obviously wasn’t pleased by this, but she sensed him backing away, and a moment later she heard the door close quietly behind him. Only then did she open her eyes and feel some of the tension drain out of her.

It didn’t surprise her at all to see Poppy arrive only a moment later, already fretting over her ankle, and Hermione then had the even more uncomfortable task of getting the little elf to leave too.

“Please, Poppy, I’m perfectly fine. I’d just like to be alone the rest of the day. I have a lot to think about.”

Poppy seemed even less inclined than Malfoy to let Hermione be, but she finally made her exit, hands wringing with worry.

Hermione sighed as she reached down and unclasped her shoes. Her ankle did hurt, yes, but her feet felt even worse. All the cushioning charms in the world couldn’t stop the straps from digging into her skin, leaving open blisters behind in several places. She winced a little as she stared at them. She knew they could be healed and the skin as soft as ever, but then again she had taken dance lessons as a child just long enough to learn that blisters always came before calluses. Training in high heels might feel ridiculous, but if Malfoy was correct that she would always be dressed up, then she knew he was right to insist upon it. It was better for her feet to toughen up than be torn to shreds and healed again after every training session.

She sighed and decided to hop into the shower before giving herself space to think. She flinched a little as she put weight on her ankle. It was worse than she realized. She hobbled to the shower and then sank down on a small bench as she allowed the water to wash the sweat and fear off.

Why was she so afraid?

The hyper rational part of her brain knew that Malfoy wouldn’t harm her, despite being perfectly capable of it. He had innumerable opportunities to injure her and had never once done it, not really. Theo, too, was safe. He was her twin, and she already trusted him implicitly. She was certain Theo would never permit Malfoy or Blaise to spend time around her if he had a single doubt about her safety with them.

And yet, the moment Malfoy surprised her and grabbed her, her entire body flooded with fear. The second time was even worse than the first because it had been entirely unprompted, and she was held against a wall instead of braced against his body. It felt too much like being stuck to that dungeon wall at Hogwarts, and it made her fear crippling. She was frozen and had no ability to do *anything* except remember Malfoy slicing the throat of her lookalike and Cormac hurting her that day.

It made her scared, angry, but most of all incredibly frustrated. She knew why he had done it. She *knew* it. And yet, she was still angry that he had singled her out for it. She told him he could touch her, but she didn’t mean like *that*. She thought she would have some time to

prepare, some explanation of what was coming before it happened. If he was going to surprise one of them to prove his point, why didn't he pick Luna or Ginny?

Because you're the one with the problem.

She absolutely *hated* it, but she knew it was true. Something inside of her was broken now. She wasn't sure if it was because of the war or losing her best friends or that day with Cormac or watching herself be murdered. Perhaps it was all of those things. Whatever it was, it was insidious. She could exist for hours or even days and feel as though she had a grasp on her mental state until something would trigger her, and she would begin to spiral again. There was some dark, terrified version of herself that was lying in wait in the back of her brain, and that shadow of Hermione emerged at the most inopportune times.

She couldn't go on missions like this. Malfoy would never let her out of the Manor if she couldn't cope with her fear. And as angry as the thought made her, she knew deep down he would be right to leave her behind. She would be a liability like this. She would be a danger to herself and the others if she froze at every unexpected touch or grab. She wasn't certain what he was planning for them, but dresses and high heels implied parties or at least some type of social occasion. Regardless of whatever safeguards Malfoy put into place, there was no guarantee that Malfoy, Theo, and Blaise would be the only men touching her. She had to find some way to cope with this debilitating fear of hers or she would be trapped in her beautiful prison and utterly useless.

Hermione whiled away the afternoon with some half-hearted attempts at wandless magic and reading about animagi transformations, pausing every so often to stare out the window and wonder how on earth she could heal herself. She knew there were muggle and magical healers that specialized in this sort of thing, but that wasn't an option. Even if Malfoy was willing to smuggle a mind healer into her room, she suspected that he or she would really be guiding her through her own healing instead of curing her in a literal sense. The hard work would still fall on Hermione.

Tea came and went and then dinner did too. Hermione rejected all visitors as she mulled the problem over in her mind. Possible solutions, along with multiple pros and cons lists flitted through her head. As night fell and Hermione prepared for bed, she did come to one, firm conclusion: it would undoubtedly be a process and wouldn't happen in a day. She needed to push herself and practice. She had mostly coped by suppressing her feelings, but she probably needed to allow herself to feel her emotions if she was ever going to figure out how to move past them. And she would need to be patient with herself and the others. She couldn't allow a moment like today be the reason she gave up. She would always have to try again, even if it felt like taking a step backwards whenever something made her panic.

Hermione started to approach her bed and then hesitated. She knew what she would be in for tonight. She would descend into nightmares, mostly likely involving Malfoy and probably Cormac too. She was certain she would see her own neck being sliced open over and over again. She would watch it all night unless she happened to scream, in which case Malfoy would wake her.

Hermione didn't want to see it, but she didn't think she could avoid it unless she understood that day better. Malfoy had deftly sidestepped most of her questions about it, but she thought

– or maybe just hoped – that his reticence about it was one of the things that was holding back her ability to really process it.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione gathered her courage and turned away from the bed. She padded across the room and toward the parlor where she approached the door connecting her suite to Malfoy's room. She couldn't be certain he was in there, but it was late, and he was senior enough to be able to assign various night guard duties to others. He had never failed to arrive whenever she screamed in the middle of the night.

She swallowed hard and raised her hand to knock.

It was time to get some answers.

Chapter 9: Touch

Hermione's heart was pounding as she knocked and then waited.

What am I thinking? I must have lost my mind. But I need to know, and he can give me answers...

A few moments later she heard the knob turn and the door was flung open by a glassy-eyed Malfoy. He stared down at her, saying nothing, but he was dressed casually in a muggle T-shirt and joggers, which told her he was ready for bed. His hair was standing on end, as though he had been running his fingers through it, and as he watched her he raised a glass of something brown to his lips and drank.

"Are you drinking?" she blurted out. Harry and Ron had both been known to seek a bottle now and then during their year on the run, but she had never seen Malfoy do it.

"Yes," he said simply, as his eyes studied her.

"What is it?"

"Firewhiskey."

"Are you drunk?"

She sincerely hoped he wasn't drunk. She had gathered her courage for this, and a drunk Malfoy would surely be a volatile Malfoy – more volatile than usual, that is. Now that she was facing him she didn't want to do this a second time.

"Unfortunately not," he said wryly.

"Oh," she said with relief. "That's good."

He said nothing to this, but just drained his drink and turned to place the empty glass on the nearest piece of furniture.

"What do you want, Granger?" he asked with a long-suffering sigh.

Hermione thought he sounded a little bitter, and she internally winced. She should have expected this. She had absolutely spurned all of his attempts to speak to her earlier that day, and he was the type to become easily offended and hold a grudge.

But I needed the space to sort my own thoughts first, she tried to reassure herself.

Surely once she explained that he would forgive her. Still, the way he was looking at her was unsettling.

Unconsciously Hermione plucked at her nightgown and began to twist the fabric in her hands. It was only then that she remembered she was rather underdressed and dropped it to cross her arms over her chest. Malfoy had seen her like this before, but she was still a little embarrassed that she hadn't even taken the time to put on real clothes first.

She took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and then it just came spilling out.

"I'm broken. And I don't know if it's just one thing or many things, but I am. I'm sorry I kicked you out earlier, I just needed space to think. That's what I've been doing all day - thinking I mean - and I have some ideas that might help... eventually. I'm aware that you didn't sign up for this. You surely didn't think I would be so difficult. I'm such a head case now, and I know I'm far more work than you anticipated when you agreed to keep me safe. I know you don't really care about me, and I wouldn't expect you to. I'm just your collateral for your pardon, and you've truly gone above and beyond to make me as comfortable as I can be. So I know I'm being unfair when I ask you for more, but... I need help. And I need some answers. Some of the things that trigger me involve you, and I just don't think I'm going to get past them until I know more. I'm hoping you are willing to at least give me that."

She realized she was rambling and abruptly stopped speaking. Then she finally raised her eyes to find him staring at her. His expression was impossible to read, and she wondered if he was occluding. He seemed to be weighing his response.

"You need help..." he said slowly.

"Yes," said Hermione, swallowing hard.

"And you want information."

"Also yes," she said. "I'm hoping you can provide both, but if not... the information is more important."

He cocked his head to study her.

"I assume you're talking about the execution?" he said carefully.

Hermione nodded and looked back at the carpet.

"I haven't answered your questions about that because I don't want to frighten you," he said. "Nor do I want you to have to mourn yet another person."

She looked up again sharply and said, "You won't frighten me. Truly. It's just... I see it over and over again. I see *you* killing *me*. I know it wasn't *actually* me, but I don't know *who* it was, and that means I can't even substitute some other person in my mind's eye whenever I remember it. Even if I have to mourn another friend, I think that would be better than only imagining myself. When you put that knife to my neck today... I remembered it. I remembered you killing me. It made me panic. I think I need to be able to separate myself from that day if I'm going to be able to train successfully."

Even in the dark, she could see how grim he looked at her words, but after considering it for a few moments he finally sighed and nodded.

“Fine, but if I tell you this, then I want you to let me heal your ankle. It has to be healed before training tomorrow, and there’s no reason to be stubborn about it. Poppy told me you refused her help.”

Relief made Hermione feel positively lightheaded. She nodded quickly and then turned to make her way into the parlor, turning on a couple lamps as she went with Malfoy close on her heels. She was limping slightly, and she could see the disapproval on his face as they both settled onto the sofa, though Malfoy was giving her some space and wasn’t trying to touch her. Hermione was grateful for it.

“Tell me your questions,” he said shortly.

She took a deep breath, hardly daring to believe he was finally going to give her some answers.

“Who was it? Who was the volunteer who took my place?”

Malfoy grimaced, though he didn’t look surprised by her opening question.

“Lavender Brown,” he finally said.

Hermione gasped.

“*Lavender?* But she... we... I mean, we were never close and...” she trailed off, hopelessly confused and surprisingly devastated by the news.

Malfoy raised a hand to silence her.

“She was seriously injured in the Battle of Hogwarts, and she was dying a painful death. She had extensive bites from Fenrir Greyback and Dolohov got her with a curse that was slowly necrotizing her flesh over a matter of weeks. She survived the Battle of Hogwarts, but the curse from Dolohov could not be reversed. She wouldn’t have lasted much longer anyway, so she was approached about taking your place. She did it willingly, and I gave her a painless death.”

Hermione’s heart hurt to hear it. She and Lavender had never really gotten on. They had been too different and for a time they fought over the same boy. And yet, Lavender was a Gryffindor. She had been part of Dumbledore’s Army. She was brave. Hermione felt humbled that she had traded places and sacrificed her last few days to give Hermione a way out.

But then she remembered something important about Lavender Brown, and her eyes widened.

“Lavender wasn’t a virgin.”

Malfoy cocked an eyebrow at her questioningly. “What are you on about?”

“I mean for the ritual? You said it required virgin blood. I’m fairly certain she had sex with Ron in sixth year. She told me all about it.”

Hermione grimaced a bit with the memory.

Malfoy winced as well, but he waved her off. “Irrelevant.”

“I thought the ritual...”

“What ritual?” he said, with a smile on his face. It seemed a bit out of place given the seriousness of their conversation, but perhaps he was simply relieved that Hermione believed him and wasn’t yelling at him for killing somebody she knew.

“What do you mean, what ritual? The ritual with the robes and the altar and the spilling of blood when You-Know-Who drank that potion!”

Malfoy actually rolled his eyes. “I made it up, Granger. It wasn’t real.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “*Excuse me?*”

He looked at her like she was dense. “Do you really think I would have performed some dark ritual to give the Dark Lord even *more* power than he already has?”

“Well... yes,” said Hermione honestly. “You’re a Death Eater, aren’t you?”

Malfoy scoffed. “Just because I’m a Death Eater doesn’t make me stupid. I would never do that.”

“But then... how?” she said weakly.

He shrugged. “It was easy. I pulled an old grimoire out of the Malfoy library that described the potion and ritual, performed some spells to change the text a little bit, and then presented it to the Dark Lord as though I had discovered it.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “And he didn’t doubt you?”

“Of course not. His dark magic expert confirmed that the ritual should work and that the grimoire was legitimate. That part wasn’t a lie, of course. I had to defile a six hundred year old book for it – it was a family heirloom and everything – but he wouldn’t have believed it without that sort of provenance.”

Hermione’s eyes widened as the truth hit her. “His dark magic expert... Snape?” she breathed.

Malfoy inclined his head in confirmation. “Exactly.”

“And he wasn’t suspicious when nothing happened during the ritual?” she asked, still trying to process this.

Malfoy gave a dismissive shrug. “Severus brewed a potion that gave him a noticeable adrenaline rush. He felt something when he drank it.”

Hermione was trying to process the fact that Voldemort had been fooled by what was essentially a magical energy drink, and she had to admit she was struggling to understand how they got away with it.

“And afterwards?”

“Theo tells me the muggles call it the placebo effect. He felt more powerful because he believed the ritual worked. It’s not like he does magic often enough to gauge it well. Most of the time he lets his followers mete out punishments and do his dirty work for him.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes at this, as though Voldemort was an idiot instead of a highly dangerous wizard. Then again, maybe Malfoy had a point. Voldemort *had* been fooled by the young wizard before her.

“My God,” she muttered, as she absorbed everything Malfoy just said.

He was quiet as he watched her consider this.

“What was the point then?” she asked softly. “You could have pretended to kill me without some fake ritual.”

Malfoy raised one eyebrow. “Think about it. What does the Dark Lord want more than anything?”

“Power,” said Hermione automatically.

“Exactly. But more specifically, he wants public power. He has lived and ruled over a small number of followers in the shadows for years and moving into the open was a pinnacle moment for him. All of that means he’s fairly easy to manipulate if you understand what he craves.”

“A spectacle,” said Hermione slowly. “He wants a spectacle. That’s what you said the day you presented me to him.”

“Precisely,” said Malfoy with some satisfaction. “That’s what he wants, so that’s what I gave him. I had the outlines of a plan ready to go before you were ever caught. When I brought you to him and asked him to delay your execution date to make it a very public event, I was sure he would say yes. That bought us some much-needed time. I was able to make plans with the Order and find somebody to take your place. I had time to change the wards in the Manor and prepare rooms for each of you. I ‘discovered’ the ritual in that family grimoire. Severus was able to brew a potion that would make him believe the ritual had been a success. And then I proved my loyalty to him by committing murder in his name. We put on a fucking show with the altar and the white robes and the blood from a supposed virgin and everything. He got to see Hermione Granger die - or so he thought - and he humiliated her in death by taking her considerable power all for himself. That fully secured my position in his ranks and made me one of his favorites. The control that gives me is incredibly valuable and

cannot be understated. It also allowed me to promote Theo and Blaise to give them more sway as well, not to mention the fact that it gave me Ginny as my boon. He never suspected anything was amiss because he was so taken in by the pageantry of it all.”

Hermione was dumbstruck, as she stared at him in amazement. “That’s... well, it’s absolutely brilliant. I never really thought about his flair for dramatics being a blind spot, but you’re absolutely right that it is. You played him like a fiddle, didn’t you? I’ll admit, I’m impressed.”

He gave her a small smile. “That’s high praise indeed, coming from you.”

She felt herself blushing, but she hoped it wasn’t too obvious in the dim light.

“So that day with Cormac - when you had Nita check me - why? If it was all fake?”

Malfoy’s eyes flashed. “First and foremost I needed to know what that fucker did to you, and I couldn’t be certain from his memories. He clearly had the intent, but the barrier Nita created confused him, and he wasn’t sure if he had managed to penetrate you or not. I just... I had to know. So there was that. And also, it gave me a memory to show the Dark Lord. He would have expected me to check because of the ritual, and I thought that if I showed him that I was concerned about it then he would let me oversee McLaggen’s punishment. That was something I was quite keen to do.”

She went cold at this. “Did you show him when I cast that curse?”

Malfoy nodded. “Yes. McLaggen was an idiot to believe the Dark Lord would care that I let you hold a wand under close supervision. He wasn’t angry with me at all – he was thrilled. You may not be aware, but very few witches or wizards can cast a cruciatus that well on the first try, let alone with a wand that’s not theirs. It showed him your power and your ruthless streak.”

Her heart dropped. “Is that why you let me do it then?”

“Of course not. I thought it might help you if you could see McLaggen be punished or do it yourself. I never expected you to perform that well, and I fully intended to occlude that part from the Dark Lord when I offered you the chance. It turns out I didn’t have to occlude it at all, and it made him even more pleased with my gift.”

Hermione’s tension eased at his words.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He fell silent as he waited to see if there was anything else.

“One last question: what would you have done if Lavender didn’t volunteer? Or if the Order didn’t offer you a pardon?”

“That’s two questions,” he pointed out.

She just gave him an irritated look, and he smiled a little.

“Fine. If Brown hadn’t volunteered I would have used the sickest prisoner I could find or perhaps a muggle.”

She blinked in surprise and then felt a bit ill.

“You would have killed somebody regardless then?” she asked faintly.

“Yes. You were a very important prisoner – far more important than the rest of them,” he said simply. “There was never any question about swapping you. I suppose it was nice that Brown volunteered though. It saved me from having to kidnap someone.”

He shrugged carelessly, and Hermione shuddered a little at how unconcerned he seemed by it.

“And the pardon?”

He looked at her very seriously. “Granger, what do you think? Really? Would I have killed you if the Order didn’t offer me a pardon?”

She hesitated, and his jaw clenched.

“The answer is no,” he said curtly. “You were never going to die, and I always planned to bring you to the Manor after the execution date. The Order didn’t know that though, so I certainly wasn’t above negotiating a pardon while I was at it. I locked it down with an Unbreakable Vow and everything.”

“You made an Unbreakable Vow for it?”

He nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Yes, it’s shocking how much value others place in a gesture like that. Really, there’s nothing to it when you are promising to do something you plan to do anyway.”

An odd feeling moved through Hermione at this as she remembered just how readily he had offered her an Unbreakable Vow too.

“Why?” she said, in slight wonder. “Why save me regardless?”

“There are a lot of reasons,” he said evasively.

“Tell me at least one of them,” she said. “Please,” she added, in case that helped.

He seemed to be weighing something, and as he did it his eyes clouded, and his mask fell in place.

“Well a big reason is the fact that you’re Theo’s sister. I would never murder my best mate’s sister. Once he accepted the truth about your relationship, he pretty quickly decided that he loves you.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, blinking in surprise.

Of course. That was an incredibly obvious point, and now she felt stupid for not thinking of it sooner. She should have known that the whole ritual was an enormous ploy the moment Theo revealed the truth to her. Then again, she was still getting used to the idea of a brother. Perhaps it wasn't so surprising that this had not occurred to her.

"So you and the others planned to save all three of us. But you did it in a way that made you one of You-Know-Who's favorites while also wrangling pardons from the Order at the same time."

"That about sums it up, yes," he said.

Hermione was reluctantly impressed, and she felt like she was finally starting to see him clearly. It was so very underhanded, and yet it fit every single thing she knew about the Slytherins. Why wouldn't they use the thing they intended to do anyway to extract favors from both sides? It was devious, but utterly brilliant.

She wondered if she should be irritated by the fact that Malfoy and the others had pulled the wool over the Order's eyes in much the same way as Voldemort's. But as she thought about it, she decided she wasn't annoyed. Not at all. After all, the Order was apparently willing to have a Death Eater imprison her to keep her out of the way. They couldn't have known for certain that Malfoy would treat her and the others well once they were at the Manor, and she found herself far angrier with the Order than with the wizards she now lived with. Besides, body counts aside, she was starting to believe that Malfoy, Theo, and Blaise weren't evil, not really. It was obvious to her that they were actively undermining Voldemort's regime in a slow and methodical way. It would be a travesty if they ended up in Azkaban someday because of the fiction they had to maintain while they were doing it.

Yes, Malfoy and the others had played the game perfectly. And now that she knew the truth about it, she felt much better about her supposed execution day. She was very sad for Lavender of course, and Hermione knew she would take some time to mourn her old roommate. But she was less bothered by Malfoy's role in Lavender's death than she thought she would be. Lavender was dying anyway, and Malfoy gave her a painless exit before he slit her throat. Hermione had seen the tiny flash of green herself, and she now knew just how precise Malfoy was with a knife. He had been telling her the truth that Lavender was gone before he did it. She never felt a thing.

For the first time since that day, Hermione could finally envision some other person kneeling before the altar: a dying Lavender Brown who was very ill and embracing a painless death with relief. The image of it in her mind's eye made that small part of her that still feared Malfoy recede.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "This... this helps. It helps a lot. I have more that I need to process, but this was a big part of it."

He inclined his head. "You're welcome. And now it's time to hold up your end of the bargain. Let me see that ankle."

Hermione sighed but spun around on the sofa a little so she was facing him squarely. She lifted her foot so he could examine it.

“May I?” he asked, as he reached for it.

“Yes, it’s fine,” she said quickly.

Malfoy lifted her foot into his lap and examined it. He scowled at what he found.

“Your ankle is swollen. It might even be sprained. And what is all this?”

He ran his thumb near one of her blisters, though mercifully he didn’t touch it.

“It’s from those shoes.”

“We charmed them,” he said, his scowl deepening.

She shrugged. “Wearing them to a party where you just stand around is one thing. Fighting and dodging spells while wearing them is completely different. It’s fine.”

“I’ll heal this too and —”

“No,” said Hermione quickly. “Please don’t.”

He looked frustrated. “You agreed to let me —”

“It’s not that!” she insisted. “Fixing my ankle is fine – that was just a stupid twist because I went off balance. But my feet need to toughen up if I’m supposed to wear those shoes. It will do me no favors to heal my feet and then let them get torn apart again during every training session.”

He paused. “Then what do you suggest?”

“Have us train barefoot for a couple days in between the days we wear the shoes. That will let our feet breathe and heal enough so the blisters eventually turn into calluses. Once that happens we can wear the shoes all the time.”

“How do you know that?” he asked a bit skeptically.

She shrugged. “I took ballet until I went to Hogwarts. I was never very good, but I did it long enough to move to pointe shoes before I quit. Trust me, pointe shoes are much worse than this. My feet used to bleed all the time.”

His hand reflexively gripped her foot as she said this, but he just swallowed and nodded.

“Alright. Two days off and then back in the shoes. But if it doesn’t work...”

“It will,” said Hermione firmly. “It won’t feel great for a couple weeks, but it’s better in the long run.”

He nodded and raised his wand, casting an *episky* over her ankle. It turned hot and then cold, and then the dull pain melted away.

Hermione groaned as she fell back against the sofa. “God, thank you...”

He was still holding her foot, and Hermione opened her eyes to find him staring at her. She followed the path of his gaze and realized her nightgown was riding up, and he probably had a clear view up her skirt. She cleared her throat and adjusted it, as Malfoy's eyes snapped up to her face. He was wearing a curious expression, and his cheeks were slightly pink.

"So... is there anything else?" he asked in a tight voice.

"Pardon?"

Hermione was thoroughly distracted by her inadvertent exposure and the odd feeling of having her foot in his lap. He still had not let go of it.

"You said you needed help and that only some of it was information. Is there anything else I can do to help?"

Now it was Hermione's turn to blush. Her plan — which had sounded so good in her head — was more intimidating than she thought it would be now that it came time to ask.

"I don't know..." she said a bit nervously, worrying the hem of her nightgown as she thought about it.

"Granger," he said, and his voice had taken on that tone he often used when he was trying to calm her down. "Just tell me."

"No judgment, please," she said, biting her lip.

"Of course not," he said, and his expression had gone a bit flat again.

"Alright. Well it's just... I have trouble being touched. You know that. And I mean, usually you ask me, and it's fine, but then when you surprised me with it during training it made me panic, and I think I need... practice with that."

She couldn't meet his eye as she said it.

"You need practice being touched," he said carefully. It wasn't a question, but he had an odd tone in his voice as he said it.

"Yes," she said, now daring to glance at him. "Not, you know... like *that*. But being grabbed, being held, things like that. I know I could ask Theo, it's just that he's my brother. The fact that I even have a brother is still new for me, of course, but his magic feels so similar to mine that I already know it won't be jarring enough if he does it. It would be better if that person is not related to me. I thought about asking Ginny or Luna, but they've both hugged me, and it didn't phase me at all. I think it needs to be someone who is male. And Blaise —"

"Not Blaise," he cut her off. "He's making headway on Ginny."

"Right," said Hermione, feeling a bit relieved that he seemed to understand her reasoning. "Even though I don't mean anything by it, I still don't want to give either one of them the

wrong impression. It might interfere with whatever is going on between them. So that leaves you, unless you tell me you really *are* seeing one of the Greengrass sisters or —”

“I’m not,” he said quickly.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, now feeling a bit more enthusiastic. “I figured that article was just Rita’s usual bullshit. So yeah. If you’re willing, I think it would help me a lot if you could touch me now and then. I don’t know what you are planning, but if some other Death Eater touches me —”

“I’m not going to let that happen,” he said darkly.

She looked at him squarely now and gave him a stern look.

“If that’s really true then all of this self-defense training is pointless. Even if you don’t plan for it to happen, you know it could. And if someone grabs me, then I can’t afford to have a panic attack. I’ve been turning this over in my head for hours, and I think that day with Cormac just broke my fight or flight response. I can’t seem to do *anything* except freeze, and that’s the worst possible reaction. Even with you today I froze and panicked simply because it surprised me, and I *know* it was just a demonstration and you aren’t going to hurt me. If I can’t move past it with you, then how can I do it with some other Death Eater who actually means to harm me?”

He was silent for a long while as he absorbed this. Finally he said, “Alright. Tell me how you would like to proceed.”

She licked her lips and took a deep breath. “Well first, you should stop asking every single time you touch me. I know what I said to you at Hogwarts, but things have changed, and I’ve moved past it with you. Most people don’t ask every single time they touch another person, and Death Eaters certainly don’t.”

“Okay,” he said neutrally. “I’ll stop asking.”

“And maybe start with my hands or arms. Maybe my waist. And...” she hesitated, wondering if she was brave enough for this.

“And?” he prompted.

“And my neck,” she said quietly, now looking down at her lap. “Cormac choked me really hard that day, and it just...” She trailed off, struggling to describe the kind of cold terror it inspired.

She glanced up to see a dangerous look pass across his face before it disappeared, and his expression went flat again.

“That’s fine,” he said. “I can do that.”

“And maybe start light and work up to it being more aggressive... as I get used to it, I mean. I’ll try to suspend that rule for training because I know you can’t take it easy on me there, but

please bear with me if I find it difficult at first. I might need some time to process it afterwards like I did today.”

“You aren’t angry with me about our training today?” he asked in a suspiciously casual voice.

She studied his face and saw some unfamiliar expression there. If she didn’t know better she would say it was self-loathing and regret.

“No,” she said. “Well not anymore,” she amended. “I was at first because it surprised me and scared me. Then I realized the problem was really me and not you. I should have anticipated something like that happening. I know you weren’t trying to make me spiral.”

His expression seemed to clear at her words. “Alright. And if you kick me out again…”

“Don’t take it personally,” she said. “And I mean it, don’t go easy on me in training. I just might need some time to process it alone, that’s all.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

“No, I think that covers it. I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

She fell silent and only now realized he was absently tracing small circles on her foot that he was still holding in his lap. He appeared to be thinking hard about something and wasn’t quite aware of what he was doing. Hermione’s heart picked up ever so slightly, but she forced it to slow again as she allowed herself to experience that sensation.

It’s okay. Nothing is going to hurt me here.

Finally he seemed to come to a decision about something because he nodded once and then moved her foot off his lap. He stood before reaching a hand down for her.

She didn’t give herself time to hesitate as she took and let him pull her to her feet.

“We’ll practice, Granger,” he said.

“You really don’t mind?” she asked a bit nervously.

He lifted one eyebrow and then surprised her by lacing his fingers through hers and tugging her a bit closer.

He raised his free hand to gently touch her throat. It was the lightest thing, but it made her freeze, and her pulse skyrocketed as she struggled to control her breathing. She was sure he could feel her heart pounding just below the surface of her skin.

“Why would I mind this?” he asked quietly, as he rubbed his thumb up and down near her jawline.

She said nothing, but swallowed hard, as she willed her body to calm down. She was feeling panicky, anxious, but also something else. It was something she couldn’t quite pinpoint

while her heart was trying to gallop out of her chest.

She forced herself to focus on his question.

“Because I’m me and you’re you.”

He seemed amused by this. “And? You think I’m opposed to touching a pretty girl? Especially when she asks me so nicely?”

Hermione’s heart stuttered again, but for a completely different reason this time. He was staring at her intently, as though cataloging every reaction.

“You think my ribbons are pretty,” she blurted out.

What on earth are you saying Hermione? Calm the fuck down and get it together.

Then again, this sort of reaction was precisely the reason she needed help. Even a very light touch in certain places caused her to lose her head. It was irrational, but she couldn’t help it. Before Cormac she would have had some snarky response for him. But now... she could barely think.

“I do, that’s true,” he agreed sincerely. “Though I notice you aren’t wearing one tonight. It’s not like you. I was under the impression you wear one around the clock.”

“I kicked Poppy out too,” she admitted, closing her eyes for a moment to steady her breathing. He was still stroking her neck, and it was making her breath stutter and her brain fuzzy. “I like ribbons, but she’s the one who insists I wear them all the time.”

Malfoy made a discontented sound at that. “Kick me out if you must, but you should let her take care of you. She only wants to help you.”

“I know I shouldn’t have made her leave, I just needed to think,” she said softly.

They were quiet for a moment longer, as his hand moved a bit lower, and he rested the weight of his palm against her clavicle while his thumb continued those maddening circles at the base of her throat

“Is this alright?” he asked in a casual tone, but Hermione opened her eyes to find him studying her intently.

She swallowed and nodded.

“It’s not a crush,” she said, though she couldn’t fathom why. Her mouth seemed to have totally disconnected from her brain.

“Absolutely not,” he agreed seriously.

“Okay,” she said softly and closed her eyes again as she let herself feel it. His touch felt oddly authoritative, but still very gentle, and eventually her heart and breathing both slowed as she adjusted to it.

“There...” he whispered, and now Hermione was certain he could feel everything happening to her body. “Just like that. You’re doing so well for me...”

Something about his words sunk into a previously unexplored part of her brain. It was strange, but heady, and it made her breathing go shallow again, though she was also feeling more relaxed now than she had been all evening. Her eyes fluttered open to find him closer than ever, staring at her like he was trying to memorize something. She could smell the alcohol on his breath from this distance, along with that familiar scent of him that was cedar and spice. It calmed her as it always did, and she felt herself melt a little into his touch.

“Oh Granger...” he sighed. “Always such a perfect girl.”

She flushed at his praise, and she found herself looking up at him through her eyelashes. He stroked her for a few moments longer before he finally lowered his hand from her neck.

He didn’t release the hand he was holding, and instead gave it a small tug to lead her toward her bed.

“It’s late,” he said simply.

She nodded and climbed in. He watched her get settled before turning and heading back through the parlor, turning off the lamps as he went.

“Malfoy,” she said, as he got to his door. He stopped and turned to look at her one last time.

“Thank you... for helping me like this.”

His mouth quirked into a small smile.

“I can assure you, Granger, the pleasure is all mine.”

Then he was gone, through the door, leaving Hermione to stare at it and wonder why her heart was racing yet again.

Draco had touched her. She had let him touch her. She had *asked* him to touch her.

So many things had gone wrong. He thought she was angry at him. He thought he had ruined everything.

The execution day kept coming between them. It wasn't the first time, but it was more apparent today than usual. Draco had kept many things from her because he was sure she would hate him if she knew the truth. He never wanted her to know about Lavender Brown, but he couldn't tell his sweet girl no when she turned the full power of her huge hazel eyes on

him. So he had told her the name of the person he killed that day, and then she had *thanked* him.

And then he got to touch her.

He had touched her before. He had hugged her a few times and touched her hand. Every night he slipped into her room to watch her breathing, curled up in her bed that was large enough for two people, and he always touched her hair or her ribbons when he did it. He would never touch her inappropriately. He would never violate her. He would never hurt her. He just wanted to feel some part of her to convince himself she was really there.

And her hair was so pretty.

Now he could do it whenever he wanted to.

The first time he touched her had been in second year. He had stared at her petrified form in the hospital wing and tugged on a curl. The first time she had touched him had been in third year, when she slapped him. Draco had come in his pants almost on command. Thank Salazar for billowing robes that hid the evidence.

Since then, the touches had been sporadic, though they had gotten more frequent after she arrived at the Manor. He remembered all of them.

And *this...* this would be everything. He could help her. He could make her trust him. He could place a finger on that soft neck and feel her pulse scatter. He would know every single thing happening inside of her body whenever he did it. He would see her flush and feel her little puffs of air on his face and inhale that scent of orange blossom that was just *hers*.

Draco poured himself another firewhiskey, this time in celebration. He took a long drink before settling onto the small sofa in his room and unbuttoning his trousers.

Because every time he touched her, he also touched himself.

He always had.

Chapter 10: Birds

True to his word, Malfoy took it upon himself to continue touching her by surprise. He rarely spoke of it, but he always seemed to watch her carefully with each new thing he tried. He would grab her hand to lead her to tea. He would stand behind her and rub her arms whenever she got a chill. When they sat on the couch together he'd fling an arm across the back of it and play with her curls or stroke the nape of her neck.

Hermione oscillated between panic and relaxation as he slowly, but surely touched her with increasing frequency and firmness. To her great relief the panicked moments were outweighed by the pleasurable ones, and she felt that broken part of her being put back together. It wasn't perfect, and it was inconsistent, but she knew it was working, and that was the most important thing. With time she hoped she would be able to keep her head long enough to defend herself if some other Death Eater was doing it.

Theo, she discovered, was also a rather handsy and affectionate person. But as Hermione had suspected, she didn't have the same visceral reaction to him, so he was able to embrace her and even carry her around in jest, either bridal style or hoisted over his shoulder, without triggering any type of panic. She invited him to do it whenever he wished after he saw Draco holding her hand one day, and he gave her a questioning smirk.

"He's helping me get used to being touched so I don't have panic attacks anymore," she said in response to his teasing look. "It's nothing more than that."

At this, Theo softened.

"Maybe that's why he didn't say anything to me about it. Could I help too?"

"Of course. Touch me whenever you'd like. I could use the practice, and I don't react as strongly to you as I do to him since you're my brother. I don't think you have to be that careful with me, but I'll let you know if anything is difficult."

At this, Theo pulled her in for a big hug and leaned down to kiss her on the forehead.

Hermione felt her face warm with pleasure. She still wasn't entirely used to having a *real* brother, but she loved everything about it.

"Do you think we would have liked each other this much if we had grown up together?" she asked him, as he plopped his chin on top of her head.

"Unclear," he responded. "We might have driven each other mad. So maybe that's a silver lining to our nearly two decades of separation?"

"I rather think so."

“And now that we’ve found each other, you know that you can’t bring yourself to deny me my brotherly privileges of potential boyfriend-vetting,” he said. “For what it’s worth, I *do* approve of Draco. He’s sufficiently scary and protective of you, which is a prerequisite. On the downside, he’s a bit weird about certain things when it comes to you and can be an absolute wanker sometimes. But overall I feel the good outweighs the bad, and nobody is perfect.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and scoffed. “There’s nothing to approve of. He’s impossible.”

Theo just grinned and gave her a kiss on the cheek this time.

“Hmmm, let me know if he finally wears you down. Luna and I have a bet going, you know.”

He left with a wink as Hermione rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t help chuckling at Theo’s antics. He had opened up so much ever since confessing their relationship, and he seemed to take great delight in gently teasing her.

After that exchange Theo began to touch her more often too, and she often found herself ensconced between Theo and Malfoy on the sofa or chaise lounge. Inevitably she would be embraced by one with her legs in the lap of the other. For a time their contact only went in one direction, with Theo hugging her and Malfoy handling her feet. But one day she tried it in reverse and found she could do it. Being reclined against Malfoy’s chest with his arms around her nearly sent her spiraling at first, but he talked her through it, and eventually she relaxed.

It was a bit frustrating just how momentous it felt.

From then on Hermione made a point to let Malfoy embrace her regularly. It still made her heart race, but she suspected it was for other reasons than fear the more they practiced.

Her friends, of course, became a bit of a complication. After seeing Hermione touch both wizards, Hermione shared the news of her relationship with Theo. Ginny was thrilled, and Luna gave her a knowing smile. The news that Theo was really Hermione’s twin explained away his obvious affection for her, but Ginny and Luna were still both convinced that Malfoy had feelings for her too. Hermione insisted it wasn’t true. They had become friendly, to be sure, and he was clearly the best choice out of the three wizards to help her with her issues around touch. But it was nothing more than that. She explained that he was surprisingly loyal, and he cared about her in proximity to Theo. He was simply doing as she asked, so his tendency to keep a hand on her didn’t mean anything at all.

The problem, of course, was that Hermione was softening toward him, and some small part of her *hoped* that Malfoy would develop a crush eventually. She knew she was mad to even consider it, and most of the time she didn’t think about it. But now and then he gave her a heated look or his hand lingered just a shade too long, and it made Hermione sigh with a bit of longing.

It was really nothing though, and she rarely allowed herself to think about it.

Training was another matter altogether. After a couple of weeks Hermione's feet hardened, as did those of her friends. They were wearing the strappy shoes all the time now, as they continued to learn how to draw, stab, punch, and kick an opponent if they happened to be caught. Once or twice they had even landed a hit on the wizards by aiming a stiletto heel at a sensitive body part, and their victims turned pale as they discovered just how dangerous high heels could really be.

But despite the occasional victory, training in hand-to-hand combat and knife fighting was exhausting, and they rarely won against any of the wizards, though Hermione had noticed marked improvement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ginny was the best of the three at all things combat thanks to her natural athleticism and a lifetime spent fighting her older brothers. But when it came to wandless magic, Hermione was soon outstripping the rest, and it wasn't long before she was the one teaching the others – not just her friends, but the wizards too. Before long they could all wandlessly disarm an opponent, and they had advanced to shields and light stunning. It was only the occasional rough grab by Malfoy or Blaise that threw her off her game and made her panic return.

Malfoy had not been lying when he said that his position within Voldemort's inner circle was valuable. He had quickly risen to be some sort of commander or low-level general, and that put him in charge of quite a few of the Death Eater's schedules. He had managed to arrange the wizards' guard duties around their training, and with only a few exceptions for last-minute skirmishes with the Order, he soon developed a routine that worked for all six of them.

Poppy would wake Hermione early for her daily jaunt in front of the dressing table, where she would read *The Prophet* and make mental notes of the things she needed to address with Malfoy and Theo. An hour later she would have breakfast, and Malfoy and Theo would both join her for it. Here she would quiz them about reported events, and they would fill in the notable gaps in reporting.

The Daily Prophet was truly in Voldemort's pocket.

After that, all three would settle on the couch, and usually Hermione would snuggle with one of them while she and Theo practiced with their bond. It was going very well, and they could now communicate readily through it and siphon each other's emotions without tremendous effort. Hermione knew they could probably cease practicing with it, but she enjoyed the time they spent together, even though Malfoy liked to crash it too.

Training began mid-morning once the practice with their bond was done and would run until it was time for a late lunch. From there, they would scatter to their individual rooms to shower and eat. Usually Theo and Blaise would leave for guard duty in the afternoons – Malfoy had managed to make them each other's partners to keep them on the same schedule – while Malfoy himself would either pander to Voldemort or spend a few hours checking in on the family businesses or the Order. The afternoons were the witches' time to study and practice the things they had learned that day, or in Hermione's case, the time to decompress. Malfoy would usually pop in for tea unless Hermione had a particularly hard training session and requested privacy. But regardless of how training went that day, the whole group would

typically get together for dinner in Hermione's room. Evidently she had the largest room of them all, even including Malfoy's, for some truly baffling reason.

Malfoy quickly upgraded her four-person table to a six top.

They had all fallen into a routine with each other, and something about it eased Hermione's anxiety in a way that nothing else could. She had always been a creature of habit who adhered to a strict schedule. With the exception of the weekends – during which the wizards typically had to attend social events with the other Death Eaters and a weekly dinner with Narcissa Malfoy – her schedule was fixed. It gave her peace, and she craved it.

Of course, given that it was Malfoy who had granted her that peace, it would also be Malfoy who shattered it as he looked around the new table at dinner one evening.

"Granger, I've picked an animagus form for you."

The others raised their heads curiously, and something on Malfoy's face made Hermione's stomach twist in knots.

"Oh?" she asked carefully.

"Yes," he said. "A bird."

"Absolutely not," she said quickly. "I don't fly."

"Granger..." he rolled his eyes as the others stifled their laughs.

"I'm serious Malfoy, I'd rather be an insect than a bird."

He gave her a stern look. "Most insects fly too, don't they? Don't even suggest it. You'll be a bird. In fact, I want you to learn two forms. You should turn into a standard garden bird *and* a bird of prey."

She stared at him. "Two forms? But nobody attempts two forms!"

"Sure they do. There are records of it."

"From hundreds of years ago!" she insisted.

"So? That means it's possible. Theoretically it should be easier if the animals are similar. So let's go with two kinds of birds."

She huffed. "And what about the rest of you then? Are you all going to attempt a transformation too?"

"Theo could do it," said Blaise thoughtfully. "He's second behind Hermione with wandless magic."

"I'm into it," said Theo gamely. "But no birds or other flying things. I don't do heights."

“Of course not,” said Malfoy cordially.

Hermione’s jaw dropped.

“Excuse me!” she demanded. “I hate heights just as much as he does! Why can’t I be a field mouse or a squirrel or something?”

Malfoy gave her an incredulous look. “You want to be some type of prey? Have you lost your damned mind? You could be eaten by regular animals, not to mention that fucking snake!”

Hermione stilled. It was the first time any of the wizards had mentioned Nagini since she arrived. Hermione had thought about asking Malfoy and Theo about her on many occasions, but she had always decided to bide her time in the hope that the topic would arise organically.

Now that it had, Hermione pointedly did *not* look at Ginny or Luna.

Play it cool.

“He still has that snake?”

Malfoy caught something in her voice, and narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Why?”

So he didn’t see those memories then.

This was a relief, though truly a bit of a surprise. He had never told her what he saw in her head while she was knocked out at Hogwarts, and she had never really pressed him about it, having always been a bit afraid of what she would learn. Evidently he had failed to find this last secret, and Hermione hoped that meant Voldemort was off his guard about it too.

She shrugged. “I just didn’t realize it survived. It’s creepy isn’t it?”

She stared at him innocently, while he studied her a bit too intently. She tried not to blink.

“It survived,” he said slowly, “and it still makes an appearance now and then. Which is *why* you won’t be prey.”

Secretly she was thrilled. This told her Malfoy anticipated her encountering the snake at some point. But to maintain the secret she huffed.

“Well even so... what’s Theo meant to be then?”

“I’d fancy being a wolf or bear. Some kind of apex predator,” said Theo with relish.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Neither wolves nor bears have lived in the wild in the UK for hundreds of years. You would never blend in.”

“A fox then,” said Ginny. “And maybe I’d like to give it a go too. My patronus is a horse.”

“That could be useful,” said Malfoy thoughtfully. “We wouldn’t have to pick an alternative form for you.”

Hermione stared at him in consternation.

“How is a horse useful?” she demanded.

“Because it means she could run really fast and carry one of us if she had to,” said Malfoy, like she was being thick.

“My patronus is a hare,” said Luna mildly. “I suppose that won’t work.”

Hermione stared at her. “You want to try it too?”

“Why not?” said Luna. “It’s worth a shot. I imagine you, me, and Ginny could work it out. Our afternoons are free most days for practice. Perhaps Theo could manage it as well, though his schedule is very full at the moment.”

“It is, that,” admitted Theo, looking a bit crestfallen as he considered fitting in yet another thing into his already packed days.

Malfoy was studying the three witches. “Well if Granger goes bird and Ginny goes horse, maybe you could go as some sort of hunting dog, Luna.”

Luna looked intrigued, but Hermione interrupted.

“I never said I was going bird.”

“You’re going bird,” said Malfoy curtly. “You’ll be a garden bird, at minimum, though I’d like you to try the second form too. A bird is by far the most useful animal out of the three, and it’s the safest one too since you will blend in and could escape into the air if you have to. You don’t get a choice in that. I’m only willing to negotiate the species.”

Hermione huffed. “Species?”

Malfoy gave her an insincere smile. “Of course. Would you like to be a robin? Or perhaps a starling?”

“Maybe she could be a great tit!” suggested Ginny. “They are all over Mum’s garden!”

Hermione’s jaw dropped as the others howled with laughter. Hermione glared at Ginny, who was sniggering.

“Your animagus name could be Titty,” she added. “Nobody would ever suspect that these three are talking about you when they discuss Titty around the other Death Eaters.”

All three wizards were laughing so hard they couldn’t speak.

“I am going to murder you,” Hermione said seriously. “All of you,” she added with a fierce glare at Malfoy in particular.

Hermione crossed her arms in irritation as she waited for them to all quiet down.

“If I’m going to be a garden variety bird it should be something native and common,” she ground out.

“That’s the spirit, little sparrow,” said Malfoy with a grin. “We will find a suitable option. Though for what it’s worth, a tit of some variety definitely has my vote.”

Hermione felt herself flush with embarrassment and discomfort as the others snickered at this.

She huffed again. “And the bird of prey? Assuming I can even manage two forms?”

“Ah, no choice there, I’m afraid. I want you to be a golden eagle.”

There was silence for a long moment, before Hermione finally said, “Pardon?”

“You heard me. Your second form will be a golden eagle.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “But why?”

“Because they’re native, and it will let you come with me to some of the Dark Lord’s social events for Death Eaters. I won’t even have to sneak you in. Ginny and Luna will be able to come too for that matter if they can manage a horse and hound.”

At this, the previous humor evaporated, and all three girls were listening intently now. Theo and Blaise, she noticed, were giving Malfoy rather impressed looks.

“How so?” asked Ginny curiously.

He shrugged. “The Dark Lord lives in a castle now, didn’t you know? He fancies himself a nobleman. He’s started making noises about hosting large hunts for the Death Eaters this autumn. All three of us will have to go to a few of them. He likes to watch hunting as a way of breaking up the monotony of regular torture. Call it his new hobby.”

“*Hunting?*” asked Luna.

“*Hobbies?*” gaped Hermione.

“*A sodding castle?*” exclaimed Ginny.

“Yes,” said Malfoy simply, looking around at them in amusement.

“Explain,” demanded Hermione. “Because I thought he was living in the Manor.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Malfoy just nodded at Theo, who sighed a little.

“No. He doesn’t live here anymore. He lives at Nott Castle.”

All three witches looked at him in surprise. Hermione glanced at Luna and could see from her expression that even she didn't know about this.

"Why?" asked Ginny.

Theo shrugged. "Plenty of reasons. I'm the last remaining Nott – legally speaking, I mean – technically the bloodline has completely died out. But the point is I owned Nott Castle after Father died, and I had no other family living there. I've never cared for it much. The other senior Death Eaters have hosted the Dark Lord as a guest over the years, but I bested all of them by giving him his own estate. It immediately bought me favor and elevated me to rank just a few spots below Draco. It also meant that he moved out of Malfoy Manor since he now has a place that he considers to be his own. None of us wanted him here, not just because of you three, but because of Narcissa."

Hermione looked at him with some concern.

"And you didn't... mind?" she asked delicately. "Giving up your castle I mean?"

The notion that her brother owned a castle at one point was a truly odd one. Then again, Theo was an aristocrat in all but blood.

Theo waved her off. "Of course not. Malfoy Manor has always been more of a home to me than Nott Castle. Besides, I have a house just outside of London where my mother used to live. That is still mine if I ever care to move out."

"You just said he considers Nott Castle to be his," said Ginny shrewdly. "Does that mean it's really not?"

Now Theo smirked. "Technically it's his for life, and it reverts back to my line if he dies. I doubt that will happen any time soon, and I truly don't care if I ever get it back. I just needed to retain some blood tie to the property after I gave it to him, and a reversionary interest was enough to do that. He was so happy to be offered his own castle and surrounding estate he didn't read the fine print. He just signed the papers as soon as I presented them."

"Why did you need to keep a blood tie if you don't care about getting it back?" asked Luna with uncharacteristic curiosity.

Now Theo's eyes shone a little. "Because it means I can still control the wards, not that the Dark Lord realizes it. Since he has a life interest in it he can control the wards too, and that was enough to convince him that he owns it outright. But someday if I needed to let in, say, a small army of Order members I could do it. He wouldn't even know it was me. I can simply open a door at the edge of the estate and let anyone in without him being aware of it."

All three girls' eyes widened at this, and Hermione inhaled as she considered the possibility.

"Don't tell me..." she said.

Theo nodded. "Yes. That's one of the things *I* am giving the Order to secure my future pardon."

Hermione glanced at Ginny and Luna. “I thought Malfoy’s deal covered you and Blaise.”

Theo shrugged. “It opened the door for it, that’s true. Narcissa is certainly covered by it, but they did ask for proof of good faith from me and Blaise since we had both taken the Dark Mark. I offered to give Nott Castle to the Dark Lord to lure him there and to grant them access through the wards whenever they call me to do it. It won’t happen any time soon — they plan to take their time while they gather a critical number of people who will fight — but I can do it at any time.”

“And you?” Ginny asked, now turning to Blaise.

“Safe houses,” said Blaise easily. “My properties are not as fine as Draco’s and Theo’s, but what I lack in quality I make up for in quantity. My mother had homes all through continental Europe and several in England that she has put into my name over the past year to maintain favor with the Dark Lord. He thinks wizarding wealth should be controlled by men, you know, and women who are independently wealthy threaten his ego. Those who want to keep their properties and gold all to themselves — like Bellatrix — have to practically lick his fucking boots to maintain his favor.”

As he said this, Blaise rolled his eyes, but then he continued.

“Anyway, my mother disagrees with his position, but she is shrewd and had little emotional attachment to most of her properties. The moment I turned seventeen she started transferring them to me so that the Dark Lord would view her as sufficiently docile and no threat. Each of her husbands left her at least one house when they died — but most had two or three. They are all connected to each other, and they have unmonitored floo access since I’m a Death Eater and now own them. There are fifteen houses in all. It’s an easy way to smuggle people out of the country when the Order can’t convince them to stay and fight.”

Hermione and the others gaped at him. All three wizards laughed a little.

“I can’t believe you three!” Ginny finally said. “That’s just... *unbelievable!*”

“You lied to me about that pardon,” said Hermione, now pointing her finger at Malfoy.

He just grinned unapologetically.

“I misled you perhaps, but my offer *was* the first one to come through, and it did open the door for Theo and Blaise. They just locked it down by offering their own trade too.”

“And in Draco’s defense, the things he had to do to secure his pardon were the most challenging by far,” added Theo. “Blaise and I just had to provide access to properties we didn’t care about. Draco had to make it look like you died.”

Hermione exhaled, as she absorbed the lengths these three had gone to in order to play both sides.

It was so brilliant and shrewd, and though all three of the wizards had confessed to doing it in order to take advantage of whoever was in power, Hermione was now sure that none of them

truly wanted Voldemort to rule.

“So he lives in a castle now,” Ginny mused, returning to the earlier conversation.

“Yes,” said Draco. “And like I said he wants to be a lord. He has no real skill with horses and hawks himself, but plenty of the higher ranked Death Eaters do. He likes how violent hunting can be, and he needs to entertain his followers. He wants them to think that his way of life is superior to the old one. He keeps his Death Eaters in line through fear of course, but he also has this misguided belief that he’s benevolent to those who pander for his favor. Nott Castle has extensive grounds, hunting lands, and woodlands surrounding it. It’s the perfect property to cater to the hobbies of his most loyal followers, especially when they dovetail so well with his own bloodlust. He’s spoken to me about it extensively because I was raised with those hobbies.”

“As was I,” added Theo. “That was another reason we chose Nott Castle. The outdoor recreation is better there than at Malfoy Manor, and the Dark Lord had intimated to Lucius and Draco that he envisioned entertaining his Death Eaters in that way if he ever won. What better way to buy his trust than to make his dreams come true?”

“And that means,” said Blaise, now jumping in, “Ginny and Luna could turn into animals for a traditional mounted hunt and Hermione into a bird of prey for hawking. I’m pretty sure Theo would get eaten if he turns into a fox though. I don’t think the Dark Lord will play catch and release,” he added, and Theo and Malfoy both cracked grins at this.

“True,” added Theo. “A fox would be a poor choice in that crowd.”

“This is mad,” declared Hermione. “He really thinks he’s some proper English lord now?”

“Why not?” asked Malfoy, raising an eyebrow at her. “He’s wanted to be on top of wizarding society ever since he began to gather followers decades ago. This is just the next part of it.”

“I had no notion wizards even knew what a mounted hunt was!” declared Hermione.

“Muggles occasionally do it of course... though it’s considered rather poncey, and it’s needlessly cruel to the animals being hunted. It’s not that popular anymore, but it’s still associated with landed gentry and nobility.”

Theo inclined his head. “Of course. And it shouldn’t surprise you that wizards do it too. Plenty of us have large estates, and the Statute of Secrecy is only a few hundred years old. Traditionally we put protective spells on the prey if we release it in advance since it’s just for recreation, but I don’t think the Dark Lord will do that.”

“Of course,” said Hermione, now slumping back in her chair as she considered this angle. “I suppose both populations did it before wizards went into hiding. And the older wizarding families have kept up the traditions ever since?”

“Precisely,” said Blaise. “We enjoy riding just like muggles do, and like Theo said we can protect the prey with spells so that the fox or deer or whatever *doesn’t* die at the end.”

Hermione stared off into space as she contemplated it. As odd as it seemed at first, it *did* rather fit with what she knew of Voldemort. Hadn't he selected Lucius Malfoy to protect a horcrux for him as a representative of the old families? And Bellatrix too because of her wealth? He had been an orphan. He had never really fit in. And now that he had a chance to live like a *true* lord, it gave him the opportunity to assert his dominance over his followers through his lifestyle choices and not just his magical skill.

God, he would probably hunt foxes in the morning and give away prisoners at revels the same night. It was absolutely twisted.

"I suppose I can see it..." she finally said slowly. "But if he wants to watch birds hunt, then why a sodding golden eagle? They aren't used for that!"

Malfoy smirked. "Sure they are. I'll admit it's rare because they are much harder to train than your more common hawk species, but it's done now and then. Besides, I already have a couple of hawks. I do *not* have a properly trained eagle, and I've always wanted one."

Hermione stared at him incredulously.

"You mean to tell me that you want me to turn into a bloody eagle so I can help you *cheat*?"

Malfoy grinned. "It could be fun."

"Christ," muttered Hermione. "And the garden bird is for what purpose then?"

"The great tit," teased Theo.

"The *garden bird*," insisted Hermione as they all started snickering again.

"I need someone who can spy on my mother's garden parties," said Draco offhandedly. "And any other gatherings we learn about. There are quite a few where Death Eaters aren't invited."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at this. "Why?" she finally asked.

"Draco's worried that Narcissa is playing matchmaker, and he'll end up engaged," said Theo.

Draco reached over and tried to smack Theo on the head, but Theo ducked.

"Truly unbelievable," muttered Hermione, now rolling her eyes.

Malfoy scowled at Theo. "It's not that..."

Hermione gave him a knowing look.

"Okay, not *only* that. Plenty of Death Eater wives attend those events, and it's filled with gossip. My mother reports back to me what she can, but she can't be everywhere at once, and the others are careful about what they say to her. They all assume it will get back to me."

Hermione pursed her lips.

“The garden bird I understand,” she said with a small grimace. “But the bloody eagle...”

“Don’t pretend like you aren’t interested in becoming England’s only dual animagus,” said Malfoy, giving her a teasing smile that made his left cheek dimple.

Hermione scowled. Dammit, he knew her far too well now. She *was* interested, and she supposed he was correct that two different species of the same type of animal would be a sensible way to accomplish it. And that smile was challenging and arrogant. He was throwing down the gauntlet just to see if she would pick it up.

Wanker.

“It’s just... birds!” she blurted out.

None of them seemed to find this situation to be nearly as problematic as Hermione did. Only Theo gave her a slightly sympathetic look, but even he wore an expression that told her she would have no choice in the matter if Malfoy had deemed it so.

She glanced at Luna and Ginny one more time as she thought about it. Luna’s expression was inscrutable as always, but Hermione thought she could read Ginny clearly.

Think of the snake, Ginny seemed to be saying with her eyes.

Yes, there was the matter of that bloody snake. Hermione now had a fair idea of where Nagini was living. She must be tucked away at Nott Castle, surviving off of the abundance of game the estate evidently provided. She might still be trotted out now and then for torture or some other manner of Death Eater entertainment, but Hermione was certain she would never leave the grounds. Voldemort would keep her close to him as much as possible and in the security of his own warded castle whenever he was forced to leave her behind.

Hermione knew she didn’t stand a chance of getting within a hundred feet of Nott Castle unless she cooperated with Malfoy and arrived as a bird he could show off to the other Death Eaters — or at least one that was small enough to fly away and hide if the creepy snake fancied a snack. After all, she didn’t even know where the castle *was*. She would never find it without assistance that first time. Theo would side with Malfoy to keep Hermione out if she didn’t cooperate. That meant there was only one course of action.

“Fine,” she finally gritted out. “I’ll turn into a bloody bird.”

Chapter 11: Flight

Just because Hermione had agreed to turn into a bird didn't mean she was happy about it.

After she consented to do it she fell silent for the rest of the meal and picked at her remaining food, brooding over her fate. She refused to make eye contact with Malfoy, whom she could tell was studying her in her peripheral vision, and she was even giving Theo a bit of a cold shoulder.

Dinner broke up, and Hermione moved away from both of them before either one could touch her, disappearing into the loo and starting the water for a bath to ensure that they would hear it. She had no intention of leaving any time soon and hoped that by the time she emerged everyone would have retreated to their own rooms.

She slipped into the tub and just sat, not bothering to scrub. She had already bathed once today, and this was just a ploy. She needed space to think.

Now that she had a bit of distance from it, she felt thoroughly ganged up on. Nobody seemed to care that she was petrified of heights. Even her own twin — who was also petrified of heights — backed up Malfoy to the hilt when he suggested it.

It felt a bit like a betrayal if she was being perfectly honest. She knew Theo was more Malfoy's than hers. They had been raised together after all, and she and Theo were only just starting to get to know one another. But it still stung that when faced with something his best friend wanted versus something his sister wanted, Theo chose his best friend.

And that best friend thoroughly respected Theo's boundaries about heights, but not hers. Whatever hopes she might have been privately harboring about his feelings were dashed. Her initial impression had been correct that he was protecting her for Theo's sake and not because he actually cared. The touching had gone to her head, and she had misread his intentions. He was simply doing what she asked of him. It meant nothing.

Even Ginny irritated her, making jokes about tits. Hermione supposed could see why the others thought it was funny, but it didn't feel that funny to her when she was the butt of them.

She wrapped her arms around her chest in the tub and hugged herself. Cormac had touched her there and thoroughly traumatized her while he did it. No boy had *ever* touched her there before he did, and while her breasts weren't as foreign to her as that space between her legs, she had never really viewed them as a source of pleasure. She knew that they were supposed to be, but instead they were just... *there*. They were just a part of her that was vaguely irritating — a couple of largeish bumps on her chest that she had to cover while blokes didn't. They drew the attention of men and gave rapists like Cormac yet another way to hurt her. They were also more sensitive than she first realized, and she could still remember the pain when he bruised them.

Rationally, Hermione was aware that Ginny didn't know what had happened to her, not *really*. Hermione had been resolutely mute every time she asked. But Hermione still found herself growing angry about the innuendos. Surely Ginny could guess, couldn't she? Luna seemed to suspect what happened, and they must have talked about it between them. Either way, Hermione had not recovered enough to be able to make jokes about her private areas, let alone in a group that included men. The fact that the wizards had laughed too — when they were the ones who found her that day — had felt like rubbing salt into an open wound.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, and it was a long while before Hermione deemed her bath and brooding complete.

Hermione rose and toweled off, wrapping herself in a fluffy dressing gown and padding into her room. Mercifully, it was empty, and Hermione saw that Poppy had laid out a nightgown for her, along with the matching ribbon.

Hermione huffed and ignored the ribbon, allowing her curls to tumble free instead. She climbed into bed and lay awake for a long time, wondering how on earth she was meant to conquer yet another fear of hers.

Hermione broke the group's routine the next day, though she privately blamed Malfoy for it.

When Poppy arrived to dress her, she begged off breakfast with Malfoy and Theo, claiming to feel unwell. She didn't answer when Malfoy knocked on her door to collect her for training, opting to skip for once. They hadn't taken a single day off since they started, and Hermione wasn't interested in facing them all just yet.

She claimed a migraine, which was only partially a lie, and she stayed in bed to read a muggle novel and escape from her thoughts. Her animagus texts lay untouched.

Poppy, naturally, fussed over her, bringing her a hot water bottle and some of Hermione's own muggle medications that Malfoy had confiscated from her beaded bag. Headaches were one of the few minor medical complaints in the wizarding world that weren't easily curable, given that their origins could derive from any number of things. That was why Hermione had selected it as her malaise of choice. As she consumed two paracetamol tablets she explained to Poppy that muggle methods barely worked too. It was best she be left alone to ride it out.

Poppy must have communicated this to the others because nobody attempted to interrupt her for the rest of the day, and Hermione was permitted to stew. The following day she still had no interest in seeing the others, but she knew that if she feigned illness for the second day in a row, one of them would force their way in to check on her directly.

Instead, she told Poppy she was improved, though still wanted a couple hours alone in the morning to rest just a bit more. She would, however, be attending training.

Poppy ensconced her at the dressing table to prepare her hair, but for once Hermione put her foot down and refused to wear a ribbon.

“It’s just not necessary for training,” she declared.

Poppy tutted but seemed unwilling to press her about it, given that Hermione was only just recovering from feeling ill.

The truth was, she knew Malfoy liked her ribbons, and she was angry with him. It was petty, perhaps, but she wouldn’t give him that, not when he had overruled her so thoroughly about her animagus form.

Sure enough, when he showed up to escort her to the training room, she caught some strain on his face, and his eyes immediately went to her hair. He frowned when he saw her usual ribbon was missing, but Hermione ignored him and just strode to her own door, waiting for him to open it.

Because *of course* she could go into her prison without any help, but she needed Malfoy’s assistance to leave it.

He reached for her hand, but she jerked it back and turned away from him, crossing her arms as she marched down the carpeted hallway, Malfoy trailing in her wake. She refused to look at him directly as they entered the training room, but she caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror, and his expression was dark and pensive as he watched her turn away from him.

“Hermione, are you alright?” asked Theo with concern.

“Fine,” she snapped, turning away from him too and grabbing her holsters to gear up. She caught a flash of hurt on his face, but she refused to feel guilty about it. He had taken Malfoy’s side on the animagus issue and hadn’t even tried to intervene. The anger spiked again when she remembered it.

Ginny gave her a questioning look, but Hermione ignored her too as she crossed her arms and waited for training to begin.

Perhaps sensing that she was feeling volatile today, Malfoy skipped knife fighting, opting instead to begin with targets. Many lessons ago Hermione had figured out how to cheat with a barely whispered wandless spell that corrected the direction of her throw. Usually her aim was good enough that she didn’t have to use it all that often, and it had always gone unnoticed in previous lessons.

But today her temper was frayed, her frustration was mounting, and on her fifth throw the knife went wide enough that when she corrected it wandlessly it swerved sharply to hit her own target instead of Luna’s, where it had clearly been headed. She felt Malfoy’s gaze practically burning into her as she muttered a wandless *accio* to make it fly back toward her.

She wasn't supposed to do that either, of course. Catching flying knives in the air was not safe, but Hermione was feeling very obstinate and slightly reckless. Besides, she had enough control over her wandless magic now that it came toward her hilt-first. It was fine.

She sensed him before she heard him, and she spun around to find him glaring at her.

"You're cheating," he said harshly. "And what the fuck are you thinking, performing an *accio* on a knife?"

"So?" she replied, turning her back to him. "I've seen you flip yours in the air before."

He grabbed her elbow, and started to say something, but she whipped back around and wrenched it from his grip.

Her patience with him had officially expired.

"Do *not* fucking touch me!" she hissed.

Malfoy blinked in surprise. "Granger, this is training. You know we have to—"

"Have to? *Have to?* Oh yes, apparently I have to do *everything* the great Draco Malfoy tells me to do! Stay in my prison! Sleep on my bed! Take a bath! Drink tea! Learn to fight! Turn into a fucking bird even though it terrifies me! I might not have a choice about any of the rest of it, but I do have a choice about *this*. Do *not* touch me, or I'll use my spell to make sure my knife guts you!"

She was breathing hard, all the anger and frustration from the last couple of days coursing through her, and she turned and started to stride from the room.

"Hermione!" came Theo's voice, and she stopped and turned to glare at him. His eyes were wide, his face bloodless. Behind him Malfoy looked like he had been turned to stone.

"I don't want to hear it Theo!"

"But Hermione —"

"NO!" she shouted, now turning on him. "You picked him! It didn't even matter that you *know* how terrifying heights can be! You sided with him without a second thought! And I get it alright? He's practically your brother, and you've had him your entire life! I'm just the little sister you barely know. But it still feels shitty to know that the moment Malfoy gives me an order you back it up without considering *my* feelings at all!"

She started to move away again and then Ginny's voice rang out.

"Hermione!"

She spun around, practically snarling, and Ginny gulped at the look on her face.

"Don't say another word, Ginny, I'm just as angry with you!"

“What?” she said in dismay. “But —”

Hermione felt like she was having some sort of outer body experience. She truly *wasn't* as angry with Ginny as she was with Malfoy and Theo, but she had stewed about those jokes and revisited some dark memories the last couple of days because of them. The words just spilled out of her, and she couldn't seem to stop herself.

“Let's all make jokes about tits, why don't we? Let's laugh and mock Hermione because we've all conveniently forgotten that *her* tits were on display for all three of the wizards behind you when Cormac pinned me to a fucking wall at Hogwarts! Isn't it fun to joke about that when the only man who has ever touched them tried to rape me?”

Ginny had gone pale and looked horrified. All the others looked equally disturbed.

“Hermione I didn't —”

“Yeah, you didn't know, did you?” she said dully, the anger leaving her as quickly as it began. She felt drained. “I'm glad you don't know what that's like Gin. But for the record, making jokes... like that... is still really hard for me. I haven't moved past it yet.”

She unconsciously wrapped her arms around her chest and backed up a few steps.

“I can't do this right now,” she said hollowly as she turned and walked toward the door.

Finally, *finally* nobody followed her.

One of the others — she assumed Malfoy — had the foresight to tell Poppy to stay away from her for the rest of the day. Food still appeared on her table for lunch, tea, and dinner, but she was left alone just as she wanted.

The following day was more of the same. It was the first time since Hermione had arrived that Poppy didn't show up to dress her hair, though a copy of *The Daily Prophet* still materialized on her nightstand, and Hermione reviewed it as she ate breakfast. She soon lost her appetite, however, when she read the headline for that day.

Werewolf Treaty Under Negotiation

by Caroline Puckett

Representatives for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures have confirmed that Department Head Fenrir Greyback is in the process of negotiating a treaty with the werewolf population of Great Britain.

“The treaty will provide rights, jobs, and hunting grounds for werewolves, who have always been marginalized,” said Marcus Flint, who is spearheading the project under Mr. Greyback. “The Dark Lord has long believed that werewolves have not been given their due, and he is thrilled that they will be fully integrated into wizarding society going forward.”

When asked what jobs the werewolves might hold, Mr. Greyback’s office informed The Daily Prophet that they would be used as enforcers of the Dark Lord’s law. As readers will know, the Ministry of Magic has undergone an audit of all departments and positions, with some departments being disbanded and others enhanced. Werewolves who wish to join the Ministry of Magic as enforcers under the DMLE are welcome to apply as soon as the treaty has been finalized.

“The werewolves’ day to shine is coming,” said Mr. Greyback. “And we have the Dark Lord and his closest followers to thank for it. We will be working on rights for the giants and dementor populations as soon as this is complete.”

(cont’d on page 4)

Hermione felt sick and did not continue reading on page 4. The article told her as much as she needed to know about it, and she wasn’t interested in reading additional quotes waxing poetic about the use of werewolves as *enforcers*.

Hermione had always felt strongly that werewolves were unfairly marginalized. They should be given free wolfsbane and legal protection for regular employment. But *this*...

Hermione shuddered, as she considered precisely how they would be enforcing the laws. She suspected it would not be with wands.

She flipped through several more pages and then blinked in surprise when she saw an article featuring Theo and Malfoy from the night before. Both of them were dressed in their finest military robes and spinning the Greengrass sisters on a dance floor, looking for all the world as though they had never been happier. The Greengrasses were spitting images of each other: both tall and willowy and blonde. As with previous articles, Theo was dancing with Daphne and Malfoy with Astoria, who was only a year junior. As she watched, both wizards twirled them and then stepped back to kiss their hands as the girls sank into a deep curtsy at the end of the dance.

Hermione stared at it and swallowed hard. She hoped it was all an act. Theo seemed content with Luna, and of *course* they had to play up their role as debonair young Death Eaters in public. She knew that. It still stung though, especially knowing they had done this the previous night while she was left wallowing in her room.

Not that she *wanted* anybody around her, but still. Did they have to look so damn happy while she was feeling anxious and miserable?

She sighed and tossed the paper aside.

A tiny part of her – some part she didn't care to examine too closely – was also *jealous*. Malfoy insisted he wasn't with Astoria, but this wasn't the first time she had seen him flirt with her in print. Then again, what did she honestly expect? Hermione was plain, damaged, and had a vicious temper when it was triggered, as evidenced by her threat to maim him the previous day. She told him she would *gut* him for heaven's sake. She had absolutely lost it, and she felt guilty and embarrassed for the way she handled it, even though she was still very angry and hurt.

But why did she even care what Malfoy was doing with Astoria? Did she have a crush on him? She sincerely hoped not, but a tiny part of her was afraid she was heading that way. It would be terrible if it were true though. She could barely stand to be touched, and even the practice they had been doing hadn't gotten anywhere close to things like *lips*, which he had grazed over Astoria's hand in that photograph. Hermione swallowed hard.

What would *that* be like?

It made her heart race, and she quickly tried to tamp it down. She didn't know if it was fear or want that was making her react that way. She couldn't think about it now. She was still too angry with him and too irritated with herself for losing her temper to think about it.

Hermione was jolted out of her thoughts by a familiar presence.

Hermione, can we have breakfast and talk?

It was Theo. He had never tried to communicate through their bond at a distance, but evidently it was possible. Instinctively Hermione started to occlude so he wouldn't sense her feelings. She mentally recited Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration in case he tried to check. In their practice they had learned that they could block the other with occlumency, though Theo's was always very still, just the way Malfoy liked it. When he blocked Hermione she always saw the same placid lake over and over again. Hermione, in contrast, continued to spout off magical theory in her head. She knew that Theo would be aware of what she was doing if he checked, but she didn't care. Her emotions were all over the place: frustration, hurt, fear, intense embarrassment and regret for shouting at him the previous day. She was sure that if he felt them he would try to siphon them and then *demand* to see her. She wasn't ready to face him yet.

She said nothing to Theo in return, and to her relief he seemed to take the hint, and she felt him leave her mind.

Hermione picked at breakfast and dug out some of her old clothes she used to wear when she was on the run with Harry and Ron. She hadn't touched them since arriving at the Manor, and they were organized haphazardly in that same drawer where she had found them on her first day. She pulled out jeans and an old Gryffindor Quidditch jersey that had been Harry's in third year and shook out the wrinkles before putting them on. She took some comfort in clothes that were familiar and just *hers*. She refused to use the green and gray blanket, but instead pulled the quilt off her bed and settled onto the window seat with another muggle novel, trying to clear her mind and give herself space to process the knowledge that she would be turning into a bird eventually.

Because she was still going to do it. Anger and shame aside, Malfoy had practically challenged her to face this fear and learn how to fly. She wasn't going to back away from it, but God why did it have to be so hard? Why did she have to face *that* fear too, along with all of the other ones she was dealing with at the moment?

It was a lot for her.

And why couldn't her friends have been sympathetic and encouraging, instead of teasing her about it and making light of her fears?

As she skimmed her book and allowed her mind to wander, she eventually concluded that this was the thing that hurt the most. Listening to Theo and the others side with Malfoy had certainly stung, but she knew that a bird was a good idea. She could also admit that the tit joke was funny, even if it made her dwell on Cormac more than she usually did.

No, the thing that was the most painful was the fact that *none* of them seemed aware of just how hard this would be for her. Instead of saying things to ease her fears they teased her about them.

The whole interaction made her remember Harry and Ron too and just how much she missed them both. Ron, she knew, probably would have joined in with the teasing and would have demonstrated his typical obliviousness about her feelings. But she didn't think Harry would have done that. He knew just how much she hated heights, and he had never given her a hard time about it, not once. Nor did he ever press her to fly except when there was no other choice.

She missed them both so much, but especially Harry.

Theo contacted her again around lunch, but Hermione continued to ignore him. She had skipped training of course, and Malfoy had not even attempted to knock this time. She ate by herself and settled in for another round with her book on the window seat, allowing the afternoon to melt away until she grew drowsy.

She was leaning against the window, eyes drifting shut as she surveyed the gardens rioting with color outside, when a knock made her sit up.

"Granger, I know you're in there. We need to talk."

It was Malfoy of course. Hermione said nothing and tried to ignore him.

"Granger, I know you're decent. I'm opening this door in ten seconds if you don't let me in yourself."

Hermione clenched her teeth, wondering just *how* he could be so sure that she was decent, before her gaze fell on the empty portrait where the blonde woman normally observed her silently. She was so still and quiet that she faded into the background, and Hermione rarely thought of her anymore.

Hermione grumbled to herself, but she was feeling too stubborn to open the door for him.

Instead, she rearranged herself on the window seat, and stared at her book with determination as she heard the door open precisely ten seconds later. It shut with a snap, and she heard Malfoy stride toward her. Hermione did not raise her eyes to look at him.

“We need to talk about your animagus form,” he said bluntly.

Hermione said nothing, but turned the page.

“Granger, please look at me.”

Hermione continued to ignore him, until he reached down and plucked the book out of her hands. Anger prickled, but she had been expecting it and refused to meet his eye. Instead, she crossed her arms and turned to stare stubbornly out the window.

“Granger,” he said in a pleading voice.

Hermione stayed silent.

“Fine,” he said, sounding defeated. “I’ll just talk then. You should know that the others are insisting you be able to choose whatever form you want. They say I was being unfair to you, and perhaps they were right.”

Hermione said nothing, but still continued to observe the gardens as though he wasn’t there.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry if it was too much. I never would have suggested it if I didn’t think you could do it. I know you don’t like heights, but the animagus books all make it clear that it shouldn’t matter once you’re in your form.”

Hermione stiffened as he said this. She had intentionally skipped the chapters on birds, after reading the blurb about owls that made her cry with the memory of Hedwig. She never thought she would transform into a bird, preferring to stay safely on land. She disliked flying so much she didn’t even want to *read* about it.

So she hadn’t.

Involuntarily she felt her gaze being pulled to his face, and she was surprised by what she found. He looked positively wrecked. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair mussed, and he obviously hadn’t shaved today. He didn’t look anything like the wizard in the paper from the previous night.

“Explain,” she said quietly.

He frowned in confusion. “You read those chapters didn’t you?”

Hermione dropped her gaze and shook her head. “No. I don’t like flying, so I didn’t read them.”

She sensed him move a little closer to her, and he sank down on the window seat too. She raised her eyes to look at him cautiously.

“You really hate it so much you didn’t even read the chapters about it?” he asked. He looked perturbed, like he couldn’t decide which way the conversation should go from there.

Hermione felt a flash of irritation at this.

“Well let’s see... The last time I flew was in the Room of Requirement when Crabbe tried to kill us all with fiendfyre. The time before that was on the back of a dragon after we broke into Gringotts and had dozens of murderous goblins trying to kill us. The time before that was a thestral that I couldn’t see, and I polyjuiced into Harry to be bait. Death Eaters attacked me in the air and injured the thestral I was riding. We barely made it to the ground, and I nearly died that time too. The time before that was at the Weasley’s when they convinced me to play a pick-up game of Quidditch, and I fell and broke my wrist. Admittedly that wasn’t as dangerous as *death*, but it still hurt like a bugger. There have been other unfortunate incidents in the air, including another invisible thestral that took me to the Department of Mysteries where Dolohov nearly murdered me. Then there was the time in third year when I had to help Harry steal that hippogriff from under McNair’s nose so he wouldn’t be executed *thanks to you*. We ended up flying the hippogriff up to Professor Flitwick’s office and breaking Sirius Black out of custody at the same time. It was all very stressful. That doesn’t even touch on the number of times I watched Harry or Ron or Ginny — hell, even *you* — almost die on a broom. So no, *I really don’t like to fly*.”

She fell silent and found Malfoy staring at her, looking stunned.

“I had no idea it was that bad,” he admitted.

Hermione sniffed. “I’ve never liked heights, nor Theo. I’m sure part of it is genetic, but I have also learned first hand just how dangerous it can be.”

He sighed, looking defeated. “Granger, you don’t have to —” he started, but she cut him off.

“I said I would turn into a bird, didn’t I? I’ll turn into a sodding bird.”

He looked perplexed now.

“But why?”

“Because I know it’s a good idea! I just... it’s *hard* for me! I’m already so damaged, and I’m trying to move past the things that scare me and now this... I just didn’t think I would have to confront this fear too!”

Hermione was mortified to feel tears start, but she couldn’t help it. She sniffed and wiped them away angrily.

Malfoy made a jerky move as though starting to reach for her, but then he seemed to think better of it. His hand clenched into a fist and dropped by his side, his knuckles white.

“Granger,” he said slowly. Hermione was looking down at her lap as tears fell.

“*Hermione*,” he insisted.

This surprised her so much her head shot up instinctively. He was staring at her intently as he took in everything about her. She felt like she was under a microscope.

“I want you to read the chapters about birds before you make any decisions,” he said slowly. “But I will leave it to be *your* decision. I’m certainly not going to force you to do something that will frighten you this much. I only ask that you have all the information before you decide one way or the other.”

Hermione slumped and nodded.

“Also,” he added, “I owe you an apology. I should never have ambushed you like that in front of the others. And the jokes... they were bang out of line. I will let the others apologize for that too when you are ready to see them, but I will say that all five of us know we really fucked up. I’m so sorry for that.”

Almost involuntarily, Hermione’s eyes drifted to the newspaper on the floor with the picture of Malfoy twirling Astoria around on the dance floor. Astoria was probably a witch who would have laughed at the tit jokes and flirted while she did it. She obviously had no trouble being touched by the wizard in front of her. She probably even liked to fly and would have jumped at the chance to become a bird animagus. She was beautiful, perfect, and Hermione was broken.

She didn’t know what to say to Malfoy, so she just nodded. But when she glanced at him she saw him following her gaze to the picture. His jaw clenched.

“You should know that Blaise had to take those memories away from us,” he said softly. “Theo and I... we would never have gotten through last night convincingly without it. He returned our memories just before we went to bed.”

Hermione looked up at him in shock. He was giving her an almost pleading look now.

“Granger... *Hermione*,” he amended, “can I... touch you please? Without you gutting me I mean?”

Hermione hesitated for a moment. She was still very upset, but her anger was finally starting to burn itself out. She nodded.

Malfoy immediately reached for her hand and laced their fingers together before tugging her toward him. Hermione found herself falling toward his embrace as he pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her. She settled in against his chest with her head on his shoulder like they had done several times before, and she felt him sigh deeply.

“I didn’t know that he was the only one who has ever touched you there,” he finally said.

Hermione stiffened a little, but he started to rub circles on the back of the hand he was holding, and the truth came tumbling out.

“He was. I’ve had a few chaste kisses, a few more snogs where clothes stayed on and hands didn’t wander too much, and an attempted rape by Cormac. That is the full extent of my

sexual history.”

“Really?” he said in a tight voice.

She nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That should never have happened to you, let alone the first time any bloke... well you know.”

“It was really painful,” she confessed.

He tightened his grip at this, but said, “It shouldn’t hurt. If you ever... I mean, if some other bloke ever gets to... with hands or lips or... well, it should feel nice...” he trailed off a bit awkwardly.

Hermione felt her cheeks turning red. Thank God she couldn’t see his face like this.

“I have a hard time imagining it,” she said quietly. “Hands *or* lips seem almost impossible. Who would want me like this? I’m damaged goods.”

She turned slightly to see that picture of Astoria again, Malfoy bending over her hand and kissing it.

“I mean, I don’t even know if I could do *that*,” she added, nodding toward it. “And it’s very tame.”

To her surprise, Malfoy nudged her so she was forced to sit up and look at him again. He was far too close like this, and it made her squint a little to focus on him. He seemed to be studying her face like he was memorizing everything about it, and he raised his free hand to wipe the track of tears that were still glistening on her cheeks.

Her heart seized at the intimate gesture.

“There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” he said, in a slightly hoarse voice.

He stared at her intently as he disentangled their fingers so he was gripping her hand just like Astoria’s in the photo. He slowly raised it to his face without blinking.

“Tell me if I need to stop,” he whispered.

The moment his lips touched the back of her hand, Hermione felt her cheeks flush and her heart began to race. It wasn’t panic though, it was something else. Something visceral and profound and *exciting*. His lips were warm and soft, and it felt achingly perfect.

She forgot to breathe as she watched him, with wide eyes, kiss her there. He lingered over it, his eyes never leaving her face as he then gave her knuckles a kiss too before turning over her hand and kissing the pulsepoint on the inside of her wrist.

As he did this his eyes fluttered closed, and he sighed a little, as though he was savoring it, and Hermione felt something unfamiliar tug deep in her abdomen.

When his eyes finally opened again, the silver made her feel like she was falling into them. His gaze was endlessly deep, as though there were a thousand truths he was harboring if only she knew which questions to ask.

He lowered her hand and swallowed hard.

“See?” he said softly. “Not broken.”

The faintest ghost of a smile crossed his lips as her gaze dropped. It flicked back up to him again when she felt his hand under her chin.

“There’s nothing about you that’s broken or damaged, Hermione,” he said solemnly. “Not a single thing.”

She gave him a sad smile at this, not really believing it, but unwilling to contradict him. His hand moved to cup her cheek, and she leaned into it a bit.

“Maybe someday I’ll feel that way too,” she said.

Chapter 12: Cake

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief description of past torture and fantasies of torture.

Malfoy left her to her own thoughts soon after that with a parting message.

“The others want to see you whenever you’re ready. Maybe breakfast tomorrow with everyone?”

Hermione hesitated, but finally nodded, knowing she would need to move past this. She had missed nearly three days of training, and it was time to face the others.

“I’ll let them know,” he said simply.

He closed the door quietly, and Hermione set aside her novel and picked up the animagus books with a tentative hand. She flipped to the table of contents of the first one and found the chapter on bird transformations. She hesitated for a moment before flipping to it, where she began to read.

Avian Forms

Like other non-mammalian transformations, avian or bird transformations often require an advanced grasp of wandless magic. More complex than any mammal form – even those of predators or very large species – birds are so unlike humans that the magic is exceptionally advanced.

Once achieved, however, bird transformations are believed to be some of the most enjoyable. The minds of most birds are relatively simple, so the witch or wizard that is in that form should find it easy to keep their own thoughts separate from that of the bird. Most bird species, however, do have one remarkable instinct that is relatively unique: flight.

If the animagus form is a bird of flight, the witch or wizard will find it to be far easier to fly as a bird than any sort of assisted flight as a human. Witches and wizards who have achieved these transformations report that flight as a bird is life-changing, freeing, and joyful. It takes only a few minutes for most witches and wizards to learn how to tap the bird’s flight instinct, and even those who are hesitant flyers as humans state that it is a remarkably gratifying experience.

In fact, most witches and wizards who have reported bird transformations say that they prefer to never fly as a human again, as it feels ungainly and unnatural compared to their bird forms. Birds of flight have no natural fear of heights as they cannot fall unless seriously injured, and even those witches and wizards who prefer to keep their feet firmly on the ground report that flying as a bird is a singular experience.

Though there will be some variations on a species by species basis, in many respects the bird form is an ideal animagus transformation: their brains are simple enough for the witch or wizard to keep their own mind while transformed, but the flight instinct is so deeply rooted that it takes very little skill to leverage it.

On and on Hermione read, and she was a bit surprised to find that every book reported the same thing: flying was easy, natural, and not terrifying at all when done as a bird. Hermione's favorite book, one that included first-hand reports from various animagi around the world, even contained an entry from an individual who was much like Hermione: utterly terrified of heights, but whose animagus form was a bird.

As a human there is no amount of gold that you could pay me to convince me that humans belong in the air. I have ridden broomsticks only a few times and cannot abide tall buildings or watching others maneuver great heights. But when I am in my bird form, it all melts away. The bird does not fear the open air, it relishes it. The bird wants nothing more than to soar on the thermal pockets that rise from the ground. It feels excitement when it gets to kiss a cloud or dive for food. And while I certainly remember my own distaste for heights while transformed, when I am a bird the instinct reassures me that all will be well. I need only turn myself over to it, and I am utterly at peace. There is nothing in the air that can harm me.

By the time she finished her reading, it was late, and she set the books aside to stare out of the window. She should have expected this, and she was feeling a bit foolish for not considering it earlier. Animagi transformations allowed witches and wizards to exploit the instincts of whatever their animal form might be. Their minds melded with the animal so that certain human fears and emotions were dulled, even if their memories stayed intact.

Hermione's memories of flying were so negative that it never even occurred to her that the bird's instinct might overrule her personal fears. And yet, every book seemed to agree on this single point: birds liked to fly *so much* that it was a biological imperative.

Hermione had already decided to do it, and the books made her dread it a little less. She knew she wouldn't be fully convinced until she tried it for herself, but she certainly hoped they were right about it.

As irritating as Malfoy had been to impose the bird form on her, Hermione now understood why *she* had to be the bird: it would be considerably harder than a dog or a horse since it wasn't a mammal.

As Hermione learned more about it she had been truly stunned that Rita Skeeter had managed a beetle. It was far more advanced than anything the Marauders or Minerva McGonagall had done. It was even harder than a bird, though perhaps not *two* birds. But the fact remained that beetles were about as far from a human as a creature could get. They didn't even have real skeletons. Hermione had never thought of Rita Skeeter as being magically powerful, but evidently there was more to the woman than gossip and shoddy writing.

This was the reason the bird needed to be her. Malfoy wanted at least one of them to have that form to be the perfect spy with an easy mode of escape. Hermione's wandless magic was the strongest out of all of them, so she was the one who was most likely to be able to achieve that form. He had dismissed her fear of heights because he didn't think it would matter once she was a bird and the flight instinct took over.

She still wished he had *asked* instead of *told*, but at least she now understood why he selected it.

She rose from the window seat and walked over to their connecting door, hesitating for a moment before she raised her hand to knock.

Within seconds the door opened, and Malfoy was staring down at her, looking both a little wary and eager.

"I'll do it," she said without further preamble. "I read the chapters about birds, and now I know why you picked it. The flight instinct should overrule my fear of heights."

Malfoy exhaled, and she thought he looked relieved.

"Alright," he said.

"In the future, please *ask*."

"Yes," he said, looking a bit chagrined.

"But I also don't think you were wrong to want me to do it," she acknowledged. "My wandless magic is the strongest."

Malfoy nodded and raised his hand to her cheek again.

"Hermione," he said, and her stomach flipped over. Evidently he was calling her by her first name now. "If you manage the transformation and you still feel frightened in the air, we'll come up with some other plan. I mean it, I don't want you to be scared here."

She softened a little. "I know you don't," she said. "You never want me to be scared."

"No," he said.

She sighed. "Alright. I'll go along with it. As for the species, I don't care what we pick – it just needs to be something common in an English garden. Whatever you manage to catch will work. I know we have to do that blood ritual for it..."

She felt a bit ill as she considered this, but he just nodded as he lowered his hand and grabbed hers instead.

“I’ll go hunting for something as soon as I can find the time,” he said.

She pursed her lips, but nodded. “And the golden eagle? I can’t fathom where you will find one of those.”

He bit his lip for a moment. “The truth is, I already have one.”

Hermione’s eyebrows flew up. “Pardon?”

“You heard me. I told you I’ve always wanted a trained eagle. I got one awhile ago — before the Battle of Hogwarts. She’s beautiful, but totally wild. It’s going to take years to train her well enough to hunt her. I don’t have the time to do it anymore, so I need to cut my losses one way or the other.”

“You would... kill her?” Hermione asked hesitantly. “Your own pet?”

Malfoy raised one eyebrow. “The things I am willing to do to advance a plan like this go much farther than that. You can attempt the garden bird first, and if it’s too advanced then I’ll probably just release her. But if you can manage a bird — and I’m sure you can do it — then yes. I am happy to sacrifice her to give you that second form.”

Hermione’s heart was inexplicably pounding. He was being so gentle with her, and yet everything about this was entirely unfeeling. Hermione was a great lover of animals. The blood sacrifice aspects of this had made her uncomfortable from the beginning, but she knew going into it that it would be necessary if she wanted to be something other than an otter. That was why she had focused her research on small mammals. Killing a golden eagle — something so noble and on the brink of being a threatened species — Malfoy’s *pet* — felt entirely different.

“You’re sure that a second form is necessary?” she asked nervously. “I could go to Nott Castle as a garden bird.”

Malfoy raised one eyebrow.

“Hermione, please remind me... what *eats* garden birds?”

“Hawks, falcons...” she acknowledged.

“Precisely. You have nothing to fear as a garden bird when you are in an actual *garden*, but you aren’t going to Nott Castle like that. There are far too many birds of prey around — both native in the surrounding woods and brought in for sport.”

Hermione sighed and gave him a pensive look. “You’re *sure* you are willing to sacrifice your pet?” she repeated.

He didn’t look perturbed by this at all, and Hermione wondered for a moment why she wasn’t properly terrified of him.

“Of course,” he said cordially. “It’s just a bird and some blood, Hermione. Think nothing of it.”

He raised her hand to kiss the back of it one more time, before slipping away.

Draco closed the door to Hermione's room and flexed his hand. His lips were burning where they had just been on her. He had spent the last few hours in a haze of disbelief that she had let him kiss her hand in the first place. And then he got to do it *again*. He would never be able to stop now.

Not that he had ever intended to stop. No, the moment he finally caught her he knew there was no turning back. Convincing her that he was safe, helping her settle into her new home, and now teaching her to accept his touch... all of it had been more difficult than he expected. She was a fierce thing. She had a temper. She had been very hurt. She had some fears that were so deeply rooted they had caught him off guard. And Draco had always paid attention to her. He had always watched her. He thought he knew everything about her, and yet she continued to surprise him. Her fear of heights had been one of those things. Of course Draco knew she hated heights. He had observed that in their very first flying lesson together as first year students. And yet, despite his careful attention he had somehow misunderstood just *how much* she despised it.

The previous few days had been terrible. When she threatened to gut him he actually feared she might do it, and then he would have to become firmer with her. Even the day he brought her home after the execution, she hadn't looked that angry. The few hours he spent obliviated at the party the night before had been a relief. When Blaise returned his memories the weight of everything that had happened settled on him again, and he drank himself into a stupor.

But the thing Draco was learning about Hermione Granger was that her anger always burned out. She could be reasoned with. She might have a volatile temper, but she was fundamentally forgiving.

She was just so sweet.

She had forgiven him for being too heavy-handed with her. Of course she had forgiven him, that's what she did. And not only that, but she decided to proceed with the bird and allow Draco to pick both of her forms for her. This was excellent news. He couldn't give her a choice about the eagle, but he had spontaneously told her she could choose the garden bird species once he realized how much she disliked the idea. It was meant to be a concession because he had strong opinions about it. The fact that she had come around to it and was now letting Draco pick that too... Merlin, but she was just perfect. She was so beautiful and trusting.

And then Draco got to brush his lips across the top of her hand again. Earlier that day he noted the freckles on her knuckles as he kissed her there too. He had even kissed the inside of her wrist and inhaled while he did it.

He learned she was using the orange blossom scent as a perfume and not just to bathe with. He smelled it on her wrist. She had placed it there intentionally, and it made him lightheaded.

It was his favorite scent in the world - his amoretia was filled with it. Draco wanted to lick her every time he got close enough to smell it.

He moved to the loo where he stared at himself in the mirror. His lips were still tingling, and he closed his eyes to remember the feel of them on her hand. Her hands were so dainty and small. They were soft, delicate, incredibly feminine.

Draco could spend hours exploring her hands. He wondered if she would ever paint her nails for him. He had never once seen polish on her fingers, but he liked the way it looked. Then again, if Hermione had a choice about it she might channel her inner Gryffindor and select some shade of red, and that wouldn't be right at all. No, she should wear soft colors. Perhaps a light pink or dusky rose. It should be sweet like she was.

Her nipples would be a dusky rose too, he was certain of it. The pretty nightgowns she liked to wear had given him the barest hint when he saw her at night, and it drove him mad as he imagined them.

No, red didn't suit her at all, and that was why it was largely absent in her wardrobe. She had a couple pieces of lingerie in that color, it was true, along with a single gown in her closet. But as Draco considered it more closely he thought he might remove the red lingerie and replace it with more feminine colors. Whites and pastels did amazing things for her coppery skin.

She needed nail polish in the palest pink, then. It would look perfect on her. Poppy could help her apply it. Hermione had finally embraced the care Draco was providing through Poppy, and it settled something deep inside of him every time he looked in on her and saw her seated at her dressing table. She looked perfect there and like she belonged. She had grown to love that routine in the morning, giving her hair and skin all the care it deserved. So why not her hands too? They deserved just as much attention as the rest of her.

Besides, he was allowed to kiss her hands now. They were finally his. Draco had always taken excellent care of his things, and her hands were meant to be cherished. They were how she interacted with the world. They were the part of her that let her turn the pages of the books she loved so much. They were often smudged with ink as she studied so diligently and took notes. They needed to be cared for properly, and Draco was just the person to do it.

Draco licked his lips, tasting that faintest trace of orange blossom that still lingered there.

His girl was finally coming around to him, and even his persistent fuck-ups weren't delaying things *too* much. In fact, they seemed to give him an opportunity to get closer to her once her temper cooled. She would become angry and then forgive him, before melting into his arms

and letting him try something new. It had happened more than once now. He was sorely tempted to continue pushing her buttons so he could draw her closer.

There were just so many things he wanted to do with her, *to her*.

But then again, he was patient. He was in no rush. His girl wasn't just sweet, she was so very innocent. She had never allowed another wizard to claim her body, and Draco was thrilled by this knowledge. But it also meant he had be slow and intentional. Every time she let him try something new he would celebrate it. He would never take it for granted, not ever.

"Poppy," he said, and the small elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Yes, Master?"

"Poppy, Hermione is feeling much better. You can resume your normal duties for her tomorrow."

Poppy curtsied, looking relieved.

"And there's another thing," he added.

"Yes Sir?"

"Please give her a manicure tomorrow morning. Pale pink would be perfect for her nails. We need to keep her hands soft and healthy. I despise the fact that we have allowed her feet to become callused, but there was really no choice given the shoes she must learn to wear. Her hands are different. They are very special to me. Please keep an eye on them."

"Of course."

"And while you're at it, remove the red lingerie from her dresser. That was a mistake. I can't fathom what I was thinking when I selected it. It's not nearly pretty enough for somebody like her. She's an innocent, and that color reminds me of the whores the Dark Lord hires for his revels. If you think she requires more pieces once the red is gone, inform me right away. I would be happy to select something more suitable."

"I will remove it while she is sleeping, Sir."

"Perfect. I know I can count on you, Poppy. My Hermione can be a little stubborn, but she needs somebody to keep an eye on these things for her. I want her mind to be focused on her studies. That's how she finds her purpose, and it makes her happy and content to be here with us. I don't want her to have a single concern about her physical care - that is for us to worry about, not her."

Poppy straightened up and gave him a firm nod. "You is absolutely right, Master. Miss Hermione is needing us to handle these things. She is not knowing what to do."

Draco gave a fond smile as he thought about her. "No, of course she doesn't know what to do. Nobody has ever taken care of her properly. But don't fret, Poppy. We can handle it.

She's adjusting beautifully, thanks in large part to you."

Poppy gave him a toothy smile and disappeared a moment later with a *CRACK!*

Draco felt something inside of him ease, knowing that Poppy would give Hermione's lovely hands some extra attention tomorrow. Hermione was learning to accept Poppy's help with grace and would surely permit Poppy to paint her nails that faint pink Draco was craving. And now that she had forgiven him, things would go back to the way they had been - except now he could kiss her too.

The next morning Poppy woke Hermione up, looking a bit hesitant. Hermione immediately leaned down to give her a hug.

"I could never be cross with you Poppy. I was just at odds with the others."

Poppy sniffed but hugged her back, and Hermione couldn't bring herself to say no when Poppy sat her down at the dressing table and began an elaborate hairstyle with several braids, buns, and bows. Then she went a step further and began to give Hermione a proper manicure with a shade of polish that reminded Hermione of a barely pink rose.

"I haven't had this done since I was a young girl," she commented. "My mum used to take me to a salon to get my nails done now and then, but it's been years."

"Tis very important, Miss," chided Poppy gently. "Your hands is needing attention too."

By the time Poppy was done with her, Hermione was running behind schedule. But she decided it was a small price to pay for putting Poppy in the crossfire of her frustration with her friends.

Those friends arrived at breakfast, looking penitent and awkward. Theo pushed to the front of the group, waffled for a moment, and then scooped her up into a big hug.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "You were absolutely right, and I behaved abominably. I've told that wanker that if he makes you cry again I'll practice my *crucio* on him."

"Theo..." she said in exasperation.

He pulled back, looking serious.

"I mean it. He shouldn't have pushed you into it, and I shouldn't have backed him up. He agreed that would be an appropriate punishment if he upsets you like that ever again."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "A touch dramatic."

“Never,” said Theo.

Hermione smiled a little. “I forgive you.”

“And the jokes...” he added.

“Theo,” Hermione sighed. “It’s alright. I overreacted. You couldn’t have known it would make me think of that...”

He was watching her worriedly. “I’ll be more mindful of it. We all will. There’s really no place for stupid jokes like that here. What we are doing is too serious.”

She gave him a small smile, and he stepped aside so she could face Luna.

“Hermione, I apologize.”

“You didn’t do anything Luna,” she sighed.

“I laughed. That was unkind. I’ll try to do better.”

Hermione smiled at her. “We’re good Luna.”

Blaise was behind her, and he stepped forward and started to open his mouth, but she cut him off. “You too Blaise, we’re also good.”

He frowned. “I never told you though... what he did to you... well let’s just say I would happily kill him if I didn’t know for a fact that Draco and Theo have been arguing about which one of them gets to do it.”

Hermione felt a lurch. “Oh?”

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t think McLaggen will get any more chances, and he’s such a fuck up he’s bound to make a mistake. If he even looks at a witch the wrong way in front of one of us, he’s done. My money’s on Draco. He’s not above pulling rank to make sure he gets to wield the knife. Theo and I will be allowed to hold the bugger down for him while he works though.”

God, these Death Eaters.

“Alright, well... thank you,” she said a bit awkwardly.

He nodded cordially, and then it was just Ginny, looking uncharacteristically abashed as she approached.

She opened her mouth, and then closed it. Then tried again.

“I... I’m so sorry, Hermione. I didn’t... I don’t...”

She looked frustrated with herself, and Hermione sighed and pulled her in for a hug. “It’s alright. I know that wasn’t what you meant. I’m sorry I lost my temper.”

She swallowed and nodded. “It was a really careless joke.”

Hermione looked at her seriously. “You aren’t the only one who laughed Gin. It would have been funny... I mean, it *was* funny. It was just... that day was awful. It hits me at the oddest times.”

She looked serious and nodded. “Do you think... maybe after breakfast... you would be willing to tell me about it? Or Luna? None of the boys will say a word, but they look positively murderous every time one of us asks.”

Hermione weighed this. She had no great interest in reliving that day, but then again... she hadn’t *talked* about it, not really. Malfoy knew better than the others what had happened that day having seen it in Cormac’s mind, and she had dropped other nuggets of information for him now and then. But she hadn’t told the story to anyone — not in her own way. Hermione wondered if it would help.

Slowly she nodded. “Alright. Let’s eat and then see if these three will give us a few minutes.”

They settled into breakfast, and it was stilted at first, but they soon fell into their usual conversation once it became clear that Hermione was determined to move on.

“I’m still going to attempt the bird,” she announced.

Everyone but Malfoy looked at her skeptically, and she sighed.

“Look, I read about it over the last couple days, and supposedly the bird’s flight instinct will take over my fear of heights. Malfoy says that if it doesn’t work we can go back to the drawing board.”

This seemed to reassure the others, and Hermione felt a small squeeze on her knee under the table. She turned in surprise to find Malfoy speaking seriously with Theo on the other side of him and purportedly ignoring her, but she glanced down at her lap and saw it was indeed his hand under the table. As she looked at it he turned his palm up, and Hermione slipped her hand into his, which he closed firmly. She felt him running his thumb over her knuckles and even her nails before finally stilling. He did not release it though.

Why did it feel different this time? Was it because they had just fought and made up? Was it because he had kissed this same hand twice now? He had held this hand a dozen times before, but this — under the table so their friends wouldn’t see — made Hermione turn crimson. It didn’t feel like he was trying to get her used to touch. It was casual, as though he simply wanted to do it.

Conversation turned to Ginny’s birthday, which was only a couple days away. Hermione felt a pang to realize that Harry’s birthday slipped by her with barely any note. Though she still got the paper each day, she usually ignored the precise date. Her days disappeared. The entire *summer* had disappeared in the confines of the Hogwarts dungeons and Malfoy Manor, and she never allowed herself to think about it.

It was decided that Ginny's birthday would be commemorated with a special dinner with her favorite meal. Blaise, Hermione noticed, looked a little nervous.

"He has no idea what to get her," murmured Malfoy's voice in her ear. "He's been worrying about it for a couple weeks."

Hermione smiled at this, but then turned serious as she whispered a suggestion in his ear. He looked thoughtful.

"He might be able to do that."

Breakfast broke up soon after. They had just under an hour until their usual training time.

"I'd like the girls to stay here," said Hermione to Malfoy. "We need to talk. You can collect us for training."

There was some raised eyebrows at this, but the wizards didn't object, and all three of them slipped into Malfoy's room.

Hermione looked around, saw the portrait watching her intently, and waved her hand to cast *muffliato*. The portrait scowled.

"I've been practicing that one," she said to the others. "Not that Malfoy isn't already aware of what happened, but he doesn't need to hear any more about it."

Ginny and Luna settled down with her, and looked at her expectantly. Hermione took a deep breath and began.

She told them everything.

She told them about her efforts to die before Malfoy killed her. She told them about her boredom in prison and failed attempts to escape. She told them about hexing the Death Eaters who taunted her, and how all of them backed off except for Cormac and Malfoy. Then she told them about that day: she described how Cormac arrived and pinned her to the wall, silenced her, and then vanished her clothes before she could even react. She told them how he had hit her and groped her so hard she bled between her legs. She told them he ripped at her breasts and then choked her when he couldn't seem to penetrate her fully. And then she told them about the wizards arriving: how it took time for them to figure out a way to get her down and covered; how Malfoy performed legilimency on him to discover what happened; how he offered to let her choose his punishment; how she tortured Cormac first before Malfoy tortured him harder.

"It felt so good to torture him," she confessed, as tears rolled down all of their cheeks. "It was like the darkness was being purged. I've never felt so powerful or such relief."

And then she described Nita's visit and the way her magic felt like it was stitching her back together.

"She was so beautiful and kind. She protected me. She protected all of us."

By the time Hermione was finished, she felt emotionally wrung out, but better than she had in ages. Talking about it was one of the hardest things she had ever done, but the aftereffects reminded her of casting the cruciatus: it was as though something poisonous had been extracted from her. It existed out in the open now and not just buried in Hermione's memory of it. She had never been so grateful for her girls.

Ginny gripped one hand while Luna gripped the other. Ginny looked her in the eye and spoke with a seriousness that Hermione had come to learn could promise terrifying things.

"This is what we're going to do," she said evenly. "All three of us are going to become animagi. We will ask the boys to make sure McLaggen is there during one of our visits to Nott Castle and have them bring him around to us. I will trample his hands so he can never touch another woman. Luna will bite his crotch so his pecker stops working. And you can claw out his eyes so he'll never be able to see a witch naked again."

Hermione blinked, breathless at the thought.

"That's rather violent," she said.

"I don't fucking care," said Ginny firmly. "This war has taken too much from all of us. Our families, our friends, our lives... he's just one person, and I know his fate doesn't make a damned bit of difference to the outcome, but it sure as hell will make me feel better."

She crossed her arms and gave Hermione a fierce look that clearly said, *Fight me on this, and you will lose*. It was an expression that was a perfect blend of her mother, Ron, and the twins. It spoke of stubbornness and anger and perfect chaos.

Hermione nodded slowly. "Fine. But Blaise did tell me that he has no more chances. If he puts another toe out of line, Malfoy will kill him."

Ginny gave an insolent shrug. "That works too. Just as long as he makes it really painful."

"Theo said that Draco kept Cormac in his cellar and cut off a piece of each finger on his wand hand every single day for two weeks," said Luna absently. "Just small bits, you know, until he had nothing left. Apparently he used a hot poker to cauterize the wounds between each round and didn't heal him or give him any pain relief. Then Theo flayed his back and Blaise practiced his cruciatus on him."

Hermione's eyes widened. "God," she muttered.

"Don't do that," warned Ginny, giving her a knowing look.

"Do what?"

"Feel bad for him. He deserved every moment of pain."

Hermione sank back in the sofa. She had a hard time disagreeing with that. But then again...

"Doesn't it just seem... wrong to you?" she asked hesitantly.

Ginny snorted and shrugged. “Frankly, I don’t give a shit. It’s true that all three of them are kind of sadistic and maybe a little crazy, but I can’t bring myself to care when it’s used against other Death Eaters who have hurt one of us. They would never do that to us.”

“That’s the measuring stick then? What would they do to us?”

“It’s my entire world right now, Hermione,” said Ginny wearily. “I can’t care about right and wrong while my family is in hiding and my brothers are dead and one of my best friends was hurt that badly.”

Hermione softened at this and reached out to squeeze Ginny’s hand.

“Maybe you’re right,” she sighed. “Malfoy is very careful not to hurt me or trigger me. He feels terrible whenever he pushes me too hard. That’s why he’s been touching me slowly so I get used to it again. I can’t allow myself to freeze if another Death Eater does it.”

Luna cocked her head and studied Hermione. “If it would help to feel a woman’s touch too, do let me know. I’d be happy to oblige. That might be easier than a man’s while you are healing.”

Hermione’s eyebrows flew up and she turned crimson. “You mean...”

Luna shrugged. “No pressure of course, and I only think of you as a friend, Hermione. I love Theo in a romantic way. But I have some experience with women too, and I’m really quite good and gentle. I’m sure Theo wouldn’t mind it if it would help you. He loves you very much.”

Hermione caught Ginny’s eye, and she raised an amused eyebrow as if to say, *Would you like for me to offer too?*

“Thanks, Luna,” said Hermione, just shaking her head a little. “I’ll consider it.”

Ginny’s birthday bash was surprisingly fun. After telling Poppy about the plan, she smuggled in some supplies, and together they decorated Hermione’s room and parlor with balloons, streamers, and confetti that floated from the ceiling before disappearing as it hit a solid surface. It was wonderfully festive and something Hermione didn’t even know she was craving.

Ginny’s face when she saw it was priceless, and she squealed just like that day when she was reunited with Hermione for the first time. Hermione was pleased and felt it was a passable substitute for a real gift.

The house elves outdid themselves and they had breakfast for dinner – a full English, no less. The wizards seemed bemused by it, but the witches tucked in happily, explaining that it was a special treat that people who had *not* been raised in the aristocracy liked to enjoy now and then.

Then it was time for the gift that Blaise had managed to arrange.

“I have a surprise for you, *Bellissima*,” he said, as he pulled something out from behind his back and tapped his wand to expand it.

Ginny’s mouth dropped, and her eyes filled with tears at the thing he was holding: a traditional chocolate birthday cake very obviously made by Molly Weasley.

“I have a letter too,” he said softly, “from all of your family members. They send their greetings.”

Blaise was forced to set the cake down in order to catch Ginny who came flying at him. She launched herself into his arms and kissed him full on the lips. His eyes widened for a split second in surprise, but he didn’t miss a beat as he kissed her back with enthusiasm, and when she broke away, he was beaming down at her a bit breathlessly.

“Well that’s a happy birthday,” muttered Malfoy’s droll voice. Hermione glanced at him and couldn’t help but smile a little as he inclined his head toward their two friends knowingly.

Ginny herself was rather pink, but she looked delighted as she grabbed Blaise’s hand and led him to the table. She plopped herself on his lap as Hermione cut slices of cake and handed them around to the group.

“This might be the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” came Theo’s voice a moment later. Hermione and Luna nodded in agreement, while Blaise and Ginny ignored him. She was busy feeding him cake from his fork.

“How long do you think they’re going to be like that?” came Malfoy’s voice again in her ear. He had sidled up to Hermione to accept his cake, though he hadn’t tried it yet.

“Ginny is affectionate,” confessed Hermione. “She and Harry were always all over each other. It used to drive Ron mad.”

“And you?” he asked.

Hermione shrugged. “It can be a little much, but for the most part I think it’s rather sweet.”

“So you’d be willing to feed a bloke cake, is that it?” he teased.

She turned to look at him squarely. “I could.”

“I dare you.”

His eyes had an unholy twinkle in them. Once again he was teasing her, but this time it didn’t feel malicious. It didn’t cross any lines. Hermione just rolled her own eyes and huffed

for a moment as she grabbed the fork from his hands and speared a piece of his cake on it.

“Open up then,” she demanded.

“Very romantic, Granger,” he said dryly.

“Less talking, more eating, Malfoy.”

Something in the air shifted around them at these words, and Hermione couldn’t quite understand *why*. But Malfoy bit his lip for a moment before saying, “Alright then,” and dropped his mouth open.

Hermione placed the fork in his mouth, and his lips closed around it, his eyes never leaving her face. He quietly groaned in a terribly inappropriate way, and Hermione’s cheeks flushed as heat traveled down her neck to...

No. It was madness.

And yet, as Draco Malfoy licked the cake off the end of the fork Hermione couldn’t help but imagine feeding him with just her fingers and feeling his tongue wrap around them.

She waited for the panic to start, but it didn’t. And the sudden realization that Malfoy’s lips around her fingers didn’t terrify her almost terrified her. *Almost.*

“Well?” she asked, and she was chagrined to hear her voice had gone a little breathless.

“Sublime,” he said. “Hopefully it’s not the *most* delicious thing I will ever eat as Theo claims, but it will surely remain in the top five.”

“Oh?” she asked, as her heart was inexplicably racing. “And what could be more delicious than this?”

Malfoy said nothing, but grabbed her free hand and raised it to his lips to kiss as he studied her.

Hermione’s eyes widened. She glanced back at the others to see if they had noticed, but Ginny and Blaise were utterly wrapped up in each other and Theo and Luna were busy getting an additional slice of cake.

Hermione swallowed hard. “You keep saying it’s not a crush,” she said quietly.

“It’s not,” he said comfortably.

Then what is it? she wanted to ask, but the words died on her lips. The only other possibility she could think of was fulfillment of the thing she had asked him to do.

But that didn’t seem quite right either. Everything he did was intense and focused. He was perfectly pleasant to Ginny and Luna, but he ignored them for the most part and seemed perpetually locked in on Hermione. It was maddening, and she knew she should ask.

But no. Not now.

Her heart was pounding, and she felt him stroking the inside of her wrist. She was certain he could feel it. Sure enough...

"Calm," he said. "Breathe. Your pulse is like that bird you're going to become... it positively skitters for me. But let's bring it down a notch, yes?"

Hermione focused on her breathing, and soon it slowed.

"There it is," he said encouragingly. "So much better. Don't ever be frightened of me."

"Not even when..." she glanced back at their friends again.

Malfoy's lips quirked up. "Why does it bother you what they see? Theo and Luna have been sharing a bed since the day she arrived. And Merlin knows we're about to experience the joys of public displays of affection from Ginny and Blaise. A peck on the hand or cheek shouldn't signify."

Hermione felt a moment of terrible disappointment at his words.

It shouldn't signify. Because it's not a crush.

Hermione nodded and lowered her gaze. He released her hand and cupped her chin. When she raised her eyes again reluctantly, she saw that his own gaze had sharpened.

"Tell me what just happened, Hermione."

Hermione hesitated. She didn't want to. She couldn't bear for him to guess that she might be developing a crush on *him*, when he didn't have one on her. It would be mortifying. It would mean that her plan for him to help her would have to stop. It would cross too many lines.

"Nothing," she said.

"Hermione..." he warned.

She closed her eyes and scrambled. "You said it didn't signify. I just thought... well it would be important to *me*... you know, because of my problems and..."

His thumb stroked her cheek, and her eyes opened to find him staring at her intently. "I meant it wouldn't signify to *them*. Theo and Luna are having plenty of sex. I wish I could *obliviate* myself to forget some of the things he's told me about it. I reckon Ginny and Blaise are headed that direction very soon. I meant that *they* would hardly notice a few pecks. I wasn't speaking of you or me."

Hermione's stomach unclenched. "Oh..." she breathed. "Alright then."

He cocked his head to watch her a moment longer, and then nodded to himself. "Better. Talk to me, yeah? I'd much rather fix something before it becomes a big problem."

Hermione dipped her head, flushing a little. She was sure he was referencing their fight about her animagus form.

Malfoy released her, and they carried the rest of their cake over to the table. It *was* delicious, truly, and it was surprisingly nostalgic. Mrs. Weasley made the same cake for every birthday every year. It was always a decadent chocolate with sticky, perfect icing. As usual, Hermione could hardly finish her slice because it was so rich.

It was only as the party was winding down that the last birthday gift arrived: an announcement from Malfoy.

“You three have done well with your training,” he said, glancing at the girls who exchanged pleased looks. “You’re all at least moderately proficient at occlumency, and I’d wager you could properly filet a wizard if he looked at you the wrong way.”

Hermione and the others grinned at this.

“The animagus forms will come, but I did promise Hermione that it wasn’t necessary for them to be complete before I let you three out of here.”

Their eyes widened, and Hermione’s heart started to race, but this time it was from excitement and not nerves.

“There’s a gathering this weekend,” he added, “here at Malfoy Manor. It will be marked Death Eaters and maybe a few boons. There will be waitstaff helping.”

Everyone’s eyes were trained on Malfoy as he spoke.

“Since this is the first time, we will conceal you as staff. You’ll be disguised, obviously. I won’t lie,” he added, now looking directly at Hermione, “you will be oggled, and there may be an innocent touch or two.”

Hermione’s stomach curdled.

“But it won’t be much,” he added, “and if you attract too much attention, one of us will pull you.”

“What do you mean, pull us?” asked Ginny.

Malfoy shrugged. “Some of the waitstaff give special attention to certain Death Eaters for extra tips. It’s nothing gratuitous, and it’s entirely up to the staff whether to engage beyond what they are paid by me to do. If the other Death Eaters don’t behave, then Theo will pull Luna, Blaise will pull Ginny, and I’ll pull Hermione. You three will just pretend to give *us* attention in that case, and then the others will be certain to leave you alone. I doubt it will come to that though because the others know the rules. The staff for this one is all mine, and I don’t fuck around.”

Hermione took a deep breath as she thought about that.

I can do this, she thought. If it gets to be too much, I’ll just go to Malfoy or alert Theo.

This was exactly what Hermione had been practicing for.

“And what do you need us to do there?” asked Luna, “other than serve drinks and such?”

Now Malfoy’s gaze fell on her. “I need you to dose a few key Death Eaters with veritaserum. The elves can’t do it because there’s no guarantee the right drink will go to the right person. They are kept out of sight and my head of staff checks everything before it goes out into the room. I don’t trust her loyalties or those of the other waitstaff who could help with this. You’ll need to make sure our targets have had a few drinks before you do it so that they think it was the alcohol that made them spill their secrets. And it won’t be all of them or that would be too suspicious – we will be selective.”

Hermione’s eyes widened, and she started to smile slowly.

“And to help,” he added, “your training for the next few days will be with a special guest.”

All three witches looked shocked at this.

“Who is it?” demanded Hermione.

Malfoy just smirked. “You’ll see.”

Chapter 13: Nita

Chapter Notes

The end note contains a small spoiler so you should read the chapter first.

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

It didn't matter how much the girls begged and pleaded – all three wizards were mute when it came to Malfoy's special guest.

Hermione's initial reaction – a very slight panic that somebody would discover them – immediately calmed and transformed into deep curiosity once she realized Theo and Blaise knew who the mystery guest was too, and neither of them seemed concerned. On the contrary, all three wizards appeared amused by the girls' collective frustration.

As the party broke up, Hermione made one last attempt to wrangle the truth out of them and zeroed in on Malfoy.

"Hey," she said, catching his hand as he was about to disappear through the door into his room.

He turned in surprise and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Why won't you tell me?" she asked, and she tried her best to affect a slight pout. It was slightly ruined by a flash of Lavender Brown's face in her mind's eye. She had seen Lavender do this dozens of times, and the memory made her sad.

Malfoy, however, didn't seem to notice her distress and simply cocked his head to study her expression with curiosity.

"Well this is a fascinating development," he murmured.

"What?" she asked innocently. "I just want to know."

His eyes narrowed, and she tried again.

"I mean, I'm safe here, and I don't know about letting somebody else behind the wards... I want to know that it will be alright." Again, she gave him a pleading look, and he stepped very close to her.

"Hermione Granger," he sighed, as he placed a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to his. "You little liar."

Hermione's jaw dropped, and she gasped. "I beg your pardon!"

He just smirked. "You're not scared. I know precisely what you look like when you're scared. You turn pale and your heart races and you tremble. But I see none of those things right now. You're just curious."

She scowled, and he had the audacity to laugh at her.

"I want to know," she demanded.

"By all means, do your best to convince me to tell you."

This made Hermione falter. "How?"

He gave a careless shrug. "How indeed?"

Hermione bit her lip, and he watched with amusement as she tried to think of something she could trade or give up in exchange for learning about it. She knew it was stupid – she would find out the following day regardless – but she was an intensely curious person, and she just *had* to know.

Then an idea struck her.

"What if I just say please... *Draco*?" she asked innocently.

The effect was instantaneous. Malfoy's – no, *Draco's* – eyes grew huge and dark, and he huffed an exhale as he stared down at her in disbelief. His hand moved to her face and gripped it.

"Say that again," he demanded.

"Draco..." she said with a little smile.

"Fuck..." he muttered to himself. "*Fuck*, I just...it's meant to be a surprise..."

"*Please*," she begged. "*Please Draco*."

He shut his eyes at this and seemed to sway a little as his hand dropped from her face to her neck. His touch was firm, but not threatening, and after a moment of uncertainty she calmed her racing heart.

"One more time," he whispered. "Beg me for it one more time..."

"Please Draco," she said sincerely. "I want it *so* badly."

He groaned quietly. "Alright, I'll tell you on one condition."

"What's that?" she asked, hardly daring to believe her plan had actually worked.

"You don't call me Malfoy anymore unless you're cross with me. We're on a first-name basis now."

“Okay,” she agreed easily.

She wasn’t exactly sure what was happening between them, but she could tell that something in their dynamic was shifting at this very moment. Calling him by his first name was no great burden. All of the others did it, more often than not. It was only Hermione and occasionally Ginny who still referred to him by his surname. Still, he seemed to view it as momentous. Some keen, innate part of Hermione – the part of her that liked hair ribbons and the scent of orange blossom and was distinctly female – was positively enamored by his reaction. He was putty in her hands like this, and she allowed him to step a bit closer, his fingers still around her neck. She felt his face drop to the top of her head.

“Such a good fucking girl,” he murmured into her hair, tightening his grip on her neck ever so slightly. Her breath caught from his words and his hand. Something about it both terrified and thrilled her. As usual he felt her heart rate pick up under his fingers. “Easy there... stay nice and calm for me... there you go... Gods, I just... okay, I’ll tell you.”

As Hermione waited eagerly his hand finally dropped from her neck and laced into hers. He took a few breaths in an effort to compose himself.

“It’s Nita,” he finally said. “She’s quite trustworthy and would never harm any of you.”

Hermione stepped back so she could see his face clearly, her eyes lighting up at this.

“Nita!” she said with delight. “Truly? Oh it will be lovely to see her again!”

He smiled softly at her reaction.

“Truly.”

“Excellent,” she said. “I was a bit afraid it was your mum, to be perfectly honest.”

He surprised her with a bark of laughter. “No! Not yet, at any rate. Just Nita.”

Hermione beamed. “Well I feel much better now that I know who it is.”

He gave her a fond, though exasperated look. “Don’t pretend like you were *actually* afraid. You know I would never let somebody through those wards who would harm you.”

She flushed a little. “I suppose that’s true. But Draco...” she glanced at him and saw his eyes were shining at the use of his first name, “I’m more excited now that I know. Honestly, I despise surprises. The anticipation is much better when I know what’s coming.”

He smiled wryly. “I’ll bear that in mind.” Then he turned serious for a moment. “Will you be able to handle yourself around the other Death Eaters?”

Hermione gathered her courage and nodded firmly. “Yes. And if not, I’ll go to you or call for Theo through our bond if I can’t find you.”

His eyes shone with pleasure and a little relief at this. “That’s exactly what I want you to do. Now then, get some rest tonight and enjoy your training with Nita over the next few days

while you prepare. Her skills are... rather unique.”

He smirked at this last tidbit, as though he knew something she didn’t. She scowled a little, realizing that he must not have told her everything. He just chuckled and kissed the back of her hands before stepping through the door to his room.

“Sleep well tonight, Hermione. Sweet girls should always have sweet dreams.”

Nita was a woman of many surprises.

The first surprise came right after Hermione and Draco walked into the training room the next day.

“*Buongiorno Mamma,*” came Blaise’s voice from behind her.

Hermione whipped around to stare at Blaise in amazement.

“Nita is your *mother*?” she gasped.

The three wizards and Nita all laughed at her expression. Luna looked mildly curious. Ginny, however, looked incredibly nervous as Nita’s deep blue eyes settled on her.

“*Si,*” answered Nita, who was still studying Ginny. “Blaise is my only son.”

Hermione swiveled her head between them. They looked absolutely nothing alike.

“But... but you’re... and she’s...”

Hermione was struggling to find a graceful way to say the thing she wanted to say.

Nita, mercifully, seemed to understand the direction of Hermione’s thoughts.

“True Veela are all female,” she said simply. “When we have boys, they are human like their fathers. It is only the girls that carry our magic.”

Hermione’s head was still swiveling between the handsome, dark-skinned wizard and his utterly stunning, ageless mother with her fair skin and silvery hair.

“So you’re part-Veela,” she said, scowling at Blaise.

“Is that a problem?” he challenged.

Hermione threw up her hands. “Not at all! Except you acted like some bloody pureblood prick for *years* while we were at Hogwarts! Just like Nott and Malfoy here, by the way.”

“Hey!” the other wizards said, and she turned to glare at them both.

“Hush, I’m cross with you too. All three of you are just bloody actors aren’t you? Nott’s really a muggleborn, Zabini’s part-Veela, and soon Malfoy is going to tell me he’s really a werewolf. We’ll have the trifecta won’t we?”

There was a slightly awkward silence, and she zeroed in on Malfoy. “*Are* you a werewolf?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “Of course not!”

He had a suspicious look on his face, and she glared at him.

“*I’m not*,” he insisted. “I just... had a close call once, that’s all.”

“Vampire?” she asked.

“No,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Zombie?”

“What the fuck is a zombie?”

“It’s a bit like an inferius,” supplied Luna.

Malfoy scowled. “I’m not *dead*.”

“Half-blood then,” said Hermione, eyes still narrowed.

“Why on earth would you guess inferius before half-blood?” he demanded.

“Because that one seems more likely...” she trailed off as she realized he hadn’t denied it, and then her eyes got huge. “You *are* a half-blood!”

“*No!* I’m precisely who you think I am! Draco Malfoy, pureblood, only son of Lucius and Narcissa.”

“Except you *pretended* to hate muggleborns for years,” pointed out Hermione. “So it’s not exactly the same!”

He waved her off. “You know why I did that. Now if you’re quite finished, I believe you lot have a lesson?”

Hermione flushed, as she realized that all the others were watching the two of them bicker with amusement.

“Fine,” she huffed. “But I’m still annoyed with all three of you. Yes, including *you*, Draco.”

At the sound of his first name, his expression eased, and he gave her a teasing smile. “I’ll find a way to manage. Nita?”

“Of course,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “If the witches would gather around me, please?”

Hermione, Ginny, and Luna approached Nita a bit cautiously. Ginny was chewing her lip raw, and Hermione nudged her slightly in a silent show of moral support.

“One at a time so I can enhance the spell before we begin.”

Hermione stepped forward first, remembering what this was like. Nita placed her hand on Hermione’s head, and once again Hermione felt that wonderful heat seep into her as though all the broken parts of her were being knitted back together. The sharp twinge below her navel told her that the protection spell had been cast again.

Hermione stepped back, feeling far more at peace than she had been, and then Luna and Ginny stepped forward in turn. With Ginny, Nita took a bit longer, though she said nothing as the redhead was thoroughly examined.

“Now then,” said Nita, turning to the wizards once she was done. “You three may leave us. Come check in an hour.”

The wizards exchanged glances with each other.

“*Mamma*,” said Blaise, “we would rather stay and—”

“No,” said Nita, cutting him off. “These are women’s secrets.”

Hermione caught Draco’s eye, and she could tell by the look on his face that he would be questioning her thoroughly about this later on. However, none of the three wizards dared contradict Nita, so they nodded and turned to leave. Theo’s voice pushed into Hermione’s head just as they left.

Call for me if you need us.

I will, she replied, and she saw Theo nod toward Draco a little as they were exiting.

“very well,” said Nita, as she looked at the three witches. “I understand that you will be going undercover as it were, to pull secrets out of Death Eaters. The boys have asked me to assist you with this. I am... rather adept at such things.”

Because she’s gorgeous, thought Hermione, still staring at the Veela with some amazement.

“It’s not just beauty, though that is part of it,” acknowledged Nita, as though sensing Hermione’s train of thought. “All three of you are quite beautiful enough as it is, and I will be sure to tell the boys not to hide your beauty when they disguise you. Therefore, beauty is not something we should concern ourselves with over the next few days. Instead, you must learn a certain presence. A way of carrying oneself. It is about discovering what makes men weak and exploiting it. And it is learning some sleight of hand to move things along.”

Hermione was spellbound. She glanced at Luna and Ginny and saw they too were fascinated by this speech. Involuntarily Hermione remembered the previous night, when she felt like Draco would give her anything at all simply because she used his first name.

Discover what makes men weak.

“Now you three will be posing as waitresses,” she said. “I understand that means there will be plenty of looking, but minimal touching unless you permit it. *Not* that I believe any of our three wizards will permit it,” she said with a knowing smile. “And that means your presence must be magnetic so that the Death Eaters wish for you to be in their vicinity. They must want you to stay serving them, even when you do not permit them to touch you. You must distract them with your faces and bodies so that they do not notice what you are doing with your hands.”

Here, Nita held out three rings and handed them out to each of the girls.

“This is how you will spike their drinks,” she said. “The rings are hollow and can hold enough veritaserum for three drinks each. I understand that all three of you have some wandless magic. You will need it to open the tiny door at the bottom of the rings just here and release a few drops into the drinks as you pass them to your victims. That way there will be no mistakes.”

Hermione took her ring and stared at it curiously. It was rounded and plain, cast in gold, with a small divot that Hermione supposed was the trapdoor. It would be just large enough to allow one drop at a time to make its way out of the chamber. It had no engravings or gems and was entirely unremarkable.

“The Borgias did something like this,” she said thoughtfully. “They were muggles of course, but quite famous. Supposedly Lucrezia Borgia used a hollow ring to poison any number of the Borgias’ enemies. Historical accounts conflict though – some believe it wasn’t true and that she’s been labeled a murderess without any real evidence.”

“Oh it was quite true,” said Nita lightly. “My great-great grandmother was never one to suffer fools.”

Her blue eyes were twinkling, and Hermione stared at her in disbelief. “But...”

“Veela live longer than witches and wizards,” she said gently. “Lucrezia was herself a Veela. She was the daughter of a Pope and his mistress, who was a Veela too. She was renowned as a great beauty and had several marriages, both magical and muggle. She had ten children, seven of whom survived infancy, and only one of her surviving children was a girl. That girl became a nun in the muggle world for a time, and after becoming disenchanted with that lifestyle she turned back to her Veela heritage and disappeared from the muggle world to continue our line. She was my great grandmother, of course.”

Hermione was utterly fascinated.

“That’s just... *gracious*.”

Nita laughed lightly. “Let’s just say that poison is a skill that runs in the family.”

At this, Hermione went cold, and only now did she remember the rumors about Blaise Zabini’s mother: Nita had seven previous husbands who died under suspicious circumstances. She was a serial killer – a black widow – just as dangerous, if not more so,

than the wizards they were living with. And now she was about to let the witches in on her secrets.

The cognitive dissonance was unbelievable. Hermione instinctively trusted Nita, felt *safe* around her. She was all that was good and light and magnetic.

Magnetic.

Hermione realized it was Nita's presence that was so compelling. No doubt her Veela magic helped her seem trustworthy too, but that wasn't everything. It was the way she carried herself. It was her confidence and assuredness. She was graceful, angelic, enthralling.

And yet, her method of murder – presumably poison – had been administered many times to the men she had actually married.

God.

“Let us begin,” said Nita, gesturing that all three should slip on their rings as she levitated a tray of glasses filled with water over to them. “Hermione, you first, my dear, and no need to look so pale. Nobody is asking you to murder our Death Eater friends just yet.”

Yet.

Hermione gulped.

Nita's lessons were like nothing Hermione had ever imagined.

They started with the most important task of learning to use their rings. They used a muggle medical syringe — Hermione was sure that was Theo's idea — to fill them with dark tea so they could see what they were doing while they practiced. It took only a few tries before all three witches could wordlessly and wandlessly open and close the little trap door, and then they practiced dropping tea into a glass of water as they held it to pass to an unsuspecting Death Eater.

They were lucky that veritaserum was odorless and colorless. It would be entirely undetectable once inside the drinks and was fairly subtle while being added. But it would still produce a small splash and that was why Nita returned the second day to teach them the next thing on her list: methods of distraction.

“Veela have an advantage here,” she admitted. “Our magic can charm men who have not been socialized to it.”

“Socialized to it?” asked Ginny curiously.

After a full day of Nita treating her no differently than the others, Ginny had warmed up to her.

“Yes,” said Nita. “Men who are raised around Veelas or have sufficient exposure before puberty are not as susceptible to our magic. Blaise’s head will never be turned by a Veela more than any other woman. Theo and Draco are not *entirely* immune to Veela magic, but they will fare much better than most, as they both spent a couple of summers with me and Blaise after their first and second years of Hogwarts. It was sufficient exposure to give them very good resistance, and they interact with me enough that they have continued to build it.”

Involuntarily Hermione remembered Ron and Harry encountering their first Veelas at the Quidditch World Cup. They had both looked ready to fling themselves from the top box to join them, as had most of the other Weasley brothers.

Hermione had been incredibly irritated with both of them and had spun around to see the reactions of others in the box. She remembered her gaze landing on Draco, who had been glaring at *her* and totally ignoring the dancing Veelas at the match. At the time she hadn’t thought much of it. It was certainly not the first time she turned to find him scowling in her direction. But now that she considered it she realized just how strange that had been. She knew that Nita must be right, and he had at least some immunity.

It was an oddly comforting thought.

What she still didn’t know, however, was *why* he had been staring at her that day instead of watching the entertainment on the field. Then again, he had always stared at her, hadn’t he?

She sighed.

It wasn’t a crush.

She barely heard Luna’s next question.

“What about women who prefer other women?”

Nita gave Luna a knowing smile. “Our magic is not strong on women. We may have a certain look and our magic makes us approachable. But no, Veelas do not affect witches in the same way as wizards, even if those witches have a preference for other women.”

“Fascinating,” murmured Luna.

“Quite,” agreed Nita. “Now then, just because Veela magic gives us an advantage as it were, that doesn’t mean that witches such as yourselves can’t use your assets to distract a target.”

And then Nita launched into a lecture and demonstration that Hermione listened to with growing incredulity.

A simple glance that called a man’s attention to her face.

A slight maneuvering of the arms to press her breasts up.

A cocktail napkin that falls on the floor and a bend to pick it up.

A toss of the head to expose the neck.

A coy look and shy smile to draw a man in *just enough*.

On and on she went, making the girls practice in the mirror, critiquing and correcting until she was satisfied with each gesture.

It was absurd. It was ridiculous. And yet...

Hadn't Hermione seen other women do this? Hadn't she watched her two best friends fall for precisely these tricks? Hadn't she done something very similar to Draco to tease information out of him? He transformed into something entirely malleable whenever she offered a smile or trusting expression. He latched onto any invitation for affection or physical contact.

"All men have weaknesses. Find them," insisted Nita.

Hermione was starting to wonder if *she* was Draco's weakness. Some part of her still couldn't believe it, but he had melted for her one too many times for her to truly dismiss the thought.

If it's not a crush then what is it?

Hermione didn't have the answers, but she wondered if Nita was giving her the tools to push him in that direction if he wasn't already on his way. The thought made Hermione both eager and anxious. She wasn't confident in using her body that way, especially not when the wizard who was her target might be somebody she cared about.

But maybe she could...

No. The very thought was madness.

Not only madness, but it would be a terrible distraction to *her* just before her first mission. She could not afford ruminations and daydreams about coaxing Draco to kiss her somewhere *else*.

She snapped to attention just in time to hear Nita's final piece of advice.

"And if your mark does not fall for these tricks, then you can turn to the biggest one of all: use each other."

"Pardon?" asked Hermione in confusion.

Nita gestured toward the three witches. "Give each other the attention you would otherwise give to them. You three are familiar with each other, no?"

Hermione turned crimson as she realized just how much Nita must have observed in their minds.

“Yes, but we don’t feel that way about each other.” said Ginny.

Nita gave a careless shrug.

“And? You have no feelings for the Death Eaters you are meaning to distract either. If there is an occasion where touching becomes absolutely necessary to draw their attention, it is better to do it to each other than to them.”

All three witches absorbed this piece of advice.

“We certainly wouldn’t hurt each other...” said Luna slowly. “We trust each other implicitly.”

“And the boys wouldn’t retaliate,” added Hermione quietly. “If a Death Eater does it, they’d be just as likely to throw a knife as use their words to stop it.”

“Precisely,” agreed Nita. “You should consider it a tool in your arsenal, that’s all. At the very least, it would give you the element of surprise, and that will serve to distract them for a few seconds.”

Hermione was quiet as their final lesson before their first mission concluded. There was no question she struggled with this more than Ginny and Luna did. She had confidence in her mind, not her body. The most intimate sexual experience of her young life was non-consensual and terrifying. Innocent jokes about breasts had triggered her not that long ago.

She was sure that she would bugger this up. And the whole plan made her feel dirty.

“Hermione, dear, stay back please,” said Nita as the wizards came to collect them at the end of their last lesson. Draco shot her a questioning look, and she just shrugged as she turned toward Nita. His eyes narrowed a little, but he hung back while Nita waved her hand and cast a privacy charm over the two of them.

“Hermione, you’re worried,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

Hermione sighed. “It’s just... this is so far out of my comfort zone. Even before Cormac I’m just... not *like* that.”

“Not like what?”

“Sexual. Pretty. I don’t know! I was always the smart one, not the attractive one. It feels wrong.”

Nita contemplated her. “Why does it feel wrong to use your body as it was intended?”

Hermione blinked at this question. “Pardon?” she said, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say to this.

“Your body. It was made for sex, correct?”

Hermione considered this.

“I’ve never thought of it that way.”

“Tell me what your own mother has said to you about it.”

Hermione shrugged a little uncomfortably. The topic of her parents was still painful. “She just explained it to me once. That was all.”

“And yet you feel shame when you think of it.”

“Maybe a little...” admitted Hermione. “I’m not exactly a scarlet woman.”

Nita’s mouth quirked at this. “An amusing expression. Tell me: who called you that?”

Hermione blinked and stared at Nita in surprise. “Nobody has called me that directly, but it was implied once. Rita Skeeter wrote some nasty articles about me, and Ginny’s mum read them. She is rather conservative and...” she trailed off.

“Oh yes, I’m quite aware,” said Nita wryly. “I have seen it all in Ginevra’s mind. But she has chosen to ignore those labels and experiment in natural ways despite her mother’s comments. You, however, have chosen to internalize it. I wonder why.”

Hermione stared off into space. Nita was perceptive, intuitive. There was no question her Veela magic helped her with this, but then again... she was right. Hermione *had* internalized certain ideas about sex.

“I think... it might be because my best friends were boys. I’m not totally clueless, I know there were always rumors about us. But they weren’t true. At most I had a crush on Ron for a time, but it was fairly innocent. I just never thought of them that way, regardless of the rumors.”

“And so it affected your perception of sex,” said Nita. “You went out of your way to prove your relationship with them was not sexual, and in doing so you closed yourself off to experimentation with *any* wizards, especially the ones you were closest to.”

“Yes. And the thing Cormac did...”

“Was an act of violence, and nothing about it was legitimately sexual.”

“Wasn’t it?” challenged Hermione.

Nita raised one eyebrow. “It was a cruel expression of power, my dear. There was no pleasure for you in it, nor did he intend for there to be. Sex is meant to be enjoyable. You must have some agency over it to have legitimacy.”

“He stripped me naked and groped me,” she insisted. “He wanted me for his boon, and Draco told him no.”

“Yes he did do that. But if someone who cared about you stripped you naked and touched you intimately, would they have done it to you like *that*? Would you react the same way? What Mr. McLaggen did to you was unforgivable. But you must not allow it to make you

believe that sex is dirty or shameful. He was exerting power over you in a violent way. Legitimate sexual experiences are consensual and pleasurable for all parties, whatever form they happen to take. That is true even when the sex involves uneven power dynamics with whips and chains and the like.”

Hermione was quiet as she absorbed this, and involuntarily her eyes drifted toward Draco who was leaning against the wall and watching them intently. He couldn’t hear the conversation, but he was tracking her every expression.

If Draco stripped her naked and touched her like that would she feel as violated as the day Cormac had done it?

No. Because he would never hurt you. He would make sure you wanted it first and enjoyed it. And you have a crush on him.

Dammit.

Hermione shoved the thought away. It wasn’t the time.

“So you think I should what... embrace sex for these missions?”

Nita raised one eyebrow. “Our species is dependent upon sex, is it not? At least some of us must embrace it if we are to survive. In any event, the notion that it is perverse or should be put on a pedestal is entirely wrong in my view. It is yet another way men have sought to have power over us because being physically stronger isn’t enough. Removing us from history books isn’t enough. Bearing titles and owning property isn’t enough. They try to control our sexuality too and in doing so women often internalize it. Molly Weasley’s beliefs about those so-called scarlet women are not necessarily ill-intentioned, but they are incorrect. Sex is perfectly natural, and it is just one way in which we as women can even the score a little bit. We should be proud of that. We should seek our own pleasure when we wish it. We should view ourselves as beautiful, desirable, and powerful. And when it comes to something like this mission of yours, we should not hesitate to leverage every advantage our sexuality can give to us. Haven’t you considered why the boys have asked you three to do this in the first place?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. She *had* wondered, but hadn’t asked. She didn’t want them to have second thoughts about involving her in a mission.

“It’s because all three of them understand how powerful a beautiful woman can be,” said Nita, answering her own question. “They have all spent enough time around me to observe just how quickly a man can fall to a woman’s charms. But they also know that the other Death Eaters underestimate it, and that presents a vulnerability that can be exploited. The things you will be doing take acting and skill and reliance on your natural physical gifts in order to be successful without giving away the game. It requires bravery and cunning and a deeply held belief that your sexuality is only *yours*. Someday you may wish to share it with another person or even give it to that person to control. But nobody can ever take that power from you without your consent, regardless of what they may say or do to you.”

Hermione was nearly breathless as she listened to Nita. Nobody had ever spoken this way before. Sex had always been faintly embarrassing to her before Cormac and then it became positively shameful. But listening to Nita she realized that it didn't have to be that way.

"You're saying that it's not something to be afraid of," said Hermione slowly, "and using my body to distract and manipulate evil men like the Death Eaters does not make me dirty. It makes me smart, because I can control it. They may look at me or try to touch me, but they will never truly have me. That makes me more powerful than them because I have something they want, and I'm the only one who can give it to them. Even Cormac didn't take that away from me."

Nita smiled with satisfaction. "Precisely, my dear. Reclaim that control. Take it for yourself and know that only *you* can relinquish it. You are a beautiful, brilliant young woman. That makes you far more powerful than any man. And if you need another boost, I can assist."

"How?" asked Hermione curiously.

"I can give you a bit of Veela magic, if you wish. It will not be nearly as strong as mine and will not necessarily attract men who do not already find you compelling. But it should help you find confidence in your task."

Hermione paused and considered this.

"If you don't mind... yes, please. I think I could use it, at least for this first mission. I've been absolutely convinced I'm going to do something wrong."

Nita smiled softly, and she placed her hands back on Hermione's head. With another pulse of magic, Hermione felt an odd sensation move through her. It was similar to that day Nita had healed her after Cormac, but this time it was more subtle than that. She thought about the mission and felt calm and in control. She thought about her physical appearance and knew that she was beautiful. She contemplated what it would be like to spike a Death Eater's drink, and she wasn't afraid.

This was brilliant.

Hermione smiled broadly and thanked Nita, who just gave her a serene nod of acknowledgment.

Then her thoughts turned to something she knew she shouldn't ask. But Nita was being open and generous with her, and Hermione seized the opportunity.

"Nita..." she started, "may I ask you something rather personal?"

"You wish to know why I murdered my husbands," said Nita calmly.

Hermione blinked. "Erm, yes. If it's not too nosy."

"Oh it's quite nosy, but I don't mind. Let's see. I've been married seven times. Two of them died of natural causes: my first husband and my last — Blaise's father. The husbands in the middle were the unsatisfactory ones."

Hermione gave her a bemused look as Nita ticked them off her fingers.

“Antonio I killed because he struck me. Bernardo took a mistress. She knew he was married, so she suffered an unfortunate accident too of course. Giovanni hid gambling debts from me, the fool. Gabriel was a pathological liar and fraudster — though he did manage to swindle three other men out of their properties before he died so he wasn’t *entirely* useless. And finally, Matteo turned to drink after he lost his position in the Italian Ministry. He was beyond help, I’m afraid.”

She was calm and clearheaded as she gave this recital.

Hermione swallowed hard. “And Blaise’s father?” asked Hermione.

“Lorenzo. The light of my life,” said Nita with a soft smile. “I thought I loved my first husband, who was killed in a riding accident soon after we were wed. And I did love Liam, truly, but we were both so young, and ours was an innocent love. By the time I met Lorenzo I was older, more experienced. I had sworn off marriage, having been disappointed over and over again. But Lorenzo tore down all of my barriers and inserted himself into my heart in a way none of the others had ever managed. He treated me like his queen. He was kind to me, intelligent, and utterly smitten. He could be cruel to others — for the world had been cruel to him before I met him — but he was never cruel to *me*. He used to call me his *principessa*. I was happy to have a child with him, and he adored Blaise with all of his heart. He would tell me that I gave him his greatest gift.”

Hermione felt a rush of sympathy for her loss.

“He succumbed to a severe case of spattergroit mere weeks after we moved to the English countryside for his job,” she added. “Blaise was three. Lorenzo had been so excited about the move that I decided to bury him at the cottage we bought for our new adventure together, and I stayed there to raise Blaise, though of course we spent ample time in Italy as well.”

Hermione found herself empathizing with this woman who had killed at least five husbands and one mistress. Nita *was* good, she decided, serial killing notwithstanding.

“Thank you for telling me,” said Hermione.

Nita gave her a knowing smile. “Your curiosity is a credit to you, my dear. Now I wish you luck on your upcoming mission.”

Hermione smiled and turned once again to find Draco watching her, now with a single eyebrow raised.

She said farewell to Nita, who canceled their privacy spell, as she walked toward Draco who reached for her hand.

Perhaps it was Veela magic or maybe it was the speech Nita had given to her, but for the first time ever, Hermione recognized her own power in the act. Draco was the one taking her hand, but she was the one allowing him to do it. Just like Nita had said, she could rescind that privilege at any moment. She had done it before, and she remembered how agitated it

made him, how desperate. Even her own brother had wilted under Hermione's anger and disapproval, and there would never be any attraction between them.

A man who was attracted to her — like she suspected Draco was — could be crushed easily.

They were silent as he laced their fingers, and they made their way back to her room. Their practice with Nita had been late that day, after dinner, and the sun had already set over the gardens.

As they reached the door to Draco's room, he turned to her.

"Are you up for this first mission? Magically speaking, you're ready. But if somebody says something untoward or tries to touch you..."

A muscle in his jaw twitched at this, and she sighed.

"I'm a little nervous, but I need to try it. I do think this is a good way to ease us in. I don't really fancy showing up as Blaise's boon, you know. He would never mistreat me, but I don't think we would be convincing."

He inclined his head. "You're right, and that's one reason why we're doing it this way. Blaise and I have told the others that we are sharing boons for now. Eventually we will make the swap official. Blaise has been rising steadily, and it won't be much longer until he can claim Ginny without a challenge from one of the others."

"A challenge?" asked Hermione in confusion.

"Nothing to worry about," he said simply, squeezing her hand. "There have been a few boons who have been reshuffled, that's all. It's usually because of a poor hand at cards or a demotion. When that happens those without boons vie for one. None of the other Death Eaters have made a direct trade with each other though. Blaise and I are getting them used to the idea, and we're waiting until he's a little higher up before we announce it."

Hermione blinked, anxiety starting to flood her again. "Demotion..." she said. "Does that mean that if you and Blaise... or Theo... they could take us away from you?"

His eyes turned nearly black, as he released her and cupped her face with both of his hands.

"Listen to me very carefully, Hermione. Nobody – and I mean, *nobody* – will be taking you three away from us. Anybody who tries is dead, do you understand me?"

Hermione willed herself to calm down. His expression was dangerous, almost wild, and she knew it should scare her. He wasn't making idle threats. But instead of feeling fear, she felt wrapped up and safe. It reminded her of being surrounded by that favorite blanket. Draco was green and gray and cedar and spice. She thought she could lose herself in him and be content.

She reached up to cover his hands with hers. "Thank you," she said softly. "Please don't let them take us away."

His gaze was fathomless, and she found herself falling into it. Who was this man and what did he mean to her now? How had he grown so important in only a few months? Why did she trust him with her life and safety like this?

Because he will do things Harry and Ron would never have done to keep you here, whispered a small voice in her head.

“I won’t,” he said firmly, “nor Theo or Blaise. Keeping you three safe is our highest priority.”

She knew it was a promise, and he would die before he broke it.

“Now tell me one more time,” he said, as he allowed her to pull his hands off of her cheeks, “will you be alright around the other Death Eaters?”

Hermione thought about this and nodded slowly. “Yes. Though you may be surprised by Nita’s methods.”

“I think a better word is ‘intimidated.’”

Hermione couldn’t help but grin at this, before turning serious.

“I can’t be the Hermione you know tomorrow.”

He cocked his head a little. “No...” he said slowly. “I suppose not.”

“I’ll be better. Stronger. More powerful. Nita has given me a boost.”

“You’re already those things.”

“Mmmm,” she said noncommittally. “But never like this.”

As usual, his eyes were mapping her face, trying to read her and something about his expression made Hermione feel reckless. Or perhaps it was Veela magic giving her too much confidence. She knew she should step away from him. She should not be putting Nita’s lessons to use on him, at least not yet.

But Hermione had been seized by an idea and could scarcely stop herself. So instead of stepping away she reached up and slowly untied the ribbon in her hair. Draco watched her do it with huge eyes, and she wondered if he thought she would keep going.

She didn’t, remembering something Nita had repeated over and over to them over the previous few days, and the Veela magic inside of her told her that it was true.

Less is more. A wizard’s imagination is a powerful thing.

Hermione unknotted it slowly and then tugged it to pull free from her curls. She dangled it in front of him for a moment and then draped it around his neck. She heard his breathing go shallow.

“There,” she said. “Hermione wears ribbons. But whoever I will be tomorrow does not. Keep this one safe for me until I can take it back.”

Draco reached up and clutched it like a lifeline, his knuckles turning white. He said nothing, apparently at a loss for words. Hermione stepped back and gave him one of the practiced looks Nita had taught her, and then she smirked as his eyes went dark.

“Good night, Draco,” she said, as she gently shoved him through the door and shut it in his face.

Chapter End Notes

Make no mistake, I love a good creature Draco fic, and I was sorely tempted to make him a werewolf this time. I want you all to know I barely resisted. Just like Hermione, I think all types of creature Draco are more likely than a half-blood Draco, and yes that includes zombies (hat tip to one of my favorite fics, Unidentified Hybrid, which features a very sexy zombie Draco).

Also, I love Nita. For years I have pondered why men would keep marrying Blaise Zabini’s mother when all of her previous husbands died under suspicious circumstances. The answer came to me out of the blue one day. She’s obviously a Veela. This is my personal headcanon now, and you will never convince me otherwise 😊

Chapter 14: Annabelle

Chapter Notes

It's time to earn that 'Jealous Draco Malfoy' tag.

The wizards suspended normal training the following morning to debrief the witches about their new identities.

"I have a lot of turnover in my staff, and I have already submitted papers for each of you," said Draco. "Read these and memorize them."

Hermione took her paper and glanced down at it.

Name: Annabelle Goodman

Status: Squib

Age: 19

Education: None (Magically inferior)

Family: None (Disowned)

Skills: Waitressing, Serving (Not available for prostitution)

Hermione raised a skeptical eyebrow at Draco. "Really?"

He shrugged. "Squibs aren't well-tracked at all. You and Luna will be posing that way, and Ginny will be posing as a muggleborn who went to Ilvermorny. You'll need to pretend to have an American accent," he added, looking at Ginny.

"Why not just polyjuice us?" asked Hermione.

All three wizards actually rolled their eyes at this question.

"Because it only lasts an hour before you have to find a way to take another dose. We can transfigure you to last a full day. And besides, if something goes wrong you should be in

your own body. It's really hard to fight while polyjuiced into a different frame. We'll only be changing your faces and hair for this."

Hermione was a bit chagrined to realize they were right.

"Well I think it's brilliant," said Ginny, looking at her own papers. "And I can pretend to be American. That's no problem. I'm Maya Williams."

"And I'm Fara Singh," said Luna as she eyed the other girls' papers. "None of us are prostitutes then?"

"No," said Theo rather curtly.

They broke for lunch early and then reconvened in the training room where the wizards set to work transfiguring them before leaving the girls for their regular afternoon duties.

As she stared down the end of Malfoy's wand, Hermione said, "I wish I could do this myself."

"You would need a wand for it," he replied.

"And if you would acquire one for me I would have one," she pointed out.

"I'm not giving you the opportunity to escape," he said shortly.

"You still don't trust me?" she asked incredulously.

"Would you?" replied Draco.

Hermione said nothing to this, but she just fell into a brooding silence as he continued to work. He had been short with her all day, as though the closeness from the previous few days had never happened. Hermione was sure he was on edge about the mission tonight, but she didn't like being at odds with him. Then again, the reminder that she was still his prisoner and wandless simply because he wanted her to be was enough to temporarily suppress whatever warm feelings she had been having for him, and not even the Veela magic swirling inside of her could convince her to placate him. It was true he had trained her and encouraged wandless magic, but her wandless magic would never be strong enough to break his wards or cast an unforgivable curse against Nagini when the time came.

She needed a wand, and she was certain Draco would never give her one.

Hermione was quiet, thinking about the mission tonight. She had been excited about it. He presented it to them as a generous gift and opportunity to do something important for the Order. But now that the novelty had worn off and the moment was approaching, she finally started asking herself the questions she should have been asking all along: what did this do for *Hermione's* mission? How would this get her closer to the snake? Other than building some trust with the wizards and a test of competency, it really accomplished nothing. And her girlfriends were now so close to Theo and Blaise that she didn't necessarily trust them to help her with it either – the wizards' missions would surely take priority.

I need to pay attention and use these missions to my advantage.

If Draco wouldn't give her a wand, then Hermione would have to take one at some point. It didn't have to be tonight, she reminded herself. She wouldn't be getting close to the snake until she could perform two animagi transformations, and that would take some time. But if she did a good job tonight then there would be other parties too. She needed to find the weak link – perhaps a young Death Eater who could be tricked or subdued. The Veela magic would help with that task, surely. She also needed to learn the layout of the Manor and discover all the dark alcoves to lure one away using the tricks Nita had taught her. There were surely parlors that would stay empty or perhaps the library could work. The Malfoy library was supposed to be famous, after all. It would be large and secluded with many discrete corners where she could draw in a Death Eater before overpowering and obliterating him.

That's what she told herself at any rate.

Draco was watching her face closely, and Hermione forced her thoughts away. None of this would be happening tonight. This party was about completing the mission, garnering some additional trust with their captors so she would be allowed to do it again, and learning more about the Death Eaters in attendance and the Manor.

"That will work," Draco finally said in a curt voice.

Hermione turned to the mirror and found a girl who reminded her of Ginny staring back. She had thick, dark red hair that hung to the middle of her back. Her eyes were bright green, much like Harry's had been. Her nose was a bit longer, and her skin fairer. The freckles that used to be scattered across her nose had disappeared. Her lips were the same and her body the same, though her skin tone had been lightened a smidge to be consistent with her face.

"She's attractive," commented Hermione. She thought she could work with this, and the Veela magic flared a bit.

Draco did not look pleased.

"I suppose," he said a bit begrudgingly.

Hermione rolled her eyes and then stared at her friends whose transformations were ending as well. Ginny's skin had turned chocolatey brown, absolutely flawless with deep eyes that were larger than Ginny's had been. Her hair was in short, tight curls and her cheekbones were high.

"God, you're stunning, Gin," said Hermione in amazement.

"I know, right? I'm way prettier like this," she said, admiring herself in the mirror.

Luna looked like the Patil twins' younger sister, her skin a caramel brown and her black hair pin straight that fell nearly to her waist. She also had dark, liquid eyes that were huge in her face. Hermione, however, could still sense traces of Luna underneath Fara's face. She

retained that air of calm that edged upon dottiness. Hermione supposed that could never be transfigured away.

“We should be going,” said Theo, checking his watch. Blaise and Draco both nodded, looking a little tense.

“Right,” said Draco. “Poppy and Flinky will be here soon to dress you three and arrange your hair and such. I’ve dropped the wards around my study just for tonight so you can floo from that fireplace directly to the servants’ fireplace near the kitchens at the correct time. The floo address is Malfoy Manor – Servant’s Quarters. Do not even think about trying to go anywhere else, because the wards surrounding the Manor will prohibit it, and you’ll be stuck up the chimney. Once you arrive in the servant’s hall, you will be meeting Mrs. Higgins. She’s my head of staff and will be expecting you. Listen to what she tells you to do, but keep a low profile so you don’t draw her attention to you unnecessarily. You each have your marks, so make a point to serve them and after a couple drinks drop the veritaserum. Hermione, tell Theo when yours is done through your bond. Luna and Ginny, either let one of us know directly or tell Hermione, and she’ll let Theo know.”

The girls all nodded.

“Right then, we’ll see you this evening,” he continued. “Don’t do anything stupid, and if it gets to be too much just signal to us, and we’ll pull you. I’d rather miss a dose of veritaserum than attract too much unwanted attention.”

“And the last thing,” said Theo, now jumping in, “is to remember that you can’t save everybody. There may be some boons there – including some people you know. Don’t act like you know who they are. Don’t try to help them. The party tonight should be on the tamer side, but you never know what might happen. You’re to stay in character and do not interfere except to drop veritaserum.”

Hermione felt a sense of forboding wash over her at this warning, and a quick glance at her friends told her they were feeling the same way.

“Theo’s right,” said Draco, doubling down. “If any of you break character, we will be pulling you immediately. Ignore any boons or prostitutes who may show up.”

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. The wizards bid them farewell and left, and then Hermione immediately turned to her friends.

“Boons and prostitutes?” she exclaimed.

Ginny and Luna both looked a bit unnerved. “I suppose it’s to be expected,” said Ginny a bit uncomfortably.

“God that’s not going to be easy,” said Hermione anxiously.

“No, but they are right,” said Luna with surprising firmness. “We can’t break character. I’d wager they’re inviting prostitutes to distract the Death Eaters for us. I suppose they don’t have any control over the boons.”

“Then what the bloody hell was the point of those lessons with Nita?” demanded Hermione with a huff.

Her friends shrugged. “I suppose they want us to know what to do in case the prostitutes are otherwise occupied,” said Ginny wryly.

As it was, the afternoon wore on in a decidedly grimmer manner than it began. Poppy and Flinky soon arrived to arrange the girls’ hair and help them dress in their uniforms for that night.

Luna’s hair was plaited into several small braids that were woven together to hold her hair out of her face, while the rest of it fell in a sheet down her back. Ginny’s hair was decorated with a thick, fabric headband in a black, green, and gold pattern. And Hermione’s was gently curled and left to hang free, though Poppy performed some magic to ensure it would stay out of her face.

Then the elves applied makeup with dark lips and smokey eyes. Hermione wrinkled her nose at the flavor of the ruby red lipstick. It tasted like cherry cough syrup, and she knew she would be tasting it all night. The jewelry came next. All three girls donned their rings, but they were camouflaged with other pieces that were flashier so they would go unnoticed. Luna was adorned with gold bangle bracelets and several necklaces. Ginny had large, chandelier earrings that drew the eye toward her face and neck and two other rings that would surely sparkle in low light. Hermione was given nothing else except a wide choker and small earrings. The choker was gold and studded in tiny emeralds.

Their uniforms followed, and Hermione’s eyes widened when she saw what she was expected to wear. It was a black dress with green and gold piping along the edges, fitted like a second skin. It was strapless and the neckline plunged to a low sweetheart shape that pushed Hermione’s breasts up so they pillowed over the top and displayed ample cleavage. The skirt hit mid-thigh and was just long enough to hide the thigh holsters and knives Poppy and Flinky insisted all three girls wear.

“Well they did say eye-candy,” said Ginny, wrinkling her nose at the outfit in the mirror.

Hermione glanced at her friends who were wearing the same thing, but Hermione knew she was a bit more exposed than they were. Whereas Blaise and Theo had made a point to remove moles and birthmarks on Ginny and Luna that would identify them, Draco had done nothing like that to Hermione. Only her skin tone was a bit lighter than usual. The freckles and beauty marks that dotted her arms and chest were still there. If it wasn’t for the Veela magic telling her she was capable of doing this, Hermione would have felt far too exposed.

The last thing they put on were the shoes. Hermione’s remained the original gold. Ginny’s were charmed green. Luna’s were charmed black.

“Tis time!” announced Poppy with some anxious hand-wringing. “We is to take you to Master’s upper study!”

The girls followed the elves out of the training room and down the hall to a door that had always remained closed. They opened it to find a small, but handsome study, whose walls

were lined with books. Hermione tried to glance at some of the titles as she passed. She noticed several in runes, others in French, and only a handful of titles in English that she could read before they were hurried to the fireplace.

All of the books appeared to be dark, and another sense of foreboding washed over Hermione as she observed it.

Was this the famed Malfoy dark books collection? Or was this just a sampling? Had Hermione's missing books from her beaded bag ended up here?

She tried to find the books about the horcruxes that she had studied so diligently in the tent, but there was no time. Poppy and Flinky were lining them up at the fireplace one by one.

"Malfoy Manor – Servant's Quarters!" they cried one at a time. Hermione went last and stepped out on the other side to find herself in a group of about eight young women, all dressed identically, while elves in pillowcases identical to Poppy's scurried about.

"Gather round," said a stern looking woman who reminded Hermione very much of Madam Pince. She had a beaky nose, sharp eyes, a thin mouth, and her hair was pulled tight into a severe bun. She looked at Hermione, Ginny, and Luna with some skepticism.

"As you all know, I am Mrs. Higgins. We have three new servers joining us tonight, though I've been told that you are aware of your duties. You are to serve the Dark Lord's men upstairs – drink, food, potions – whatever they wish. You will be the only ones on the floor, other than certain guests who may be invited tonight. Keep in mind that you are not to interfere with any of the Death Eaters' pleasure. The boons are the property of the Death Eaters who own them, and any prostitutes who are in attendance have the right to sell themselves to the highest bidder for the evening. As usual, you are permitted to give special attention to any Death Eater who takes a shine to you for tips, though you may not go home with them until Mr. Malfoy calls an end to the party."

The girls nodded, and Hermione's heart began to thud with anticipation.

"Now then, you three who are new will be on drinks, along with Caroline over here," and Mrs. Hughes nodded to a petite blonde. "The rest of you will be on food, circulating through the guests. As always, if a Death Eater asks to be served exclusively by just one of you, we will have to accommodate it."

You can do this Hermione.

Nita's magic flared.

"Off you go," said Mrs. Higgins, clapping her hands. The girls scrambled forward to each collect a small silver tray, and Hermione and her friends hung back a little to follow the veterans through a short hallway and up a flight of stairs, where Hermione could hear music and male laughter floating down the stairwell. At the top they slipped through a large door nearby to find a masculine-looking parlor, with a couple of card tables set up and several low seats and sofas strewn about. The lights were dim, and Hermione scanned the small crowd that had already gathered.

Evidently firewhiskey had been set out while waiting for the servers to arrive to take individual orders. Hermione did a double take when she saw Dolohov seated in one corner with Susan Bones next to him. She was in a sparkly minidress with a collar and chain. Hermione saw some bruises on her neck and arms, and her eyes looked dead. For a moment it was as though the entire room disappeared as Hermione's attention was pulled to her old acquaintance from the D.A.

"We can't," hissed Ginny's voice in her faux American accent behind her. "Not yet."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment and tried to breathe.

She was right. This was so much bigger than Susan.

Still, her stomach was knotted with guilt as Hermione turned away, only to find Malfoy in one corner taking a sip of a drink and staring intently at her. His eyes met hers for only a moment before they dropped slowly, taking in everything about her. He wasn't even pretending to hide the fact that he was looking at her breasts and legs. Hermione felt heat creeping across her as his gaze lingered on her body, but there was that sense of Veela confidence too as she allowed him to stare. Other than that single glance to confirm that she saw him, he was totally ignoring her face.

He seemed unwilling to look away, so Hermione was the one who forced herself to turn around once it had been long enough and make note of who else was there. Rodolphus was in one corner, speaking to Blaise and Theo, both of whom were doing a better job than Draco of ignoring the girls. Crabbe senior was speaking with both Goyles. As Hermione watched, Yaxley arrived with Hannah Abbott, who looked almost as bad as Susan. When Hermione's horrified gaze fell on her, she saw that Hannah's cheek was bruised, as though she had been struck.

Hermione swallowed hard and forced herself to turn away as she approached the group with Rodolphus. He was one of her marks.

"Can I get you anything, sirs?" she asked in a soft voice, dropping her gaze to the floor, just as Nita had taught her.

"Malfoy has a twenty-five year firewhiskey in his cellar," said Theo in a cold voice. "Let's start with that. It will be better than this swill he's trying to offload on us."

"Seconded," said Blaise.

"And me," said Rodolphus, who was watching her with considerably more warmth than either Theo or Blaise. "What's your name, love?"

"Annabelle," she said, gracing him with a small smile and slight jut of the hip. "I'll be back soon, gentlemen."

Hermione turned and caught a glimpse of Draco, who was still staring at her. He wasn't speaking to anybody, but had settled into a chair, his gaze fixed on her as he tracked her progress back to the kitchens.

What is he doing?

He was supposed to be hosting, for heaven's sake. He should be ignoring her, drawing the others into conversation.

She huffed in annoyance, hoping that he would have snapped out of it by the time she returned to the room. She made her way to the kitchens and put in a request with the elves. It took a little searching, but eventually one of them produced a dusty bottle of the requested firewhiskey.

Hermione thanked them and brought the bottle along with three low glasses filled with ice back to the room. As she entered she saw that Draco was still being antisocial in the corner, and once again his eyes locked on her and followed her over to Rodolphus and the others.

Several others had arrived in her absence, including Travers, who was her second mark of the evening.

"The twenty-five year," she said as she approached Theo, Blaise, and Rodolphus. She unscrewed the bottle with a flourish and poured a generous measure into each glass before passing it to each of them. When it was Rodolphus's turn, she intentionally tossed her hair a little and gave him a small smile. The Veela magic thrummed a bit as his eyes gleamed and he accepted the glass.

"Thank you pet. Tell me — how old are you?"

Hermione gave him a flirty smile to play along.

"Oh nineteen now — just barely."

"Such a pretty little thing," he said.

She made herself blush and looked at him through her lashes. "Thank you, Sir. Would you like me to leave the bottle, or would you prefer I top you up?"

"Oh you're welcome to come over here and help us out, pet. As often as you wish."

He winked at her, and Hermione forced herself to give a little laugh as she tossed her hair one more time and turned around to head toward Travers. The Veela magic told her she had Rodolphus well in hand.

As she turned around, however, she nearly stumbled with surprise when she caught sight of another man being antisocial in a different corner who must have arrived while she was flirting with Rodolphus. Severus Snape was in the opposite corner from Draco, staring at her just as intently as he was.

Hermione hurriedly averted her gaze and made a beeline for Travers, who had joined the group with Yaxley and Hannah Abbott.

"...hundred galleons to share tonight?" she heard him say. "I heard Malfoy and Zabini are sharing all the time now. I haven't the blunt that Dolohov demands for his."

Again, Hermione almost tripped as she realized Travers was asking Yaxley to purchase Hannah for the evening. She forced herself not to look at the resignation on Hannah's face. It was almost worse than seeing fear or loathing.

This had happened to her before.

"Sorry to interrupt, is there anything I can fetch for you?" she asked, forcing a terrible false smile on her face. Not even the Veela magic could break through the disgust and revulsion she was feeling for the two men in front of her.

Unlike Rodolphus, they barely glanced at her, which came as a relief. "Elf wine," said Travers.

"Gin for me," said Yaxley. "And my boon requires a contraceptive. She will be working tonight."

Hermione went pale and didn't even bother to respond, but just bobbed and hurried back to the kitchen. As she moved across the floor, dual gazes — one black, one gray — followed her every move.

She was feeling sick now as she conveyed the order to the elves and hurried back to the party to pass out drinks. Travers and Yaxley both ignored her, which was the only positive thing she could say about it. Spiking Travers' drink would be simple and would require no help from Nita. He was far more interested in Hannah than Hermione.

As she passed Hannah the potion, Hermione's eyes met hers and softened with sympathy. Hannah, however, gave her a hard look back, almost defiant. It was surprisingly firm, and Hermione made a point to brush Hannah's hand in solidarity as she passed her the contraceptive potion. There were so many things she wanted to say to her: be strong, be fierce, they may take your body but they will never take *you*.

But the warnings from Theo, Draco, and Mrs. Higgins echoed through her mind. She couldn't be caught interfering. Hannah could not be saved tonight. Hermione felt a lump rise in her throat and she made herself choke it back as she stepped away.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Rodolphus already making his way to the bottom of his first drink, and she was about to wander over to him when she caught Snape's eye as she turned. He made a gesture to her that she should approach him.

This was *not* part of the plan. Hermione wasn't even aware he would be here tonight. He certainly wasn't one of the marks for any of the three girls, and Draco was reluctant to say very much about him whenever she asked.

Hermione knew he was still working to undermine Voldemort, but she had no idea if he was aware that she was still alive or if he had been involved at all after tricking Voldemort with the fake ritual.

She walked toward him, thinking quickly. If there was one Death Eater in the room who might see through her disguise it was Snape. He knew her well, though admittedly it had

been a full year since they had really interacted with each other. Draco had not bothered to change her voice as part of her disguise – a huge oversight in retrospect.

Hermione made the split-second decision to mimic Hagrid's accent in an effort to throw him off the scent and hope that between that and Nita's magic she would be able to get through this interaction.

"Will yeh be wantin' anythin' Sir?" she asked. Hermione almost stumbled over the last word, as she fought the instinct to call him Professor.

"Who are you?" he asked, and Hermione felt the lightest brush of legilimency against her mind. Immediately she started to occlude, reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood in her head. She saw his eyes narrow, and she felt herself break out into a sweat.

"Annabelle, Sir. I'm new. Will yeh want a drink or summat? We've got a nice brandy."

God this was not how Hagrid talked. Hermione was going to bollocks this up, Veela magic or not.

He ignored her question. "Are you a Mudblood, Annabelle?"

"Squib," she said automatically, while her mind moved to ancient runes, and she began to recite *Tales of Beedle the Bard* to herself in the original language she had memorized from Dumbledore's copy. She felt another soft prod of legilimency.

"Oh I think not," said Snape softly. "You seem... very well educated."

Shit.

Of course. Her occlumency strategy was a veritable data dump of magical theory and facts. These were things most squibs would never learn. She made a sudden shift to muggle things and began to recite Shakespeare in her mind, landing on the first play she could think of.

"Not sure what yeh mean, Sir. Just me mam – err, mum – and pa who taught me. Fore they disowned me, I mean," she added.

Christ, she was bad at this. Her natural accent was rather close to Draco's. And here she was trying to speak like Hagrid while mixing in phrases that Seamus Finnigan — who was Irish — might use.

Absolutely nobody talked like this.

She felt another pass at legilimency.

"*A Winter's Tale?*" he asked in dark amusement. "That's a fascinating choice."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She was named after a character in *A Winter's Tale*. Why on earth had her brain picked that play out of the dozen she had partially memorized as a child?

She immediately switched to *Macbeth*.

“Ah yes, the witches,” agreed Snape, his smile broadening. It was one of the most disconcerting things Hermione had ever seen. “That’s better.”

“I’m sorry Sir, I have no notion what yeh mean. If yeh’ll be needin’ a drink? Otherwise I must be gettin’ on to the others.”

“Of course, Annabelle. You simply remind me of somebody, that’s all. She was quite... extraordinary while she was alive.”

“Oh?” she asked tightly.

“Yes. The hair and eyes are a perfect match.”

Now Hermione was confused. She was certain Snape had seen through her and figured out he was talking to Hermione. But she wasn’t a redhead with green eyes. Hermione had no idea what was going on. She had to get out of there.

“Thank yeh, sir,” she said quickly. “I’d best be movin’ on.”

“Come find me when you have a break, and we can chat a bit more,” he said as she backed away.

She gave him a tight smile, but didn’t answer. She absolutely would *not* be speaking to him again if she could help it. She felt so very wrong-footed and on edge, and not even the little boost of confidence from the Veela magic had been enough to make her feel like she had handled herself. Thank goodness she had it though — who knows how much worse it would have been without it. She probably would have spiraled into a true panic the moment he started legilimency and stuttered at him incoherently.

Theo, she said, reaching out to him through their bond. Is Snape safe? I just had a very unsettling conversation with him.

She saw Theo pause as he took a sip of his drink, and his eyes found hers.

We know he’s working to undermine the Dark Lord, but his work with the Order is classified, and we don’t know enough about it to trust him. Don’t reveal yourself to him.

I tried not to. He did some legilimency on me though and knew I was lying about who I was. He could tell I wasn’t a squib.

Fuck. Do you need Draco to pull you?

No, but he asked me to come back and talk to him later. Do I have to do that?

No. Do two more rounds of drinks and spike the second round. Then go to Draco and let him pull you. Snape won’t expect to speak to you after that.

Okay.

Be safe.

She broke the connection as she made her way back to Rodolphus. Theo had moved away toward Draco, but Blaise was still with him.

Rodolphus practically lit up as she arrived, and the Veela magic seemed to settle a bit as it sensed an interested wizard.

“Can I top you off?” she asked, reaching for their glasses. Blaise handed his glass over first and then Rodolphus followed.

“Take a sip for yourself love,” Rodolphus offered. “It’s wonderful stuff. And leave some of that lipstick on the glass for me.”

Hermione blinked in surprise, but the Veela magic intervened and told her she could do this. She passed Blaise his glass back and then pressed her lips to Rodolphus’s and pretended to take a sip before handing it back over. He gave her a lazy smile, and his fingers touched hers as he accepted the glass.

She gave him a slow smirk. Her mark was eating out of her palm like this.

“I’ll be back to check on you boys in a few minutes,” she said with a flirty wink. Rodolphus grinned just as the floo turned green and three heavily made up women stepped out onto the threshold. They were not in uniform like the waitresses, nor were they in cocktail dresses like Hannah and Susan.

They were in lingerie. Very small, very sheer lingerie.

All three seemed perfectly at ease in a room full of dressed men, and they looked around to gauge the interest of those in attendance. To Hermione’s chagrin she noticed Rodolphus looking at the three before his gaze slid back to her and fixed there instead. Travers had perked up a little, but he soon refocused on Hannah. Draco, she couldn’t help but notice, didn’t even look at them. His gaze had not wavered from her the entire evening.

Yaxley, however, gestured for them to come over, and she saw the Goyles doing the same.

She tried not to shudder.

As she started to head back toward Travers, she caught Draco’s eye. Theo was sitting with him now, but Draco was pointedly ignoring him as he was sprawled in a low-slung chair. His expression was a bit challenging as he pulled out the hair ribbon she had given to him the night before and began to twirl it around his fingers lazily while his eyes bored into hers.

What on earth is he doing?

Hermione glanced around to see if anybody else noticed, and she gave him a fierce glare. But he just raised one eyebrow and continued to play with the ribbon.

Feeling irritated now, she made her way toward Travers. “Can I offer you a refill?”

“Go on then,” he said, and Hermione took his glass to pour his second drink.

She handed it back to him and topped up Yaxley too before deciding there was nothing for it. She would have to approach Draco.

She moved toward him, and his gaze swept over her from head to toe as she approached.

“What is wrong with you?” she said under her breath as she leaned toward him, as though offering him a drink.

“Merely observing your methods,” he said in a cold voice.

She scowled.

“You’re going to bugger this whole thing up if you don’t stop staring. Go oggle the prostitutes.”

“Is that what you want me to do? Look at them instead of you?”

Hermione flushed. No, that wasn’t what she wanted. The fact that nearly naked women were making their rounds and heading his direction made her uncomfortable and even a little angry. But what he was doing instead was completely reckless.

“I don’t care what you do, but you need to stop *this*.”

She pulled away from him. “I’m going to presume you did *not* place a drink order,” she said coldly as she turned to move back to the middle of the room. She nearly came face to face with a blonde in a sheer negligee. Hermione could clearly see her nipples through it as the woman stepped around her.

“Do either of you fancy a tumble?” she asked both Draco and Theo. Hermione couldn’t help but freeze to hear their answers.

Theo declined, but Draco’s voice drawled, “Ask me later. It depends on how *well behaved* a certain acquaintance of mine is tonight.”

Hermione fought to control her temper. She knew he was bating her. They had already arranged that all three girls would ‘go home’ with the three wizards for appearances.

“Poncey prick,” she muttered, trying hard not to feel the sting of tears in the corner of her eye. She heard the prostitute move on, and Hermione willed her feet to trudge back toward Rodolphus. The next drink would be spiked, and then she could be done with him.

She straightened up and marched over to him, throwing him a flirty smile as she did it. At least *he* was easy and far less difficult to manage than his nephew in the corner.

She passed Blaise, who seemed to be heading toward Malfoy too, and he threw a wink at her. As she passed the door to the stairwell that led to the kitchens, Ginny was emerging with a determined glint on her face.

Apparently Hermione wasn't the only one with a Death Eater who was ready for his third drink.

"Annabelle," said Rodolphus as she approached. "Might I bother you for another? My friend may want a top off too. He just stepped away to speak to somebody else for a moment."

"Certainly, Sir," she said as she took the glass from him and turned to pour from the firewhiskey she had left on a nearby ledge. Hermione willed her breathing to be steady and leaned on Nita's magic. This was it. It was time for the slight of hand she had practiced over and over again. The moment she needed to distract him was upon her.

She gripped the glass over the top with her ring suspended over it and turned to hand it back to him. She caught Rodolphus's eye and had a moment of inspiration based on their previous interaction. She pretended to take another sip, and his pupils expanded to see her do it unprompted.

"Wonderful," she said with a smile as she leaned forward and placed her free hand on the small coffee table in front of him, which she knew would make her breasts fall forward and give him a perilous view.

She should be shaking in her very high heels, but she wasn't. She was playing him exactly as she had been taught. Every bit of confidence from Nita welled up inside of her.

Sure enough, his gaze dropped precisely where Nita assured her it would, and Hermione wordlessly and wandlessly opened the little trap door in her ring. She waited a full three seconds to ensure it was done. His gaze did not waver from her chest as she placed the drink on the table and slid it slowly toward him.

"I hope you find it as delicious as I did," she said.

He licked his lips. "If you would like some extra galleons tonight love, find me at the end. I do enjoy showing a pretty girl like yourself a good time."

She rewarded him with a mysterious smile and then turned away.

Rodolphus is done, she called to Theo in her mind.

We're on it, he said.

Hermione looked toward him and saw he was now alone with Blaise. Draco and his fixed stare had disappeared, thank God, and Theo was making his way toward her. As he passed he gave her a small brush on her shoulder. Those who didn't know better would have said it was flirty. Hermione knew it was a gesture of encouragement.

She approached Travers next. Just one more, and he would be even simpler than Rodolphus. He had largely ignored her all night.

Hermione's stomach rolled as she saw that Hannah was now on his lap, and Traver's hand was under her skirt. Hannah looked like she wanted to be anywhere but here.

“Sir, can I top you up?”

He turned around in surprise and his hand stilled its progression. “Oh, no. I’d actually like to switch. Can you fetch a G&T?”

“Of course,” she said quickly.

This would be even easier. She could spike it on the way back from the kitchens.

She moved through the door and alighted down the stairs. As soon as she reached the landing, she felt a hand dart out from the darkness and clasp her around her wrist.

Hermione acted on instinct, and her brain went on autopilot as she pulled the knife from her thigh holster and spun toward her opponent, shoving him with all her strength against the nearby wall as the knife went to his neck.

A familiar, silver gaze was staring down at her, completely ignoring the knife she was holding to his throat. Instead, he appeared angry with her and a little desperate.

She nearly pulled the knife away, but then thought better of it, just in case.

“Who am I?” she asked.

“Like this? Annabelle,” he spat, and Hermione pressed the knife into his throat a bit more. Any harder and he would start bleeding, but he completely ignored it. Instead, he held up the ribbon and dangled it in her face.

“But with this? Hermione.”

Hermione huffed out an irritated breath and backed away, pulling the knife with her and reholstering it.

“What the hell were you thinking? I nearly killed you!”

Draco ignored her. “I’m pulling you. Right now.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re done here.”

“But Travers—”

“Fuck Travers, I don’t care about him. You are coming with me *now*.”

“But—”

“Tell Theo through your bond. He and Blaise can end the party when they are done interrogating the others for me. I’ve already informed Mrs. Higgins I’m taking you with me.”

He grabbed her hand tightly and started pulling her through a maze of hallways and corridors.

“Draco, *stop* and explain!” she demanded, but he ignored her and just pulled her hand harder.

Soon realizing she was totally lost and would never find her way back to the party without him, she knew there wasn’t anything she could do but reach out to Theo like he asked.

Theo, Draco is pulling me for some asinine reason. I don’t know what’s gotten into him, but I think he’s taking me back to my room. He said you and Blaise can end the party whenever you’re done talking to the others. I didn’t get to Travers, but he had just asked for a G&T from the kitchens. Ginny or Luna should be able to spike it easily.

Heard. I’m surprised he lasted that long, came Theo’s voice. It sounded amused. Hermione huffed in annoyance and severed the connection.

Before long she was entering the wing of the Manor that she knew through a back staircase, and Draco was pulling her through the main door and then down the hall to her room. He flung open her door and practically shoved her inside of it before stalking in after her.

“Tell me what the hell has gotten into you!” she demanded.

He didn’t respond, but just raised his wand toward her and snarled, “*Finite incantatem.*”

Hermione felt her features shift, and in her peripheral vision her hair turned brown and curly again. Draco’s eyes shone with something like fury as he strode toward her.

“Put this back on,” he demanded as he shoved the ribbon into her hand.

“Pardon?”

“I said put it back on. I can’t... you aren’t... fuck, I wanted to *stab* them...”

“Who?” she asked in confusion.

He looked at her like she was daft.

“Rodolphus. Severus. Crabbe Senior too – he was watching you, though you didn’t seem to notice. And you also caught Pucey’s eye. I made you far too pretty. And you’re wearing that *thing*.”

His gaze once again swept over her dress as he sneered.

“You mean my assigned uniform as a member of *your* staff?” she cut in as she quickly snatched the ribbon from him.

“Nobody on my staff has *ever* attracted that much attention before. I have no idea why it—”

He cut himself off as he noticed her deep blush.

“*What did you do?*”

“Nothing!” she insisted.

“*Hermione...*”

She huffed. “It was just a little Veela magic! Nita said it wouldn’t be strong or make those who weren’t attracted to me notice me... and it didn’t! Traver’s barely looked my way! Besides, it was just supposed to give me some confidence!”

Draco closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as though praying for patience. “She will be removing whatever spell she placed on you tomorrow,” he gritted out before opening his eyes and staring down at her balefully. “Now put that *fucking* ribbon back in your hair!”

Hermione scrambled to pull back a few curls and tied the ribbon in. She wasn’t thrilled about following his orders when he was in this sort of mood, but his temper was so volatile she didn’t dare object.

A muscle in his jaw twitched, as his eyes dropped to her form again, lingering at the choker around her neck and the upper swell of her breasts over the low top.

When he saw the ribbon was back in place, he reached up to trace the choker.

“I gave this to you for a reason,” he said darkly.

Hermione’s mouth had gone dry. “Oh?”

“To signal to the others that you aren’t their plaything. To remind you of this.”

He touched her throat gently again, and Hermione’s eyes fluttered closed instinctively.

“Yes...” he whispered as his thumb traced its way up to her ear. “Just like that...”

She felt him step closer, and that familiar scent of him was in her nose, making her head light. “Did any of them touch you?” he asked in a dangerous voice.

Hermione hesitated for a split second too long before saying, “No.”

“Who?” he asked, obviously picking up on her hesitation. “Which one?”

She sighed in defeat.

“Rodolphus brushed my fingers with his. That’s all.”

“Did he invite you into his bed?” he asked bluntly.

Hermione was silent, unable to lie but unwilling to tell the truth.

He seemed to take her silence for confirmation, because something shifted in the air around him, and Hermione thought the room must have plunged several degrees.

He was unstable like this, teetering toward violence. Some part of her wanted to rail at him for being so bloody maddening and hypocritical. It was *his* plan after all. She had simply

done her job and used some magic from Nita to help her get through the night. Was it *her* fault Rodolphus propositioned her? Of course not, that was the entire point – to get him off his guard. And yet, Hermione was afraid of the kind of damage Draco might do, intentionally or unintentionally, if she couldn't find a way to quickly soothe his temper.

She tried something she had never done before and reached up to cup *his* cheek. Nita's lingering magic seemed to hum a little at the contact. His skin was rough under her palm with a shadow of stubble. The gesture took him by such surprise that he stopped scowling.

"He didn't hurt me," she said, trying to mimic the slow soothing voice he liked to use on her. "He didn't scare me. And he disgusted me. It was to be expected, Draco. I was laying it on really thick so he wouldn't suspect what I was doing, and I was leaning heavily on Nita's magic at the same time. I'm not surprised he suggested it."

Draco's eyes closed, and Hermione sensed him fighting for composure.

"He made you drink from his glass. Then he tasted your lipstick after you left. Blaise told me all about it. Rodolphus said your lips tasted divine."

Hermione's stomach turned at this, and Draco opened his eyes to find her wrinkling her nose.

"Well first of all, I only pretended to drink, I'm not stupid. Second, this lipstick is rather vile if you must know. It's flavored, which is a bit strange, and it tastes strongly of cherry. I don't care for it at all. I suppose Annabelle has to wear it to maintain the fiction, but Hermione doesn't. I can assure you, my lips don't taste like this."

With that Hermione released his face and used the back of her hand to swipe some of the lipstick off. She was sure it was smeared on her face now, but Draco didn't seem to notice. He grasped her hand and stared at the red streak on the back of it for a full ten seconds before raising it slowly to his face. He didn't kiss it, he *smelled* it.

"Cherry," he confirmed. "Not orange blossom."

Hermione's heart skipped.

"No," she said quietly. "Definitely not orange blossom."

Draco picked up his wand with his free hand and pointed it at the ruby smear.

"*Evanesco*," he whispered. It vanished, and then he did it to her face. That pungent taste of cherry that had been lingering about her all evening finally disappeared.

"Much better," she said with a small smile.

He exhaled and nodded.

"Look," she said. "We'll need to try this again..."

He gave her a fierce look, but she pressed on. "We *will*, Draco. We both know it. I've done it once now so next time I suppose I can forego the Veela magic and be a little less

flirtatious. Meanwhile, it would be great if *you* didn't stare at me all night and then ask the prostitutes to check in on you."

A flash of guilt crossed his face, and it was such an unexpected expression Hermione blinked. This was a man who tortured, maimed, and killed. He didn't feel guilt.

And yet, Hermione was sure that was what she had just seen.

"I wouldn't have," he said. "I was... reacting."

She pursed her lips for a moment, but gave him a curt nod. She had no claim on him, she knew that. She didn't *really* have any right to be angry. But she had been, and she was glad he knew it.

"Alright," she said, trying to dispel her frustration. Being angry with him wouldn't get them anywhere. "We just need to... rethink the next one."

"Rethink. Right," he sighed, dropping his forehead to hers.

Then she heard him add in a low voice, "Because the next one who touches you is losing a hand."

She shivered. "You weren't like this in school," she murmured.

"Wasn't I?"

"No. At least I don't *think* you were..."

"Potter and Weasley were good deterrents. They usually kept the less savory ones away from you."

"You hated them."

"True. But you didn't. That makes a difference."

"You're so maddening. I don't understand it."

He lifted his head and looked down at her again.

"You don't have to understand it. You just have to keep in mind that the next one who touches you or invites you into his bed will experience... severe consequences."

She looked at him warily. "Perhaps you'd best move along and let the others know that you and Blaise have traded boons then. I could go like that instead."

He hummed at this. "You'd like that? Being with me all night?"

She turned a little pink. "It's better than serving drinks I suppose."

He huffed a little. "Soon. We've been getting questions about you two and will have to bring you out eventually. There's no good way for you to do reconnaissance in that form though."

Hermione frowned as she realized he was right.

“Maybe we can alternate,” she suggested. “Boons one week and waitstaff the next.”

He reached up to twirl a curl around his finger.

“That could have some merit. I’ll think about it.”

She nodded, as he stepped back.

“It’s getting late. You should get to bed,” he said, stepping toward his door.

When he got there he turned back and took one last long look at her. He seemed to shudder before turning around and heading through the door.

“Draco—” she started.

But he didn’t look back. He simply called over his shoulder, “This is nothing like a crush Granger,” and then the door closed behind him.

Chapter 15: Fire

Chapter Notes

We all remember that Draco is kind of crazy and willing to cross some lines to get what he wants, right? Okay, great 👍

Also, this is a general content warning that all of the characters in this fic are morally gray to some degree, not just Draco. This will become increasingly apparent, starting with this chapter.

Nita appeared in Hermione's room nearly the moment she woke the next morning and removed the Veela magic with a wry smile.

"I told Draco it did nothing more than enhance your natural abilities, my dear, but I'm afraid he insists. Do try to remember what it was like for your next mission. I doubt he will let me cast it again, but I can assure you it's not necessary. Your charm is all your own, and the magic just made you aware of it."

Hermione appreciated the encouraging words. Still, with that lovely balloon of confidence punctured, Hermione spent much of the morning dwelling on the party and all the things she *hadn't* done.

She hadn't dosed Travers. She hadn't been able to help Hannah or Susan. She hadn't made any mental notes about which Death Eaters would be easy marks for acquiring a wand eventually – *other* than Rodolphus of course, though she knew from experience he was a rather competent duelist so he was not her first choice. She hadn't seen any part of the Manor except for the kitchen, a small part of the servant's hall, and the large parlor where the party was held. There had been no opportunity to wander or explore or even *flirt* with anybody except for her marks and Snape — though even with the Veela magic that had been almost disastrous. Draco's eyes had been on her at nearly every moment, twirling her ribbon around his fingers which served as a terrible distraction.

She didn't think the Veela magic could be blamed for his keen attention to her, unfortunately. He was largely immune to it.

It was incredibly frustrating. She would never advance her *own* mission if all the parties were like that. Once Draco started bringing her out as a boon her freedom would be even more restricted. After the previous night she now knew that the boons stayed with their Death Eaters at all times, unless bargained away.

And Draco would never bargain her away.

She had no immediate solution to this. Her initial excitement at being sent on a mission had morphed into a commitment to do some reconnaissance for her own purposes. But even with the boost from Nita it had been entirely fruitless, and she could not envision how another dozen parties would produce any better results. Draco was too careful, making sure she was always watched and confined to a few small rooms with no good opportunity to leave.

Perhaps the Death Eaters weren't the answer.

As she mulled this over, a different plan started to materialize in her mind. Her chosen animagus form – assuming she could manage it – would be used to spy on garden parties. She recalled what Draco said about wizards typically being excluded. Hermione suspected he wouldn't let her go alone, not *really*. He would surely come up with some way to keep an eye on her. But as a bird she would be expected to flit around and listen in on conversations, and that would give her some freedom. As a bird she might be able to catch a witch alone and seize the moment to transform and overpower her before taking her wand and obliterating her.

Hermione wouldn't need a wand to achieve an animagus form – that was the entire reason Sirius had managed it in Azkaban, after all – but she also knew that wands could be incorporated into their forms just like clothing could. Most animagus *did* carry wands all the time, and it would be little use to transform into an animal if one's wand couldn't come along too.

Yes, a garden party would give her more opportunities for it. She would have a way to disappear from Draco. Her target would be somebody frail or weak who was obviously *not* trained in combat like she was. Even if it didn't work perfectly for her, any wand would be better than no wand.

Keeping the wand hidden from Draco and learning how to cast an *Avada Kedavra* without him finding out about it would be another problem for a different day. The wand had to come first. And that meant she needed to focus on her animagi transformation and continue to build trust with Draco by attending the Death Eater parties as a waitress or boon. She shouldn't push his temper or needle him the way she had the night before. The garden parties wouldn't be as dangerous as the Death Eater events, but they would necessarily involve more freedom than anything he had granted her thus far. She needed him to trust her.

Training the next morning was cut short to discuss the mission from the night before. Despite the fact that the party had been nearly useless as far as Hermione was concerned, she did find herself intensely curious about the things Theo and Blaise had learned.

"It's as you suspected," Theo said, looking at Draco after glancing at the three girls. "Rodolphus is plotting to take your position, and there are rumblings that you and Blaise are being swayed by your boons since nobody has seen them. There are only a few others who have kept their boons totally hidden away... including me, I suppose."

Hermione went cold and exchanged glances with the girls, who were both pale.

Draco, however, didn't look too worried about that. "We'll bring them out in a few weeks. Maybe Luna can go with you to the next one as your boon. Blaise and I are close to making the switch official."

Theo nodded, looking a bit relieved by that. "I think so. It would be better if all three of us didn't bring our boons out at the same time."

Draco nodded before turning to the other piece of information Theo had disclosed. "And Rodolphus? What is he planning?"

Theo bit his lip. "A raid. One you're not supposed to know about until the very last minute. Crabbe is in on it, and so is Avery. The others didn't know about it. We managed to subtly obliviate Rodolphus, Crabbe, and Avery after speaking to them. They won't remember telling us."

Hermione felt the tiniest measure of relief at that.

"Where is the raid?" asked Draco, eyes narrowed.

Theo sighed. "The Burrow."

Ginny gasped, and Theo looked at her apologetically.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It relates back to the boons though. Rodolphus doesn't like that Draco has risen higher than him, and he's been trying to find a way to discredit him. Even though Draco and Blaise are about to switch boons, there are rumors that Draco has been compromised by you. Blaise too. Out of all the boons, you were the biggest prize and the one most obviously aligned with the Order. Plenty of Death Eaters have some fondness for their boons, but being fond of *you*..."

He trailed off and looked away.

Ginny looked pale and turned pleading eyes toward the three wizards. Theo wasn't meeting her gaze. Blaise was looking a bit tense. Draco, however, had a speculative look on his face as he leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head.

"Let me guess – he's going to tell me about it right before it happens and see if I warn them?"

"Essentially," said Theo.

Draco snorted. "Weak."

Ginny's face was starting to regain some color now, as she watched Draco. "Why?" she asked. "You *can't* warn them, right? Or that will confirm his suspicions? And I know what Blaise is always saying... you all don't have a choice, but..."

Draco glanced at her. She looked distraught.

"Rodolphus is an idiot, and his plan will not work. Your family will be safe this time. Although... it would probably be best if we don't save the house. I don't want our loyalties

questioned again when it comes to you three.”

Ginny blinked. “That’s fine,” she breathed. “That’s alright. The Burrow is my home, but... my family matters more.”

Draco nodded. “In that case, the solution is simple.”

“And what’s that?” she asked, but Blaise and Theo looked like they already knew where this was headed.

“We swap your parents for some muggles – *tonight* if possible – and then Blaise and I will go and burn the house down with the imposters inside of it. One of us will pull the bodies out once the fire is done, and we’ll bring them to the Dark Lord. Rodolphus’s plan will be mucked up, and nobody will think you have compromised us.”

All three witches froze, and Hermione’s heart started to race at the casual mention of murdering a couple of unlucky muggles.

“I don’t think –” she started, but she was interrupted by Ginny.

“Yes,” said Ginny, looking paler than ever. “Do it. Please.”

“Alright,” said Draco comfortably. “Anything else?”

“*Wait,*” insisted Hermione. “You can’t just do that! The Burrow is under a fidelius! It has muggle repelling wards!”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Arthur is the Secret Keeper. He wrote down the address in a letter to Ginny ages ago. All three of us know where it is. And bringing down muggle repelling wards is simple, you know that.”

Hermione stilled, as Ginny blushed.

“Then how will Rodolphus...” she started.

Malfoy shrugged. “I’d wager he plans to catch Arthur with an imperius at the edge of the property. The Death Eaters have known the location for ages. Don’t you remember that wedding? It’s been raided before, they just can’t see it while it’s under a fidelius. If Arthur puts a toe outside of the boundaries, then Rodolphus will *make* him disclose the address. Even if it’s Molly who leaves he could imperius her and coax Arthur out that way. It’s been done before, it just takes a little patience.”

Hermione swallowed hard and just nodded. She knew he was right. She, Harry, and Ron left their warded house and tent multiple times. The Weasley’s really weren’t the type to go into permanent hiding. Arthur might be caught in a skirmish or even getting provisions in Ottery St. Catchpole. It was only a matter of time before Rodolphus could get in.

Blaise began to question Ginny about the Burrow’s layout and other places her parents could hide, but Draco wasn’t listening.

“Don’t worry about it, Hermione,” he said softly. “It will be simple.”

“But you are going to kill some muggles and...” she trailed off feeling ill.

“It’s alright. It would upset Ginny if they died. It would upset *you* if they died. You know it isn’t their time to go.”

She knew he was right, but she still didn’t like it.

“Don’t think about it,” he said. “We’ll handle it this afternoon. You and the others should study your animagus theory. I want to brew the potion to start the transformations tomorrow.”

This news was enough to distract her from Draco’s immediate plans.

“You caught a bird then?”

“I did,” he said. “It’s a surprise.”

“I’d like to know what I’ll be killing,” she said grimly.

“No, no,” he chided. “Not until it’s time. You’re too softhearted, and you will dwell on it. Put it aside for now, and we’ll talk more about it tomorrow.”

He was utterly infuriating.

“Draco, I don’t like *any* of this,” she insisted.

He sighed and gave her a tired sort of smile. “I’ll tell you what. I promise to *Avada* the muggles before we burn the house down. And I’ll make sure you have a calming draught for the bird tomorrow. Will that help?”

He was looking at her with such earnest concern that she closed her eyes and prayed for patience. Once again, she wondered why he didn’t scare her. Evidently his original plan was to burn the house down while the muggles were still *alive*. Killing them humanely first was a compromise to make her feel better about it.

“Yes,” she said, because what else could she say? She wouldn’t risk the Weasleys, and heaven help her but she wouldn’t risk Draco, or even Blaise, either. If they didn’t have bodies to produce then Rodolphus could still argue they were compromised.

That simply couldn’t happen.

“Excellent,” he murmured, raising her hand to kiss the back of it again. “You’re far too sweet for all of this, but you’re doing so well with it. Now be good for me and study this afternoon, okay? I want to see that brilliant mind of yours full of animagi theory the next time I peek into it.”

Heat bloomed, and Hermione blushed.

She hated how much she liked him.

The wizards left soon after lunch. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna tried to browbeat their brains into animagi theory while they waited for a report. They had a tense tea, and finally around six o'clock the wizards returned with Hermione's beaded bag in tow, which Draco tossed to Ginny.

"I reached out to my contact with the Order, and they evacuated your parents and George to your Aunt Muriel's. They had emergency bags packed, but we took a couple hours to strip the house like you asked and put everything else in that bag. Their muggle replacements are already dead and waiting for us in the sitting room. We'll burn the place down after we have dinner with my mother. The fire will be more dramatic at night."

With that announcement the wizards left to dress for their standing weekly Sunday dinner while the witches gaped at each other.

Hermione snapped out of it first. "Let me see that," she demanded, as she pulled her beaded bag toward her. She hadn't seen it since the Battle of Hogwarts.

She peered inside of it and exclaimed, "My God, half of the Burrow is in here!"

Sure enough, Hermione pulled out some familiar cookbooks, a Weasley knitted blanket, and even the family clock. She watched as a tear rolled down Ginny's cheek as she touched it.

"I'm so grateful to them," she said quietly.

"They're about to burn down your home, Ginny," said Hermione with some disapproval.

Ginny sniffed. "That's alright. They saved the sentimental things, and everyone will be safer at Muriel's anyway. It's not as grand as Malfoy Manor, but it's just as old and the wards are excellent. They should have moved in with her a year ago, but they were just stubborn. Mum and Dad can rebuild the Burrow if it ever becomes safe again."

Hermione softened at this and pulled Ginny in for a hug.

"You're right," she said. "Of course you're right. I'm glad they are okay."

Dinner was much less tense than tea knowing that the only thing left to do was to burn the Burrow down. Hermione didn't think that would pose as much of an issue as getting the Weasleys to leave in the first place. But the things the wizards had already done and would soon be doing were weighing on her mind.

She told herself the Weasleys were worth it.

“Draco, I expect you to escort Astoria to the autumn gala. It is coming up in a month, you know.”

“Mother, I’ve told you a dozen times I have no interest in her.”

Draco exchanged knowing looks with Theo and Blaise. Nita was absent tonight, but this had been a recurring theme at their weekly dinners on and off for ages now.

“Nonsense, you two are perfectly suited. She’s a better match than... any others.”

“Everyone at this table knows who I want, Mother. There is no need to be coy.”

“My dear, you know it’s not possible. She’s —”

“My sister,” cut in Theo tersely. “She deserves more than being a boon, Aunt Cissy. You know that.”

Narcissa sighed. “I’ll not deny it. But that’s her lot, and it will be until further notice. You can’t possibly mean to tie with her, Draco. The Dark Lord would never allow it, and it would draw unnecessary attention to her true identity.”

Draco felt a muscle in his jaw twitch, as he fell silent. His mother may be right in the near term, but Hermione was *his* now. It was true he had only kissed her on the hand, but he told himself it wouldn’t be long before she was ready for more. She was softening toward him day by day. And he was willing to be patient and take as much time as she needed to be ready. She was the only one he had ever wanted.

Draco knew he was in love with her. He had been for a long time, and it wasn’t any great secret. Hermione might not be aware of it just yet, but every person at the dinner table knew how he felt.

In Draco’s view, the only person who had *any* right to object was Theo, and even that was debatable. Besides, Theo was in full support, so in Draco’s mind there should be no barriers to tie with the witch he loved other than those put up by Hermione herself. He was wearing her down though, he was sure of it. She was learning that Draco was always good to her. He provided for her. He anticipated her every need and took exceptional care of her. His sweet girl was a Gryffindor at heart, and she was the type who wanted to see acts of service before she was convinced.

Draco had committed to serving her in every single way a man could serve a woman long ago. Everything he did — *every single fucking thing he did* — was to make sure she was safe and comfortable. He wanted her to lean on him and need him. She had to learn to trust him and be content. He needed to be the center of her world because she was certainly the center of his.

She was noticing his efforts, too. He often caught her blushing at his attentions, and her gaze hovered on him persistently now. Even when they argued, he often sensed an underlying fondness to it. It was only a matter of time at this point, so why shouldn't Draco be thinking about the steps he would need to take to have her exactly the way he wanted her? With enough time and careful planning even the Dark Lord could be managed.

Draco said nothing more for the rest of the meal, but as he rose his mother stopped him.

"Draco, I have no objections in keeping her here as your boon. I know you care about the girl, and she's safe here with you. But you *must* accept that there are certain expectations for you to fulfill when it comes to your lineage and your public facing role. Please don't make me take matters into my own hands."

"You wouldn't," he insisted.

His mother sighed, and her usual melancholy seemed to settle around her. "I certainly don't want to. I ask that you please not put me in the position to make such a difficult choice."

Draco's jaw clenched again, but he gave a curt nod, and Narcissa seemed to slump with relief. Draco didn't react. Of course he was not going to put his mother in that position because the choice was not hers to begin with. It never had been.

"I must be going," he said coldly.

"Oh?"

"Theo, Blaise, and I have to burn down the Burrow."

His mother's eyes widened in shock. "But the Weasleys...."

"They've been evacuated and replaced by muggles. It's fine."

His mother's hand darted out and clenched his arm. "How many, Draco? How many people will die before you stop?"

"However many it takes until I get what I want."

Narcissa released him and took a step back and then another. She was trembling. "Don't become him," she whispered.

Draco's face darkened. He hated the thing his mother was implying. It was poisonous.

"I'm not," he said curtly. "I'm greater than he ever was."

Tears filled her eyes as she turned away. Normally Draco would try to soothe her, but he had no patience for it tonight. The others were waiting for him. Draco strode toward the door, leaving his mother looking shaken. He hated it, but he would only frighten her more if he stayed. He was feeling too volatile after the comments about Astoria to trust his temper around her. He needed to cool down first.

He glanced back as he left the dining room and saw her face turning uncharacteristically resolute. It made him pause for a split second.

Would she really force the issue?

It wouldn't be in character for her at all. His mother had always been the docile sort. She had a spine and could exert her superiority around the other wives, certainly, but she knew what was expected of her and had always been passive when pitched against her husband or son. She knew better than to anger Lucius while he was alive, and she usually treated Draco with deference now that he was head of their household. She had not objected to any of Draco's plans involving Hermione, other than trying to push him toward Astoria for that so-called 'public facing role.'

Then again, war and fear did peculiar things to people.

Draco forced himself to set it aside, but he couldn't help his mind from drifting to one of his contingency plans for this very thing. It was something he had dreamed about doing for a long time, and he knew it would probably be necessary to bring the Dark Lord on board. He had even floated the idea by Theo weeks ago, and Theo had come around to it more quickly than he usually did. It was true Draco hadn't intended to do it *this* soon, but that look on his mother's face...

Draco would need to remind Theo of it. He was sure Theo would still agree with the matter in principle, if not the execution.

As for Hermione herself, she was so much like her brother. They both needed time to consider new things. If Draco approached her with the idea, she would take days or even weeks to absorb it, much like Theo had done. She could also be stubborn, and she might resist it even though it was for her own good. And now that Draco was thinking about it more closely, he concluded that he should start the process without delay. He couldn't waste time getting her used to the idea or arguing with her about it.

That meant Hermione couldn't know.

An unfamiliar sensation coursed through his body as he contemplated it. It was not entirely pleasant. It almost felt like.... *guilt?*

Draco frowned, but he pushed it away. There was no room for guilt, not yet.

"Ready?" asked Blaise, as Draco approached him and Theo in the entry hall. Blaise's eyes were glittering a little.

Draco gave him a knowing look as he led them toward the front door so they could apparate. In many respects Draco was far more similar to Blaise than Theo, even though he was a bit closer to Theo and always had been. Draco and Blaise had shared the common experience of watching a witch from afar, fantasizing about her, and being willing to take desperate measures to get her. Their witches were also entwined with each other and far more emotional than Luna Lovegood, who was the very definition of unruffled. It was always a

delicate balance between keeping their witches happy and doing the things that needed to be done so that Hermione and Ginny would come to rely on them.

Of course, Blaise did have several advantages when it came to attracting Ginny. His mother approved of the match. Ginny had arrived at the Manor mourning Potter, but also very angry with him, and that had given Blaise a clear opportunity to divert her attention. Ginny had a ruthless streak and was much more willing to compromise on her morals than Hermione was. And of course she hadn't been hurt in the same way.

Then again, when it came to something like burning down the Burrow, Draco would never have believed that Ginny would agree so quickly. It took him and Blaise by surprise, but the moment she accepted it Draco knew that they would make sure she couldn't change her mind.

That was the *real* reason they had to do this tonight, even more so than the threat posed by Rodolphus. Draco was sure Rodolphus could be managed in other ways. Burning down the Burrow was just the simplest solution and happened to dovetail nicely with the wizards' own desires.

Destroying the Burrow was something he and Blaise had both idly fantasized about for a long time, though they never believed they would really have the chance to do it. That house was the heartbeat of everything that was Weasley, and as long as it was standing their witches would always cling to it as a reminder of their pasts. It was time for them to fully embrace Draco and Blaise as the wizards who would be giving them a future, and daydreaming about returning to the Burrow at the end of the war would only slow that down. Rodolphus's foolish plan had given them the unexpected opportunity to level it, and now there would be no stopping them.

Draco and the others apparated to the field immediately behind the property and looked at it one last time. Draco glanced sideways at Blaise and saw a broad smile start to cross his face.

"Finally," he breathed.

Theo looked a bit disapproving, but inclined his head begrudgingly. He knew just how much Blaise and Draco wanted this, even though he had always insisted it was unnecessary. Then again, now that Rodolphus was actively plotting, Theo didn't hesitate to get on board with the plan. There was too much at stake to allow his scruples to override what needed to be done.

He and Hermione were so much alike.

"Go ahead and start," said Draco, looking at the eager expression on Blaise's face. "We'll be right behind you."

Blaise nodded and barely spared them a glance. He was nearly quivering with excitement, as he moved forward and passed the wards.

"Do you think he's finally going to fuck her tonight?" asked Theo wryly. "I know Ginny agreed to it, but this is bound to make her emotional. She will want comfort once it's all

over.”

Draco gave a huff of laughter. “Could you blame him?”

Theo snorted. “No, I suppose not. I’d put a hundred galleons on some pretty words in Italian to soothe her, just as he’s unzipping her dress and working his way into her knickers.”

“No bet,” said Draco instantly. “That’s exactly what he’s going to do. It’s bound to work.”

Theo looked at Draco critically. “Why are we hanging back then? I expect you’re just as eager.”

Draco shrugged. He *was* eager, it was true. But this was more important.

“You know that thing we talked about with Hermione? The extra layer of protection I want to give to her?”

Theo’s eyes sharpened. “Yes.”

“I’m going to do it.”

“Do you think it’s necessary?”

Draco shrugged. “Hard to say. I’m not going to risk it though. And you know it’s a good idea.”

Theo was quiet for a moment. “You know I want you to do it eventually. I’ve felt guilty about the way we were raised.”

Draco didn’t allow his satisfaction to show on his face. He knew Theo had felt guilty. It was true Theo had been jealous of Hermione’s relationship with their biological parents, but he had also been given opportunities and security that she would never have unless Draco executed his plan and gave them to her.

Draco was not above using that guilt. He suspected it was the reason Theo had come around to the idea in the first place.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“But you haven’t talked to her about it, have you?”

Draco shot him a look. This was the precarious part.

“No, of course not. She’s too delicate, Theo. I will tell her when she’s ready, but it could be months before she’s settled in enough to hear it. I can’t wait that long before starting the process. It may never be needed, but I won’t risk it.”

Theo swallowed hard. “I don’t like keeping her in the dark.”

“I know. I don’t either. But you know it’s the best approach right now. You’ve said yourself she’s too fragile to know everything.”

Another look of guilt flashed across Theo’s face, and Draco forced himself not to smile when he saw it. Theo had done a few things behind Hermione’s back too, and Draco suspected a subtle reminder was all that was needed.

“We will have to tell her someday, Draco.”

I’ve got him.

“And we will. Once she has healed a little more.”

“She might hate us when she finds out.”

A shiver of displeasure passed through Draco at these words.

“She won’t,” he said firmly. “She’s very sweet and forgiving. And if you think she’s not ready to handle the things you need to tell her, then she’s certainly not ready to hear what I intend to do.”

Draco turned to look at Theo squarely. His face was so much like Hermione’s, especially when lit by the small flames Blaise had started in the background. They said nothing, but Draco knew they were thinking the same thing.

Mutually assured destruction.

Draco knew they would keep quiet because if one of them told Hermione the other’s secrets then they would both be fucked. Draco may be more like Blaise, but he was bound tightly to Theo thanks to a shared history and the fact that they loved the same witch, though in very different ways. And while they both wanted to get closer to her, they were also perfectly capable of withholding information from her too.

Especially when it gave them the things they each wanted so desperately.

“Fine. You’re right. When?”

“Tomorrow. I will have the perfect opportunity.”

Theo’s mouth tightened. “True. That’s better than another—”

“Yes,” said Draco curtly, cutting him off. “You know I’m not thrilled about that part, but she will be doing it as part of the ritual for the animagus potion anyway. We might as well use it.”

Theo nodded. “Alright. I won’t say anything.”

“Neither will I. We will tell her everything when she’s ready to hear it.”

Theo gave a firm nod. “Then let’s do this.”

He strode forward and Draco followed. Now that his plan for Hermione had been blessed, he could focus on the thing he had come for tonight.

And Draco *was* very eager.

He barely spared a glance at the dead muggles in the sitting room. Blaise was in the kitchen, coaxing the fire to burn larger, as Theo moved to the muggles to preemptively burn their polyjuiced bodies so they could be pulled out and taken to the Dark Lord while the rest of the building smoldered. It would take a little time before the fire was self-sustaining, and Draco knew precisely where he wanted to start.

He took the stairs, two at a time to the first landing. He opened the door the bedroom and looked around it quickly. Yes, this was it. He had seen this place in Hermione's mind just one time, but he would never forget it. The room was small but bright, with a large window and painted a cheerful blue. There was a desk against the window overlooking the orchard and posters of the Holyhead Harpies on the wall. Blaise had taken it upon himself to strip this room earlier, and it was mostly bare. There was nothing left that should be saved.

Not that Draco had any intention of saving *this*.

His eyes fell on the thing he hated most about this room. He raised his wand toward it and hesitated for just a split second.

Hermione had been very upset by the prospect of burning down the Burrow, perhaps even more so than Ginny. She had been quiet and withdrawn when he saw her before dinner, clearly perturbed by the dead muggles and destruction of property. Then again, she had agreed to it, if a bit reluctantly. And it would be worth a little tension if it meant he got to finish this.

Draco thought for a moment longer and decided he could find some way to make it up to her. He didn't know what it would be yet, but he trusted that something would come to him. Draco was excellent at identifying opportunities and leveraging them to his advantage.

Draco no longer hesitated as he whispered, "*Incendio maxima*," and the flames roared to life. Draco stepped back and started to smile.

He was ready to burn Hermione Granger's past to the ground.

The wizards returned just before it was time for bed, smelling strongly of smoke.

"It's done, *Bellisima*," said Blaise gently, opening his arms for Ginny. She ran to him and hugged him hard, and Hermione could see a few tears, but also the determination radiating from her friend. Her home was gone, but the things and people she cared about the most were safe.

“We took the bodies to the Dark Lord,” added Theo. “The story we’re going with is that Blaise has turned Ginny, and she disclosed the Burrow’s address with a letter her father smuggled to her. Then he and Draco killed the Weasleys and burned it down. The Dark Lord was thrilled.”

“It’s true,” said Blaise, now addressing Ginny. “You may have to pretend to be a blood purist when you are seen in public, but you won’t have to talk very much.”

Ginny sniffed and pulled away. “I can do that,” she said roughly. “It’s probably safer anyway.”

“And it will secure Blaise’s claim on Ginny,” added Draco. “We’ll be able to bring all three of you out as our boons soon.”

Hermione exchanged a glance at Ginny and knew they were thinking the same thing. Trading boons was obviously more delicate than either Draco or Blaise disclosed given how long it had taken them to do it. This would be an unexpected benefit of the thing the wizards had done tonight.

A moment later Ginny broke the gaze with Hermione and nestled into Blaise again.

"I'm going to take her back to her room," said Blaise softly. "She needs some time."

Hermione saw an oddly knowing look pass between Theo and Draco at these words, but she couldn't make sense of it. Blaise, however, didn't seem to think anything of it as he maneuvered Ginny away, closing followed by Theo and Luna.

Then it was just Draco left behind.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said, as a smug look settled on his face.

Hermione stood questioningly as he moved back to his room, and a moment later a great “*Mrreow*” broke the silence, and he reappeared carrying a familiar ginger cat.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione gasped, striding forward to gather him to her. She buried her face in his fur which smelled a bit smokey, and she squeezed him until he began to protest. She looked up to find Draco watching her with satisfaction.

“How?” she asked weakly. “I had to leave him behind a year ago, and Ginny said he ran away...”

“He didn’t,” said Draco. “He just moved into the garden shed. After we lit the place up, he came out to tell us off. I’m sure he recognized me.”

“He recognized you?” she asked with confusion.

“Of course he did. Crooks and I are old friends, aren’t we boy?” he asked.

Then to Hermione’s utter shock he reached out a hand, and Crookshanks let Draco scratch him under the chin, and he began to purr. As far as Hermione could recall, Crookshanks had

never shown an ounce of affection toward *anybody* but her, with the notable exception of Sirius Black.

“I’m going to need an explanation,” she said.

Draco just chuckled. “He used to roam all over Hogwarts, didn’t he? It took a little time, but we became friendly. He used to sleep with me when he wasn’t sleeping with you.”

Hermione was speechless.

“It started around fourth year,” he added. “Right after I made it clear that I thought Krum was a tosser. Crooks agreed with me, and we became allies.”

Hermione shook her head, in disbelief. “That’s just... wait. Did you know he was mine?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Obviously. You showed up with him in third year.”

She had, and Draco had noticed. That was a year he had barely spoken to her, but he had noticed her cat, managed to befriend it, and now here he was returning him to Hermione. She could scarcely believe it.

If she didn’t have a crush on him already, this would have done it. Her pet, her familiar, whom she had missed *so much* had just been returned to her. She had never believed she would see him again.

“Thank you,” she said, as Crookshanks hopped out of her arms.

Hermione approached him, as another feeling of recklessness took over. Draco kept telling her it wasn’t a crush, and only in the last couple of days did she finally have an inkling of what he could mean by it. Maybe it wasn’t a crush because it was bigger than that. It was more enduring than that. He befriended Crookshanks because he disliked Krum – and why would he have any reason to dislike Krum, unless his *crush* had started back then? Perhaps fourth year Draco wasn’t as comfortable with torture and murder as this version of him, but had he been just as jealous? Had he seen Hermione at the Yule Ball and hated watching another boy touch her?

She wasn’t sure what had gotten into her, but she wanted to push a boundary. She wanted to be brave. She didn’t know if she was truly ready to feel a kiss anywhere but the hand, but she wanted to try it. And she rather thought Draco would do it for her.

She slipped her arms over his shoulders, and his hands immediately came up to hold her waist. She leaned in and hugged him, and he wrapped his arms around her to squeeze back.

“Are you happy now?” he murmured. “I know you were cross with me about the Burrow, but it was really for the best. And I couldn’t bear to leave Crookshanks behind once he emerged. There is plenty of space for him to live with us here in our wing.”

“Yes,” she said. “Getting Crooks back... it makes me *so* happy.”

“Good. I want you to be happy here. That will make *me* very happy.”

“Draco,” she said, gathering her courage. “If I said you could kiss me on the cheek... would that also make you happy?”

She felt his hands tighten, and his voice turned low. “Yes, darling girl. That would make me... incredibly happy.”

“You can,” she said, and immediately she felt his face turn toward hers. His nose traced her cheekbone, and it made her pulse race just as she thought it would. This was closer, tighter than they had ever been before, and his breath was leaving a hot trail as his lips grazed her cheek.

“Orange blossom,” he sighed. “So fucking good...”

Hermione’s nose wasn’t filled with orange blossom, but with cedar and spice, overlaid with smoke. Instinctively she dipped her face into the crook of his neck, and she felt *his* pulse racing. Another reckless thought seized her, and she gave his neck a tentative kiss. He reacted instantly and pulled her tightly against him, and now Hermione could feel something firm in his trousers that made her freeze.

“You’re alright,” he breathed, as he held her there so she could feel it. “It’s just me.”

It’s normal. It’s natural. Half of the human species has a body part that does this.

The tension slowly left her, and he sighed contentedly. “Good. You’re being *so* good just like that. Look at how well you’re letting me touch you now.”

And she was, she realized. Full frontage contact with lips on cheeks and necks was enormous progress compared to where she had been a few weeks ago. She wouldn’t be able to do this with anybody else, she knew, but with Draco she could. She laid her head on his shoulder while he continued to hold her close. He seemed unwilling to move, lest the embrace end.

“It’s getting easier,” she said. “With you I mean.”

He made a pleased sound at this. “When I bring you out as my boon, do you think you’ll be able to play along then?”

“How?” she asked a little nervously, remembering Hannah sitting stiffly while Travers felt her up.

“Sitting on my lap, curled up against me, letting me play with your hair and neck. Maybe some more kisses on your cheek. I’m going to make it clear I’m very fond of you and that anybody who asks to share you is risking a limb.”

“Will they ask?”

“Doubtful,” he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek again. “They’re about to learn that I officially traded away Ginny Weasley to have you all to myself. Why would I ever share such a treasure?”

God, but he had a way with words. Hermione couldn't help but melt into him as he spoke to her.

"So lovely," he murmured as he felt her relax against him. "I know you'll do well for me in front of the others, won't you, sweet girl? You'll be perfect for me, just like this?"

Hermione nodded, unable to speak. His voice was settling deep into the recesses of her mind. She could listen to him say those pretty words to her forever.

"Good," he said, finally pulling back from her. "There will be another party soon. I can't wait to bring you with me."

"No more waitressing then?" she asked wryly.

He shrugged. "We'll see."

Based on his tone of voice, Hermione suspected he would never let her do it again.

She stifled a yawn, but his keen eye caught it of course. "Get some rest. We have a big day tomorrow."

Then he looked down at Crookshanks. "I'll ask Poppy to put in a cat door for you. That way you can sleep with whichever one of us has your favor on any given day."

Crookshanks purred, and Hermione felt her heart melting for this boy who had committed murder and arson only hours earlier. How much longer could she really fight her feelings for him?

She gave him a brilliant smile, and his eyes shone as he leaned in for one last kiss on the cheek and then — to her surprise — a reverent kiss on the forehead that made Hermione feel precisely like that priceless treasure he used to describe her. When he finally pulled away he was smiling too. He looked back at her expression as he crossed the threshold to his own room and gave her a wink before closing the door quietly behind him.

He knows he has me now. Dammit.

Chapter 16: Columba

Chapter Notes

TW1: Depiction of animal sacrifice (the garden bird). Skip the paragraphs between *** if you don't want to read the graphic section. Contains other references to animal sacrifices throughout.

TW2: Emotional manipulation and misdirection

The note at the end contains a small spoiler.

Hermione's warm feelings persisted the following morning when she woke up to feel that familiar weight of Crookshanks on her pillow. She buried herself in his warm fur and tried not to think about the thing she would be doing later on that morning.

Poppy helped her get ready, but Hermione opted to skip breakfast with Draco and Theo in order to do some last minute studying. They had canceled training today and would be brewing the potion for the animagus transformations instead.

The potion contained some obscure ingredients, which Draco had been collecting slowly over the previous weeks. The brew itself was fairly straightforward though, and Hermione felt certain they could complete it that morning. The witches would take it during dinner when the wizards would be there to observe them. The written accounts of it were vague and euphemistic, but all of their books made it clear the potion could be dangerous to the drinker while their brains connected to the animal for the first time.

The potion didn't force a transformation. Instead, it sent the drinker into a kind of fugue state. It was technically possible to become an animagus without it, but the potion sped the process up considerably. It would give the drinker vivid hallucinations so that visualizing the transformation would be more readily achievable. And in the case of Hermione and Luna, it was required in order to draw out an animal that wasn't already inside of them.

Hermione really didn't want to think about that part.

Draco collected her at their normal time, giving her a piercing look. No doubt he was worried she was cross with him again since she shut him out for breakfast, but Hermione gave him a tight smile, and he relaxed.

"You're nervous," he said, grabbing her hand and leading her through the door.

"I've never killed an animal before," she said softly, "and I *really* don't like blood."

“Hey,” he said, stopping her in the hallway and looking down at her with concern. “You can do it. I’ll be with you the whole time.”

“I wish you could do it for me,” she confessed.

“Oh my sweet girl, so do I,” he sighed. Hermione felt an odd blend of warmth at the term of endearment mixed with dread of the thing she was about to do.

It was terribly confusing.

She saw his eyes sharpen on her expression before he pulled her in for a hug.

“If there was any way for me to do it for you...”

“I know,” she said quickly. “I know you can’t. It has to be by my hand.”

Her eyes dropped, and she tightened her arms around him. It was starting to feel like too much again.

“It will be quick,” he said bracingly, rubbing her back a little. “And you don’t have to watch Luna. We can do yours first and then leave.”

Hermione swallowed hard and then nodded as she pulled away. Truly, Luna’s sacrifice was far worse than Hermione’s. She would be going as a dog, and Hermione was certain that if it had been her animal she would never manage it. Theo had reassured Hermione that Luna’s chosen animal was very old and would have to be put down soon in any event — but Hermione still didn’t think she could have done it. Luna had taken a stoic approach to it though, explaining that animal sacrifices had occurred now and then with her mother’s experiments when she was still alive. Luna had seen a fair few and had participated in them before.

But no, Hermione didn’t want to see it. Her own sacrifice was going to be challenging enough.

It’s just a bird. Just a garden bird. It will be fine.

Steeling herself, Hermione followed Draco into the training room to find three cauldrons set up, with one having twice the quantity of ingredients as the other two.

“That’s mine then?” she asked.

Draco nodded. “You’ll be making a double batch.”

“You’re so sure I can manage two...”

“I’ve never doubted it,” he said simply.

Hermione tried to hold this knowledge close to her heart as she settled down at her station. This potion was so personal that it had to be brewed by the witch or wizard who would consume it. She said little to the others and pointedly did not look over at the cages at the

end of the room. In her peripheral vision she could see a large form lying still in the larger of the two cages, and she assumed that was the dog. Evidently the animals were stunned, and Hermione was grateful for it.

She still didn't know which species of bird she would be. After Draco had refused to tell her the previous day, she decided that she didn't want to know. It didn't matter, and he was right that she would just dwell on it unnecessarily. She had noticed him casting some curious glances at her, surely waiting for her to question him about it again. But her silence seemed to prompt his own, because she didn't ask, and he didn't offer.

She settled in with her brewing, the instructions memorized and motions practiced. It was cathartic, in a way, being able to brew again. She had always enjoyed potions and had a talent for it that had been unmatched until the Half-Blood Prince made his appearance in sixth year. It had been far too long since she had done something like this, and some of the tension drained out of her as she worked.

"You enjoy this," said Draco quietly. He was leaning against a nearby wall, arms crossed, his gray eyes studying her as always. "I always sat behind you in class, you know. I've never been able to see your face while you work."

"I've always liked potions," she said. "It's relaxing."

This word seemed to pique his interest.

"You should tell me whenever you want to brew something. That can be arranged."

She gave him a little smile and fell silent as she focused on her task. Her mind stilled like this. Even her dread of the thing that was about to come was dulled and set aside. It suddenly struck her that she hadn't felt this way in ages.

"Do some legilimency," she said to Draco, not bothering to raise her eyes from the potion, but instead letting her mind fall back into the routine of brewing. She felt a nudge and then a prod and then a deeper push, but she ignored it and continued to brew. A few moments later she felt him leave, and her eyes flicked up to find him watching her with a slow smile.

"Fucking finally," he said. "Right. I'm getting you set up with a lab after this. Evidently your still place is at the bottom of a cauldron."

Hermione exhaled with a smile. She would need to practice it that way before trying it among the Death Eaters of course, but it had felt different this time. Draco's pushing hadn't sent her mind anywhere. It didn't make her feel like she was being examined. It wasn't a distraction, it was an impenetrable place he couldn't enter, unless she allowed it.

Even if the animagi potion was a bust, *that* was something.

The brewing came to an end with only a few emergency assists for Ginny and Luna. Hermione needed no help at all, having been utterly absorbed by her task. As she gave the final stir before adding the blood, she lifted her spoon out, and it felt like coming up from being underwater as the stillness dissolved and she remembered what she was about to do.

She felt her own blood drain from her face at the thought.

Draco seemed to sense the shift in her, because his expression went from fond to grim as he watched. He pushed himself off the wall and strode toward her, holding out a small vial.

“Drink this,” he said. “It’s your calming draught.”

Hermione didn’t question it and just tipped her head back. She felt some of the calm from a few minutes earlier returning to her, but it wasn’t perfect.

Draco watched until he was sure the potion was working, and then he spoke quickly.

“Alright, Hermione first, then Ginny, then Luna.”

Even with the calming draught, Hermione’s stomach started to roll as she nodded quickly. She needed to get this over with as soon as possible.

Draco pulled out his wand and waved it to dim the lights.

“Over here,” he said, pointing to a space on the other side of the room that had a few candles, which Theo was lighting for her, along with a bowl and a knife. There was a cushion on the floor as well, and Hermione went over to it and kneeled down, trying to get as comfortable as possible.

God, she really didn’t want to do this.

Draco disappeared for a moment, and she heard the sounds of a cage unlocking. She closed her eyes as she heard him start to move back toward her, and she felt the telltale signs of a panic attack beginning. Even with the calming draught it was going to pull her over within the next few seconds. She was sure she would already be deep into one if she hadn’t taken that potion.

“Theo,” she said in a sort of desperate, strangled whisper.

“Give it to me, Hermione,” he said. “Open for me.”

She opened their connection, and Theo immediately started siphoning her emotions. They eased a little and began to dull as Draco placed the bird in front of her.

It was a dove.

“Oh God,” she said.

She knew it was stupid to assign meanings to animals, but she couldn’t help herself. Doves were innocent symbols of peace and grace. She was about to butcher it.

She stared at it, taking in all the details. It wasn’t white like the doves in stories. It was a collared dove, its body a sleek light gray that reminded her of Draco’s eyes with its tail the color of charcoal. Around the back of its neck was a band in that same charcoal color that

gave the dove its name. It reminded her of the choker she had worn to that party – of having Draco’s hands on her throat.

It actually looked very much like a pigeon, but Hermione knew better.

“You remember what to do?” asked Draco in that soothing voice of his.

Hermione swallowed and nodded, her eyes still fixed on the bird. It looked dead, but she knew that it wasn’t because *she* would have to kill it. It was just stunned. The moment she touched it she would feel warmth.

Theo was siphoning harder than ever, and she felt Draco kneel behind her.

“You can do this,” he whispered, gently moving her hair aside and placing his hand on the back of her neck in precisely the same location as the dove’s collar. He was rubbing it gently. “Breathe. It doesn’t know what’s happening. Just make it quick, and it will be over before you know it.”

Hermione’s eyes squeezed shut, and she picked up the knife with a shaky hand and gripped the dove with the other. It was warm, and she could feel its heart beating.

She froze for one second, then two, then three. All of her friends were around her, watching her. Theo and the calming draught were working overtime to keep her on the edge of her feelings, and Draco was still whispering to her.

“Good. So good. You’re holding everything perfectly. Just say the words, and one little slice. That’s all...”

She positioned the bird over the bowl and the knife near its throat. She squeezed her eyes shut and tears leaked out as she murmured the words in Latin she had read a hundred times and memorized for this moment — words claiming the bird for herself and calling its life force inside of her.

At the end she pulled the knife across its throat, and she opened her eyes when she felt the hot blood spill over her hands. The metallic smell filled her nose as she wrung the poor thing dry.

Her hands were shaking when it was complete, and she dropped the knife and the remains of the dove, palms open to see the red death there. Theo whipped out his wand to vanish the mess from her hands and the bird remains, so that all was left was the bowl with blood. He was siphoning harder than ever, and Hermione let him do it.

“One more step before we add it to the potion,” murmured Draco, now handing her a second knife for her to use on herself. It wasn’t a knife he typically used in training, but she thought it looked familiar. It was obviously very old and fine. There was a crest on the handle that

she recognized from the silver goblets at Grimmauld Place. It must be a Black family heirloom.

Was this the family knife that was written about in the papers – the one he used to mark muggleborns to track them? Would this enable him to find her if she ever ran or was taken? Would it track her in both forms? Had he told her the truth all those weeks ago when he said he couldn't track through wards?

Did any of it even matter? Hermione felt sure he would never stop looking if she disappeared.

After the thing she had just done she was in no emotional state to process anything to do with the mysterious knife. She was trembling and needed to finish this. She hesitated for only a moment longer and then gripped the knife and opened her left palm with it. She winced a little at the cut, but something about it also felt cathartic. She milked her hand as blood poured freely into the bowl to mix with that of the dove's. If Draco was correct the potion would recognize the combined blood as one.

"That's enough," came Draco's voice as he moved out from behind her and pulled her injured palm toward him.

He started tracing the cut, whispering words under his breath. Hermione caught few words but thought she heard "Black" and "sanguis," and "Columba." The blood stopped flowing, and the cut faded into an odd mark, with seven small dots seemingly at random that were a deep red.

"There," he said, and Hermione caught a tone of deep satisfaction in his voice — something dark and covetous.

He swiped a thumb across her palm one last time and released her hand.

"Best add it to the potion now," he said. "Ginny's up next."

Hermione rose on shaky legs while Blaise pulled another bowl and a regular knife forward for Ginny. She would only be adding her own blood to the potion, since her horse form was already a part of her. She had no sacrifice.

What am I thinking? She made the biggest sacrifice of all last night to save her parents.

Draco followed Hermione back to her station, where she divided her potion into two equal parts. In one of them she poured the blood while stirring clockwise six more times as Draco bottled the other half to save for later. It would be used for the eagle if she could manage the dove.

The last few moments of brewing wasn't enough for her to relax again, and she wanted nothing more than to get out of there. With the final stir, the potion steamed and then turned a clear blue that was the precise shade described in the books. She slumped with relief. It was done.

“Let’s go,” said Draco, taking the wooden spoon out of her hand and quickly bottling the rest of it before grabbing her gently and pulling her toward the door.

“We’ll see the rest of you this evening,” he said firmly. “She needs some time.”

There were murmurs of farewell from the others, and Hermione saw several worried looks cast her way, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. She felt ill, clammy. She had killed some innocent thing for her own gain and then released quite a bit of her own blood too. She was lightheaded from it.

“Come on, let’s get you settled,” he said as he pulled her into her room and forced her to sit on the chaise lounge. “You look ill.”

“It was a lot of blood,” she confessed. “Both kinds.”

Draco looked grim, but called Poppy for a blood replenishing potion, which Hermione took with some relief. As she felt her color returning, she closed her eyes and tried to forget the sight of that poor dead bird. Crookshanks jumped up next to her, and she automatically started to stroke his fur as he purred. It was soothing, but it wasn’t enough. She needed to distract herself. And she needed some answers.

“Draco,” she said, “what did you do to my hand?”

He had been fussing with the green and gray blanket and giving Crookshanks a few pats. He paused at this question.

“What makes you think I did something?” he asked in a too-casual voice.

“I’m not stupid,” she said, opening one eye to look at him. “Was it a tracking spell?”

He gave her a slightly wary look as though wondering how she would react to the truth.

“Of sorts,” he said. “It’s tied to my knife... and my ancestral home.”

“The Manor?” she asked in confusion.

He shook his head. “Grimmauld Place.”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighed. “Hang on, let me show you something.”

He disappeared into his room for a moment and soon returned holding a quill and ink. He prepared the quill for her and then sat on the edge of the chaise lounge and turned her palm up before handing her the quill.

“Connect the dots,” he said.

Hermione furrowed her brow, but slowly started to draw lines between the red dots on her palm. When she was finished her eyes were wide as she recognized it.

“It’s Columba,” she breathed, “the dove constellation.”

“Precisely,” he said. “And I have the dragon.”

He turned his palm over and showed her. She could see a few faded marks, which he connected to form Draco. She had never noticed them before.

“What does it do?” she asked in fascination.

“It will help me find you if you ever go missing,” he said simply. “It makes the tracking spell on my knife stronger. All I have to do is go to Grimmauld Place and call for you. I will be able to find you anywhere.”

Hermione studied him, trying to decide if he was telling her everything or not.

“Through wards too?”

He nodded. “The knife by itself is good enough for basic tracking, but I lose the trail inside of wards. Tying it to the Black family magic makes that stronger.”

“So you’re saying I’m truly your prisoner now,” she said.

She had very mixed feelings about this. It was incredibly underhanded that he had done this without talking to her about it first, but then again did she expect anything less from him? He was protective, almost possessive. He was keeping her safe just as much as he was imprisoning her. Did it really matter if she had a mark that would let him find her quickly? It would be a shortcut, nothing more. By now she was certain that he would *always* find her, mark or not, and he would leave no stone unturned if she ever went missing.

Because it wasn’t a crush.

“I prefer to think of it as a safety measure,” he said airily.

“Draco, I don’t *want* to be your prisoner.”

Despite those mixed feelings — or maybe because of them — a slight feeling of panic started to creep.

“Hey,” he said soothingly, as he pushed her hair out of the way and began to rub her neck just like he had while she was killing that bird. “That’s not why I did it. And I don’t think of you as my prisoner, Hermione. You’re a witch I care about very much, and you are here under my protection.”

”But the tracking...”

“It’s just a safety measure, that’s all. Please try to calm yourself and think for a moment. Do you remember when I grabbed your wrist at the party and pulled you away? It was true you went for my throat. You did a great job defending yourself. But what if it had been somebody else who did that to you? What if they had stunned you from behind so you couldn’t call for Theo? What if they took you some place you didn’t recognize so even the

bond was useless? You were outside of the protective wards in my wing that night, Hermione, and anybody could have taken you.”

“But—”

“You’ve told me before you have no interest in leaving because everything you care about is here.”

“That’s true,” she acknowledged.

“And I *know* you don’t want any other Death Eater to take you.”

“No, of *course* not, but I—”

“And this means nobody will ever be able to take you away from my protection, not for long. If you go missing I will be able to find you very quickly and help you. I would do everything in my power to find you anyway, Hermione, but when it comes to other Death Eaters seconds matter. I wouldn’t hesitate to kill anybody who is trying to hurt you, darling girl, but I have to be able to find you first.”

Hermione felt what little fight she had draining out of her as he made this point. She knew that if she ran he would do everything he could to find her, whether he could actively track her or not. And while she certainly had an interest in breaking a few rules to acquire a wand and practice with it, she truly wasn’t interested in escaping. She wanted a bit more freedom around the Manor, that’s all. She didn’t want to *leave*. And he was also correct that if she was taken or threatened by another Death Eater then seconds mattered.

“I wish you had asked me first,” she said a bit lamely.

He pulled her hand into his lap and traced the constellation on it. “You can be cross with me, little dove, but it’s to keep you safe. I’m not apologizing for it.”

She should be angry, raging. He had crossed a huge line. She knew this.

But upon hearing the affectionate name he had just used, all she could think about was that poor dove’s blood being spilled. So she didn’t rage, she couldn’t. She just didn’t have enough fight in her after the thing she had just done and the points he had made. She was emotionally wrung out.

She wondered if Draco sensed this.

She wondered if it even mattered.

“Columba,” she sighed, very frustrated with herself for moving on from it too quickly, but not able to summon the energy to take him to task just yet. “I suppose that’s a good name for my animagus form if I can manage it.”

He smiled broadly at this, until his left cheek dimpled. “I think that would be perfect.”

She exhaled and closed her eyes, finally allowing herself to *feel*. She thought she sensed something of Columba stirring inside of her, though she knew it wouldn't truly awaken until she consumed the potion this evening.

"Draco, I have one more question."

"What is it, my darling?"

Hermione felt herself blush at how gentle and kind he was being. He smiled a little to see it.

She tried to shake herself out of it and made herself focus.

"Is it just a tracking spell or is there something more to it?"

"It's just my way of protecting you, Hermione. That's all. It's nothing for you to worry about. Now we have a long day ahead of us, and you need to rest so that you're ready to meet Columba this evening."

Hermione felt a frisson of doubt now. She didn't know if the spell only tracked her or if it did something more than that. She didn't know if she could trust him.

Then again, she didn't know what to do if she *couldn't* trust him.

"Draco, promise me you aren't lying."

He sighed and gave her a tired sort of smile.

"I'm not lying, Hermione. Would I ever do something that hurt you? Of course not. All I have ever wanted to do is protect you and keep you safe and happy here with me. Your Columba symbol will help me do that. And if something ever happens to you, I'll be able to find you and hopefully get to you before you are in any real danger."

Hermione absorbed this silently, trying to decide if she could let it go or not. She felt him settle into the chaise lounge behind her and pull her back against his chest.

"Relax, little dove. Lean against me and close your eyes for a few minutes. You've been through a terrible ordeal this morning, and now you're fretting. Your heart is so tender. I feared the sacrifice would be too difficult for you, but you did so well with it. You were so brave. Now it's time for you to breathe and rest and recover from it. There is nothing for you to worry about. You are safe here with me, and I'll stay with you the whole time."

Something about Draco's words washed over her, and she choked up a little as tears pricked her eyes. He must have sensed her emotions because he continued to make soothing sounds as he wrapped his arms around her firmly and placed soft kisses on her cheek and the top of her head and even her shoulder. When the worst of it passed, she found herself leaning into him.

She didn't know if he was hiding things from her. She didn't know how to find out. She didn't know if she had the emotional bandwidth to even care, at least not at that very moment. That

poor dove was on a loop in her mind's eye, and it was the only thing she could seem to focus on.

"I didn't like killing her, Draco. Doves are supposed to represent peace, tranquility, freedom, and hope. I feel like I ruined it."

Draco made a sympathetic noise and nuzzled her harder. "You could never ruin it, sweet girl. All of those things are inside of you. Columba will just enhance them. That's why I chose her for you. She is perfect for you."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm positive. Columba is a part of you now. Try to embrace it, Hermione. And rest with me while you do."

Almost unconsciously Hermione's eyes fluttered closed. That feeling of being emotionally drained soon caught up to her as she sank into the scent and feel of Draco behind her. Before she knew it, she drifted off to sleep.

Hermione woke up around lunchtime to find Draco still holding her and looking at her with sincere concern.

"Are you feeling any better? I knew you needed your rest. I'm glad you were able to sleep."

Hermione's cheeks flushed bright red as she realized she had been sleeping on him for well over an hour. He just gave her a contented smile when he saw it.

"I promise I behaved myself. Crookshanks kept a very stern eye on me the entire time."

Hermione glanced at her cat who was indeed staring right at Draco from a chair on the other side of the room.

"Sorry," she muttered.

He tutted. "Never be sorry for falling asleep on me. I invited it, didn't I? But I was thinking while you were resting... and I know said I wouldn't apologize for your Columba symbol, but I realized that wasn't well done of me. I certainly don't regret protecting you, but I should have found a way to talk to you about it first, Hermione. I'll admit I only realized last night that we would have a perfect opportunity for it today, and I'm afraid the situation with the Burrow and finding Crookshanks got in the way soon after it occurred to me. And then this morning you didn't invite me in for breakfast, and once I finally saw you I could tell how nervous you were. I didn't want to spring it on you and distract you from the sacrifice. Still, I'm sorry I didn't ask first. Can you forgive me?"

He was tracing her palm while he said this, and Hermione found herself melting a little. He sounded so earnest and serious, and if he was telling her the truth that it only came to him last night, then she could see why he didn't talk to her about it first. He was right that a lot had happened.

"It really only occurred to you last night?"

He nodded. "I've thought about it before, but I could never bring myself to cut you, my darling. It was only last night that I remembered we would have the perfect opportunity for it today because you were slicing your palm anyway."

Hermione started to nod. A look of relief crossed his face, and he gave her that brilliant, dimpled smile that she loved so much before raising her hand to his lips and kissing it.

"Thank you. You have such a forgiving nature. I truly don't deserve it, but it's one of my favorite things about you."

Hermione flushed again and dropped her eyes. "Just as long as you promise there's nothing bad or—"

She cut herself off as he raised her chin to make her look at him. His face was serious, fervent.

"Nothing about it is bad. Not one single thing, do you understand? I could never, *ever* do something bad to you, Hermione, I swear it. I may have fucked up by not asking you about it first, but that spell will protect you. It was very important for us to do it, and I had to take advantage of the opportunity that we had for it. Please tell me you understand that."

Hermione relaxed into his embrace and nodded again. She still wasn't certain if he had told her everything about it, but she knew he wouldn't hurt her. She believed that much. He cared about her, that was very apparent. And while she was still uncomfortable with the tracking, his heartfelt apology and sincere insistence that it was necessary to keep her safe made her push it down. Besides, she truly *didn't* intend to leave. If that ever changed, Draco would surely comb the earth to bring her back so the spell wouldn't matter very much. But it could be the difference between life or death if she was taken.

She felt him relax as he dropped another kiss on top of her head.

"Thank you, my darling girl. You're my greatest treasure."

Hermione sighed into him, relishing the attention and the lovely things he said to her. Whenever she had him like this he was all hers, and he was incredible. She idly wondered if anybody but her got to see this side of him. Somehow she didn't think so, and that made it even more special.

Hermione gave him a small smile, and he twinkled back at her before slowly disentangling himself.

"I need to check on a few Death Eater things before we meet this evening for the potion. But please keep resting and let Poppy know if you need anything, alright?"

"I will," she said softly.

"Good girl," he murmured, before brushing a hand across her curls fondly and then moving away from her. As the door to his room started to close, Hermione could have sworn she heard him whistling a jaunty tune, as though he had just achieved something extraordinary.

Everyone gathered in Hermione's room for dinner.

"Well?" asked Hermione, trying her best not to look as disturbed as she felt when her eyes landed on Luna.

"I'm eager to see my horse," said Ginny enthusiastically.

"And I'll be an English foxhound," said Luna with some excitement. "She really was a gorgeous thing."

Hermione felt faintly ill, but she just gave Luna a tight smile. "That's great, Luna. No issues then?"

"None," she said. "I think I can feel her life force in me. She's so happy. I can't wait to get to know her a little better."

This was such a Luna way of seeing the world that Hermione gave her a genuine smile.

"You know what? You're right. I'm eager to meet Columba."

"Columba?" asked Theo curiously. Hermione couldn't help but notice he shot a piercing look at Draco, who seemed to give him a warning look back, though Hermione couldn't fathom why.

"Yes. It's the dove constellation. I thought it would be a good name for my animagus form."

"Oh I love that," insisted Ginny. "So that would make me what...?"

"Equus," supplied Draco automatically.

"Then I'm Canis, I suppose," mused Luna. "I quite like it."

Theo and Blaise both wrinkled their noses at this, while Draco looked smug.

"What?" asked Ginny, noticing their expressions.

“It’s just very... Malfoy,” said Blaise.

“It’s Black, actually,” corrected Hermione. “They’re all named after stars or constellations.”

There was a moment of silence as all three wizards stared at her. Theo and Blaise looked amazed. Draco looked... *hungry?*

“How in the bloody hell did you know that?” demanded Theo.

Hermione shrugged. “There’s a tapestry at Grimmauld Place. Ginny and I lived there for a couple summers.”

“It’s true,” added Ginny. “Draco’s on it. And Hermione’s right, most of them are stars, aren’t they?”

“Not Narcissa,” pointed out Blaise.

“Perhaps not yet,” insisted Hermione. “But her name is a derivation of Narcissus, which was a character in Greek mythology. Many of the stars overlap with Greek mythology. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if a star was named after Narcissus at some point in the future.”

At this, everyone but Draco rolled their eyes.

“Honestly, Sis, must you swot us like that?”

“You share fifty percent of my genes,” she retorted.

At this reminder, Theo’s face broke into a genuine smile.

“Yeah. I do,” he said happily.

They ate quickly before settling around in a circle on the floor. The three girls each held their potions and looked at each other with anticipation.

“It should last at least a half hour,” said Hermione nervously. “But it could go much longer than that.”

“We have all night if we need it,” said Draco. “One of us will be with each of you the whole time.”

“You may have to restrain us,” reminded Ginny. “If we start thrashing about or sleepwalking.”

“We’ve got you,” said Blaise.

“Bottoms up then,” said Luna.

All three girls raised their potions to their lips and drank. Hermione’s eyes fluttered closed, and she swayed. She felt somebody catch her as she went limp and laid her gently on the floor. She began to dream.

There was a fluttering in her chest, a rapid heart beat as her feathers ruffled and shook. She wasn't quite sure where she was — it was some place that was wooded. She was perched on a low branch of a tree. She heard a twig snap, and her head cocked to the side. She heard it again, a larger crunching this time.

DANGER!

She took to the sky, wings spread, and immediately her fears melted away. This was easy. This was where she was meant to be. It was safe up here in the sky, away from beasts that were larger than her.

She soared over the trees and found a meadow. There was a smoldering ruin nearby, and the sky was tinged with green. Instinctively she flew around the green. It felt wrong, like something that might come to life and devour her.

She continued to fly, passing fields and farmlands. Occasionally she saw a small town and houses perched along the patchwork quilt of the countryside.

She didn't know precisely where she was going, but she flew on for hours. Something inside of her — an instinct or perhaps a memory — told her she was heading the right direction.

She passed rivers and ponds, slate roofs, and a circle of enormous stones. Then there were more fields until she finally she saw it: the place she wanted to be.

It was a garden, alive and verdant in the late days of August. She saw berries, ripe on some vines, and she flew down to eat one. The juice burst in her mouth, tart and satisfying. So she ate another and another until she was sated after her long flight.

Berries were a gift. Before long they would wither, and she would turn to seeds or perhaps the occasional insect.

Something inside of her protested this, but it was odd. She had eaten insects many time before.

"No!" cried a voice. "No insects!"

It was curious.

She hopped over to a gravel path and peered up to see a perch. It was gray and looked to be a low ledge. She stretched her wings and fluttered up to land on it. She was delighted to find a basin with a pool of water. She dipped her head and drank.

She heard a crunch of gravel, and her head shot up. Another crunch, and her heart began to race.

DANGER!

She flew to a nearby branch and settled upon it. Perhaps she should fly to some other place, but she was reluctant to leave. It had berries and water and surely this place would have seeds in the winter. Her keen eyes even caught some insects...

"Not insects!"

No, there would be no insects, but it had everything else. And other than a few other birds that were smaller than her, this place was safe and beautiful. She didn't want to leave.

"There you are sweet girl," came a voice.

Her heart started beating faster than ever. She was flooded with fear, and knew she needed to fly away, but something made her pause. It was unnatural, but she couldn't help it. She was frozen in place.

A figure moved into her sight line. It was large and something white gold gleamed in the sunlight. Its eyes were gray like the storm clouds that meant rain.

"I was so hoping you would find your way home. I considered a pigeon, you know, because their homing instincts are better than a dove's, but you just where to fly to, didn't you?"

Her heart was still racing, but she couldn't move. She was in a high branch. He couldn't reach her up here. He couldn't.

"It's time to wake up now, Hermione," he said gently. "You've been with Columba for ages. The others woke up hours ago. I finally decided I had to come fetch you myself."

Something about these words stirred inside of her. The fear receded, leaving wariness behind. Who was this? Was he her mate? She would only have one for her whole life and hadn't found him yet.

"I could be your mate," he said in a low voice that reminded her of the gravel he had just crunched. "If you would have me. That would be... the most exquisite pleasure. And I'm in favor of monogamy. Very much so. Both of your birds will be monogamous. I'll admit it was a factor when I chose them."

Now she felt an odd warmth at his words. And there was interest, to be sure. But it was all so odd. He couldn't be her mate, could he? He looked nothing like her and couldn't fly.

"I most certainly can fly, thank you very much."

Now he sounded...

Offended.

The word just came to her. How odd.

“Come back to me Hermione,” he said. “I know you’re in there. I can hear you. You’ve just been enjoying Columba so much you’ve forgotten yourself for a time. Listen to my words and come back. Show me what a good girl you can be.”

Something complex and multifaceted began to emerge, and soon she was being pushed aside. She no longer knew what was happening. But this other thing was bigger than her, stronger than her, far more powerful and intelligent than she was.

“Draco?” said a voice.

“There she is,” the figure said with relief.

“Draco, what...?”

“You’ve been learning all about Columba. And in true Hermione Granger fashion I think you chose to immerse yourself.”

“Goodness.”

“Come back to me, little dove. It’s nearly morning.”

“But how?” she asked.

“Come touch me.”

It was an odd thing, approaching a form so large. It went against every instinct she had to get this close, but that thing in her head assured her it was safe. He would never hurt her. All she had to do was fly to him.

She — Columba — spread her wings and fluttered down from the branch, landing on his open hand. He was holding berries, and they looked riper and sweeter than anything she had ever eaten before. She couldn’t help herself. She bent her head and plucked one from his hand. He gave a low chuckle.

Then the thing inside of her emerged again. This time it felt smoother, like it might be part of her after all.

“How do I do it Draco? How do I wake up?”

“Tell me your name,” he said. He was stroking her head now, down the back of her neck, touching her collar. Her feathers ruffled at the sensation.

“I’m Columba,” said the thing that was also her. “But I’m also Hermione.”

Hermione's eyes fluttered open. She felt like she was coming out of a deep sleep, though she had never felt more exhausted.

It took her a moment to get her bearings, and as she began to stir she realized she was on something soft like a cloud. That cedar and spice scent she loved so much was enveloping her, and the room was dark. It was that time of night just before it began to lighten into morning.

"There you are," came a rough voice. "For a moment there I was worried I had lost you."

Hermione turned to the side and found Draco's tired face looking down at her. He looked terrible. His hair was standing on end, and his face was stubbled. He had deep circles under his eyes and looked like he was ready to collapse.

He had obviously been up all night.

"What happened?" she asked.

His hand flexed on her waist, and only now did the full scope of her current situation hit her: they were in bed together – *her* bed – still clothed, though it seemed he had removed her shoes. She wasn't under the covers, but the gray and green blanket was draped around her, and Draco was propped up on his side, watching her.

"You explored Columba a bit too thoroughly. Luna woke up after a couple hours. Ginny around eleven. But you..."

He trailed off, looking a bit haunted.

"I got lost inside of her," said Hermione softly, and he nodded.

It was a risk with the potion. There were reports of witches and wizards dwelling inside of their animals for weeks or even months before they found their own minds again. A very small number never reemerged. Spending an hour or two in the animal's mind before the human thoughts returned wasn't uncommon at all, but much longer than four hours, and the books warned that the mind could be slipping away. She had returned though. Draco had found her.

"How did you do it?" she asked. "How did you bring me back?"

"A spot of legilimency," he said. "I found myself in the Manor gardens. I looked everywhere for you, but I finally concluded you weren't there. I hoped you were just away and would be returning, but a dove's homing instinct isn't that strong compared to other species. I was just about to go to Grimmauld and call for you when you arrived."

At this he moved his hand from her waist and opened her palm to trace the marks there.

"It would have worked in my mind?"

He shrugged. "Hard to say, but it's blood magic. It's complex and personal. It would have been worth a try. I told you the tracking spell was important, didn't I? That potion is

dangerous.”

They both fell silent, and Hermione flopped back on her pillow. She was just as tired as he was. She hadn’t been asleep – just lost in a vision.

Draco slid down next to her and laced their fingers together as his eyes closed too.

“What time is it?” she finally thought to ask.

“Around half-past four,” he said. “I called Poppy before I went to find you and told her not to wake us up until half-nine. We can eat and dress for training in thirty minutes.”

“And you moved me to my bed, when?”

“A few hours ago. Unlike you, I don’t much fancy spending the entire night on the floor.”

Hermione had to admit that she couldn’t fault him for this. Even the sofa and chaise lounge were too small for two people to comfortably spend the entire night. But now that she had come back, he no longer had to stay. She couldn’t help but notice he still hadn’t moved.

“You’re... staying here then?” she asked hesitantly.

“You will have to levitate me out of this bed if you don’t want me here,” he grumbled. “I’m beat. I’ll admit this wasn’t how I envisioned exhausting myself the first time I was in bed with you, but you know me... I’ll take whatever I can get.”

His eyes were closed as he said this, but a small smile crossed his face too. Hermione felt her cheeks heat, but she supposed he could stay. They were both clothed, very tired, and Draco had obviously been under a great deal of stress for the last several hours. He wouldn’t be taking any liberties with her tonight.

Not that I would mind terribly, she admitted to herself.

She wouldn’t tell him that she remembered what he said to her while she was Columba – that he would be her mate if she would have him and that he intentionally sought out animals that were monogamous. His rejection of a species with a strong homing instinct was also curious. Pigeons were just as common as doves, and they were very closely related to one another. In fact, the average person might find them to be interchangeable. But there *were* slight differences, the homing instinct among them. Evidently he had considered the pigeon as an alternative and rejected it. That meant the dove was no accident. He had obviously selected it for some specific reason. Perhaps it was the symbolism.

Her palm prickled at this thought, but she was too tired to think any more about it.

“Alright,” she said, as a yawn caught her. “It’s late. You can stay.”

“Good girl,” he murmured as he shifted closer to her and draped an arm over her again. “Sleep just like this.”

The scent of cedar and spice was all around her as she slowly relaxed into the linens and the wizard who had made himself home in her bed.

“You did so well finding your way home,” he murmured, and Hermione could tell he was on the verge of sleep.

“Malfoy Manor is my home now?”

“Mmmm. Do you have any other home besides the Manor or Grimmauld Place?”

Hermione thought about the house where she had been raised. Hermione had sold it soon after obliterating her parents. She couldn't bear the thought of ever returning there after the thing she had done to them, and they needed the funds for their very early retirement. Hermione never expected to survive the war, so keeping a home for them in England was not a high priority. In any event, she had started to separate herself from that place the moment she learned she was a witch and disappeared into the wizarding world for the first time. Selling it had been sad, but it did not feel like she was losing her *home* when she did it. The Burrow and Hogwarts had both been more of a home to her than where her parents lived for the last few years, but now the Burrow was gone and Hogwarts was in the control of the Death Eaters.

“No,” she said. “I don't suppose I do.”

“Good,” he said blearily. “Because if you did, I would have to burn it down. You live with me now.”

That night Hermione dreamed of the thing she had seen while she was Columba — the smoldering ruins and the green in the sky. She watched Draco torching the Burrow, not only to put on a good show for Voldemort, but also to remove any temptation she might ever have to return. In the dream Columba was flying around, circling an enormous Dark Mark cast into the sky. Her beady eyes watched as Draco set fire to the trundle bed in Ginny's room, where Hermione used to sleep. While he coaxed the flames to grow larger, his face broke into a broad, wild smile as he rejoiced in the destruction of the place she had always thought of as her magical home.

Why do you like him so much? Columba seemed to ask her.

Hermione had no answers.

Chapter 17: Gala

Chapter Notes

A lot of things happen in this chapter, as Hermione truly begins her descent into the morally gray.

TW1: Threatened SA

TW2: Two very short sections with gore, which are both set off by *** if you wish to skim

I'll also note there is a brief F/F/F moment in this chapter thanks to a plan the girls cook up. It is strategic (not emotional) and is the only time it happens in the fic, which is why it's not tagged at the top.

The next two weeks were spent in training and mostly-futile attempts with the witches' animagi transformations, though Draco did make good on his promise of a miniature potions lab and set up a table with a cauldron for her in one corner of the parlor.

"I don't want you brewing anything that will overtax you," he said, "but calming draughts or healing potions are perfectly fine."

Hermione couldn't help but notice that the ingredients to make advanced potions that could help her escape or aid her in extracting information — like polyjuice and veritaserum — were missing. Also missing were ingredients like aconite that could harm her if she ingested them.

He obviously did not trust her with them.

She was left with innocuous ingredients that when mixed together made innocuous potions, along with a small stack of books that had been heavily redacted.

Like so many things with Draco Malfoy she didn't know what to think about it. Should she be grateful that he was giving her a chance to do something she genuinely enjoyed? Or should she be angry that he was shackling her abilities while he did it?

When she expressed her frustrations to him he looked perplexed.

"It's merely a way of helping you relax for occlumency. Why would you need to brew polyjuice or veritaserum? I have an ample stock of both."

"I want a full lab."

“You know I can’t do that. But if the smaller lab distresses you, I can always remove it.”

The threat was not subtle, and Hermione grimaced. But because she wanted to be able to brew *something* more than she wanted a complete lab, she kept her mouth shut and spent an hour a day brewing simple things while she emptied her mind and worked on honing her occlumency.

In the afternoons the witches would gather to practice their transformations.

It took five days of meditation and wandlessly trying to change *anything* before Hermione managed some feathers on the back of her hand. It was two more days before Luna produced canine teeth that looked more canine than human. The day after that, Ginny whinnied for the first time.

It was slow going, but their transformations were beginning. It would come in fits and spurts – first one body part and then the next. But the fact that *all* of them had finally produced something after a week of trying lightened their spirits, even if the hours where nothing happened seemed to drag on.

As they were approaching the end of the second week, Draco informed them at the end of training one day that there was to be another party, this time in the Malfoy ballroom. His agitation was clear, as he announced it.

“I wasn’t going to have you three come, but Hermione has no choice, and I need Luna and Ginny there too to keep an eye on her. The three of us will be more occupied than last time, and we may not be able to pull you if something goes wrong.”

“What? Why?” asked Hermione in confusion.

Draco’s jaw was so tense she could tell he was grinding his teeth.

“Severus has requested you, personally. Evidently you made an impression on him at the last party. We have no choice but to have you pose as one of the waitresses again.”

“But –”

“*We have no choice*,” he insisted, but his agitation was clear.

Theo was eyeing him warily. “It will be alright mate. This is the autumn gala, right? There will be Death Eater wives and daughters there too. It will be much less charged than the last one. No prostitutes, no going home with waitresses at the end of the night. It’s just a lot of mingling and some dancing. Hermione won’t have to speak to him for long because she’ll be working the entire room, not just a few groups.”

Hermione stilled as she absorbed this. Narcissa would probably be there. The Greengrass girls would probably be there. Pansy might be there. This was the sort of event that got photographed for the society pages in *The Daily Prophet*. Would she be forced to watch Draco kiss Astoria’s hand and dance with her?

It made her feel ill.

"I don't see why it's so important for us to be there," she insisted. "If it's a party where everyone is mingling for only a few minutes that doesn't really lend itself to veritas serum, does it?"

"It's important because Severus requested it," said Blaise.

"But *why*?" she asked. "Why do we care what Snape requests?"

"Because he outranks me!" Draco snapped angrily.

Hermione went pale.

"But I thought... you said we couldn't be taken and..."

"He is *not* going to take you," insisted Draco. "He's not. I won't let him. But I can't very well tell him you aren't available to talk."

"Maybe you fired her?" suggested Ginny.

"Then he would want her address."

They all fell silent at this, and Hermione scrambled to control her racing heart. Her encounter with Snape at the last party had been very unsettling. She forced herself to think rationally about it.

"Look, Snape is part of the Order right? Or at the very least he's working against You-Know-Who? He's not going to harm me. If it comes down to it, I can tell him who I am."

"No," said Draco. "No, you cannot."

"But—"

"You *cannot*. He doesn't know that you're here with me. I told you that the list of Order members who know you are here is very small, and it needs to stay that way for everyone's safety."

"But then how do I—"

"Oh I don't know," he said angrily. "What did you say to him last time that made him so fucking interested? Maybe you can just take it back."

Only now did Hermione realize what was happening.

"Wait a second, are you *mad* at me?"

Draco said nothing, but the set of his jaw told her that he was.

"You must have lost your damn mind!" she said, throwing her arms in the air. "*He called me over to start, and I said as little to him as possible! It's not my fault he did some passing legilimency and realized that a squib obviously would not be able to occlude!*"

Draco's eyes were burning into her. "Then what did you say?"

"Nothing! I pretended to have no idea what he was doing, and I got away from him as quickly as possible!"

"What did you show him in your head then? While he was doing legilimency I mean?" cut in Theo.

Hermione gave him an exasperated look. "At first? Some magical theory and books in runes that I've memorized. Then I remembered I was supposed to be a squib so I switched to Shakespeare. He never saw who I was or anything about you all."

Hermione decided that the wizards didn't need to learn that she had started with *A Winter's Tale*. Draco's temper was teetering.

"It doesn't make sense," said Blaise, frowning at this. "He's just famously disinterested in witches *or* wizards. Many of us thought he was entirely asexual. But I saw how he was watching you that night, and it was borderline creepy."

It was precisely like Draco, she wanted to say, but she resisted.

"There have been rumors," gritted out Draco, "from the first war, I mean. Apparently he did have a fancy once, but she died. Mother told me – she wouldn't say who it was – but after that Severus never looked at another witch again."

Hermione went still as she made herself remember everything from their conversation.

"He said I looked like a witch he once knew..." she said slowly.

"Draco, why don't you transfigure her back into Annabelle, and we can have another look," suggested Luna.

Draco frowned, but nodded as he raised his wand and went to work. Ten minutes later Hermione turned to stare at herself in the mirror, and the others were now looking at her thoughtfully too.

"She looks like Ginny," said Theo.

Admittedly, that had been Hermione's first thought too when she saw herself this way a couple weeks earlier. But she knew it was just the hair. Hermione tended to associate *any* redhead with the Weasleys.

"No..." she said slowly. "No, other than the hair color I really don't. And Ginny's hair isn't this dark."

She stared in the mirror, the dark red tresses in waves over her shoulders. Green eyes very much like Harry's were bright on her face. Her nose was longer and slightly turned up at the end, but her mouth was precisely the same.

She suddenly knew who she looked like. She had seen pictures of the woman quite a few times.

Her eyes met Ginny's in the mirror, and she could tell that Ginny thought so too.

"There's no way," Ginny insisted. "No *possible* way, Hermione, that would be crazy."

"What?" demanded Theo. "Who is it?"

Luna was looking intrigued too, and she cocked her head to the side.

"You know..." she said. "I can see it. Harry showed me her picture once."

"And they were in the same year at Hogwarts," said Hermione softly.

"But I thought he *hated* her!" insisted Ginny. "Didn't Harry say he called her a mudblood?"

"I'm starting to think that some people use that word when they don't know what else to say."

Involuntarily her eyes flicked to Draco, who had gone pale. He was staring at Hermione with an odd expression on his face. He looked remorseful but also a little defiant. She wondered if he had really hated her back then. When did it become an act? When did he stop believing it?

She looked away from him and back to the mirror.

"It's her, Gin. You know it is."

"But *who*?" demanded Blaise. "We still don't know who the bloody hell you three are talking about!"

"Harry's mother," said Hermione simply. "Lily Evans Potter. She looked just like me. Or I suppose I look just like *her*. And as I said, she was in Snape's class at Hogwarts. Gryffindor of course."

The three wizards looked stunned.

"But Potter —" started Theo.

"Looked like his father James," finished Hermione. "He was the spitting image of James, except for the eyes. And Draco gave me Harry's eyes."

Draco's own eyes widened momentarily as he realized that he had.

"Fuck, I didn't even notice," he muttered.

Hermione shrugged. "Probably subconscious. You were trying to make me look different, and Harry's were very different."

“It just seems so unbelievable though,” said Theo frowning. “Do you mean to tell me that Severus is what... in love with her? Even though she married some other bloke and has been dead for *years*?”

Hermione nodded slowly. “Yes, and it fits, doesn’t it? Snape *despised* Harry – you know he did, don’t pretend like it wasn’t different from the other students. But he also saved Harry’s life a few times. And Snape was the one who heard the prophecy about Harry and told You-Know-Who. He’s the reason the Potters were hunted down. Dumbledore insisted that Snape didn’t know that the prophecy meant the Potters though, and he joined the Order the night You-Know-Who started to hunt them. Harry blamed Snape for their deaths.”

All three wizards were listening to her with wide eyes. Again, she glanced at Draco, and he looked positively ill.

“He was in love with a muggleborn then,” he said. “And he accidentally fed the Dark Lord the intelligence that killed her.”

Hermione glanced at him, wondering what he was thinking. She didn’t believe Draco necessarily *loved* her, but he clearly had an interest in her. She thought he might be putting himself into Snape’s shoes – perhaps he was imagining letting some crucial piece of information slip that meant Hermione died.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I imagine when he first saw me he thought he was seeing a ghost. He asked me if I was a mudblood. He said he could tell I was very well educated after he looked into my mind.”

“Lily Potter was a potions prodigy,” chimed Blaise. “Slughorn used to rave about her at the Slug Club. He always said she was even better than Severus.”

Hermione nodded slowly.

And there was the doe patronus in the woods, wasn’t there? Somebody had stolen the Sword of Gryffindor from Snape and lured Harry out with a doe. Hermione snorted to herself at how foolish they had been. The Sword hadn’t been stolen at all. Snape planted it and called Lily to find Harry.

Hermione didn’t share this with the others, but it was the last piece of evidence she needed.

“Yes, Snape was in love with Lily – he’s probably *still* in love with Lily – and Annabelle looks exactly like her.”

“He’s in love with her and obsessed with her then,” said Theo a bit darkly. “That’s concerning.”

Draco looked grimmer than ever.

“I don’t like it,” he said shortly. “I don’t like it at all.”

Hermione exhaled as she thought hard.

“Let’s all be rational about this. If Snape outranks you and wants to speak to me, then I suppose there’s no choice but to do it. The good news is we know he won’t hurt me – not as Hermione *or* as Annabelle. I certainly won’t be going home with him, and if this gala is really as busy as you say then Theo’s right that I won’t have to talk to him for very long. I got away from him last time and can do it again. I do think it’s a good idea to meet with him though, if he’s been thinking about me for the last couple of weeks. I’ve obviously never met Lily Potter, but I know enough about her that I can make sure to behave differently. It’s best to head this off before he starts to develop a real obsession with Annabelle too.”

“And if your behavior doesn’t put him off, and he wants to see you again?” demanded Draco.

“Then the next time he asks to see me we use a different hair color, and I’ll tell him I dyed it because I was tired of red. We can make it almost black like Harry’s. It will remind him of James *and* Harry, and that should be enough to make him back off.”

Draco didn’t look thrilled with this plan, but Hermione knew she was right.

“It’s a good idea,” said Ginny, and Hermione threw her a grateful look. “If we’re right about Lily, then Snape’s entire interest is based on Annabelle’s physical characteristics. Give Hermione a chance to get rid of him the normal way, and if that doesn’t work then changing her hair should do it. He’s obviously being driven by some nostalgic memory.”

Draco exhaled and swiped his hands over his face for a moment.

“Fine,” he snapped. “But I want all three of you to wear your knives and stay close together during the party. Like I said, Blaise, Theo, and I are going to be forced to dance and mingle, and the ballroom is large. There will be a few hundred people there. We might lose sight of you in the crowd.”

Hermione stilled at this news. Perhaps she *would* be able to slip away and explore Malfoy Manor after all. Maybe she could catch a witch unawares on the way to the powder room and acquire a wand that way. Maybe it would be worth confessing her plan to her friends so they could cover for her. But would they? Or were they more loyal to their respective boyfriends now than Hermione?

She couldn’t be sure.

“It will be fine,” said Luna in a soothing voice. “We can help Hermione get away from him if needed.”

“Be sure that you do,” said Draco in a cold voice. “Because godfather or not, if he tries anything with her, I’ll have to fucking kill him. And Merlin knows he’d be harder to kill than the Dark Lord himself.”

The next several days were tense. There were no soft touches. There were no kisses to the back of her hand or cheek. It was reminiscent of Draco's reaction after the first party, but somehow worse. He seemed to blame her for Snape's interest, though she continued to insist that she hadn't done a damn thing to encourage it. The whole situation was just terrible luck.

He became cold enough that Hermione consumed more than one of her brewed calming draughts, and even Theo offered to intervene.

"I can throw a *crucio* his way if you'd like," he said. "He's being an utter arse."

Some tiny part of Hermione fantasized about it because his behavior hurt. She had tried to fight her feelings for him. She knew they weren't healthy and that there were things about him that should be absolute deal breakers.

But she couldn't help it. He had crawled into her heart with his obsessive staring, his exceptional care, and the gentle touches that she knew she could only accept from him.

And now this chilliness — so reminiscent of their days at Hogwarts — threatened to bruise her heart.

Hermione hoped his foul mood was because of the gala. She told herself it had to be. He was jealous and had his own issues with anxiety and paranoia, especially when it came to Hermione and her safety. But the more he ignored her the more she hurt, and by the time the gala finally rolled around she was wrung out.

The only positive thing that had happened in the last few days was her animagus transformation. She had finally managed a full wing on each arm, though not at the same time.

Still, it was little consolation when she was facing down a gala with an angry... what was he? Not a boyfriend, certainly, and not a lover either. No, an ornery, possessive jailer was the most fitting description for him.

When it came time to transfigure her into Annabelle, Draco scowled and wouldn't speak to her. He worked quickly and then turned with a dismissive air and strode out the door, slamming it as he went. Theo gave a great eye-roll at his antics and quickly filled them in on the plan.

"Since you are all going to be there as servers, you'll each have two marks for veritaserum. Wait until Hermione has spoken to Severus before you bother to try, and if it doesn't work tonight that's okay. Don't do anything risky to get it done, none of them are that critical. We have to give it a shot though, and if you manage to dose any of them let me or Blaise know."

"Not Draco?" asked Hermione in a wry voice.

Theo grimaced. "No. He's having an off night."

Hermione gave a mirthless laugh and just turned away.

“Hermione,” said Theo as he pulled her aside from the others. She looked up and found herself staring at that face that was so much like hers. “It will be alright. He’s just... emotional. And he’s bad with emotions.”

Hermione shook her head. “He’s infuriating! I thought something was starting, you know? It’s been building for months now. And I was...” she hesitated because she had barely admitted it to herself, let alone the others. But this was Theo, her *brother*. “I thought I might have... a crush,” she finished.

Theo looked like he was warring between amusement and dismay.

“I know,” she said. “But I just... I can’t have feelings for him if this is how he behaves whenever somebody else notices me. I mean, Snape doesn’t even want *me*, he wants Annabelle! And Draco is blaming me for something that is nobody’s fault. Honestly, if it’s anybody’s fault at all it’s *his* for making me a Lily Potter duplicate! And yet, he’s acting like I did this intentionally. He’s being cold and cruel. It’s exactly like Hogwarts, and I *hated* him there! And there are so many things I’ve had to overlook — all the people he’s tortured and killed, the way he has imprisoned me, the fact that he *marked me* with his knife in a way that means he can always track me without asking first... and I had nearly accepted those things! I was starting to fall for him even with all of those flaws! But then he turns around and starts to act like this? I can’t do it, Theo. It makes me want to run. I don’t want to be stuck here on the brink of giving my heart away to somebody who is just going to break it.”

Hermione gave a great sniff and a single tear tracked down her cheek. Theo cupped her face and brushed it away with his thumb.

“Let me talk to him, Hermione. He’s just... he blames himself. He’s terrified that Severus is going to try something, and he won’t be there to stop it. But he’s not a bad bloke, he’s really not. And Merlin, if he fucks up a chance with you because of *this*... I’ll kill him myself.”

Hermione was already shaking her head. “Please don’t. At least not tonight. I can’t... I don’t want.... *Please* Theo. I need to know that anything he does is his own idea.”

“He made you cry!” he insisted.

“Lots of people have made me cry,” she retorted. “I’m a rather weepy sort.”

“Hermione,” he sighed.

“I’m serious,” she said.

His mouth thinned. He didn’t look happy at all, but he finally slumped. “Fine,” he said. “But if he does *anything* else to hurt you or fuck this up, I’m saying something. This is just...” he gave a helpless gesture.

Hermione nodded curtly, and Theo changed the subject, looking almost as frustrated as Hermione felt.

“We need to have a plan for Severus,” he said, now turning back to the others and raising his voice so they could hear too. “I know Hermione is going to do her best to get away from him, but how do you intend to snuff out this little fascination of his?”

“I’ll make it clear I’m not interested,” she said.

“How?” pressed Theo.

She shrugged. “I’ll wing it. But now that I know what to expect I’ll be better prepared for it.”

“Ginny and I can help,” added Luna. “Can’t we Theo? If she needs us?”

The five of them began to discuss a tentative, emergency plan. It was *not* one that Hermione was terribly inclined to execute, but she had to admit that it was likely to work.

“Will one of you tell Draco?” she asked. “Just in case, I mean...”

“We’ll let him know,” said Blaise. “You three are sure?”

“We’ve done it before, right Hermione?” asked Ginny, twinkling at her.

Hermione turned crimson and refused to answer.

Blaise and Theo left soon after that, and then the elves arrived with their uniforms for the evening, which were markedly different from the previous party.

“I suppose with the wives and daughters there the waitstaff doesn’t have to put out,” said Ginny, rolling her eyes.

Hermione, however, was relieved. It was a simple black skirt and black oxford shirt with long-sleeves. Her clothing looked very much like traditional waitstaff at any rather nice muggle restaurant. They all slipped their thigh and arm holsters on, and then the elves charmed their shoes to appear to be closed-toe so they would blend in with the black stockings they were given to wear.

She would melt into the background like this.

Their hair and jewelry was arranged much like the previous party, though Ginny’s colorful headband was replaced with a simple, black one this time. The jewelry too was more subtle for everyone but Hermione. Poppy produced the choker again, and Hermione shook her head.

“Absolutely not,” she said.

“But Master Draco wishes—” she started.

“I don’t care about his sodding wishes, I’m not wearing it.”

She wouldn't, not when she was at such odds with him and her heart was feeling bruised. After he explained what he meant by it, Hermione was not interested in wearing something that was meant to represent some sort of public claiming.

"I'll wear anything else in my jewelry box, but not that," she insisted.

Poppy wrung her hands, but apparated away and reappeared a few moments later with a simple necklace in silver. It had a small G on it, and Hermione smiled sadly when she saw it. This was one of the few things she had taken from her parents' house and brought with her on the run. It wasn't something Draco had given to her.

Annabelle Goodman

The G could stand for Goodman just as well as Granger.

She clasped it around her neck and played with the small charm for a moment before straightening up.

"Right," she said. "Let's send Snape packing, shall we?"

Hermione, Ginny, and Luna emerged with trays of champagne and began to move through the crowd. She tried not to gasp at the opulence of the ballroom. It had heavy molding on the walls, a fresco on the ceiling, and several shockingly ornate chandeliers casting a warm glow on the guests.

It struck Hermione just how privileged the three wizards she now lived with were. This palatial building was Draco's, and Nott Castle had been Theo's, and Blaise had his fifteen homes all connected by floo. He could probably sell them and build a place like this if he wanted to.

And yet, despite the shocking room in which they found themselves, most of the guests were affecting a bored air. Draco had been correct that there were a few hundred people, and for the first time Hermione was getting a glimpse of just how *normal* the outside world must be. Despite skirmishes with the Order and the occasional act of murder, Draco had insisted that Voldemort wanted the wizarding populace to be complacent. He couldn't burn it to the ground or else there would be nothing left to rule over.

No, this gala looked like nothing more than a very fancy party, with the wizards in dress robes and the witches in gowns. Other than the fact that Death Eaters were mixing openly with various Ministry officials and their spouses, nothing about it struck Hermione as being particularly odd. And that, she thought, felt *very* odd.

She had spent the last few months hiding her very existence while the Ministry of Magic was rebuilt and bureaucrats pushed paper.

Voldemort had won, and life continued as normal for everyone but those who were willing to put their lives on the line for their chosen side. Most witches and wizards, she thought bitterly, were *not* so willing to sacrifice a comfortable life to pick sides. They wanted to keep their heads down, their homes secure, and their families safe. Their routines would largely stay the same, regardless of who was in power.

Voldemort had been relying on it, and the evidence of it was all around her. It made her inordinately angry, and she fought to control her temper.

This was not the time.

The three witches began to make their rounds through the guests, making a point to stay in close eyesight of one another. It wasn't until she had crossed to the other side of the room from the staging area for staff that she caught a glimpse of Draco. He was standing with his mother, speaking animatedly with a middle-aged witch she didn't recognize, his blonde hair shining in the candlelight. His dress robes were fine, and even from behind she could tell he cut a handsome figure. As she stared at him, Narcissa turned to the side, and Hermione studied her profile. She was elegant, cold, and carved like marble. She did not have a hair out of place, though she appeared a little tense. Hermione ducked her head and moved on.

As they worked their way through the crowd she caught a glimpse of Rodolphus who was standing next to Bellatrix. The sight of her made Hermione's pulse shoot so high that she felt Theo nudge on their bond. He immediately started siphoning her panic, and she felt his own fear in her head.

What the hell happened? What is it?

Bellatrix is here.

Oh. You'll be alright, Sis. Just avoid her.

She's tried to kill me multiple times.

I know it. I told you she's on my list.

Alright. Just... next time give me some advanced warning, yeah?

Heard. Let me know if you three need anything.

He severed his connection, and Hermione's eyes swept the crowd until she found him. His curly head was bent toward Draco now, saying something in his ear.

Telling him about Bellatrix no doubt, she thought.

Sure enough, Draco spun around and seemed to be looking for something. She shrank away from his gaze, but she felt the heat of his stare lock on her from the other side of the room, and then Theo's voice was in her head again just a moment later.

Draco wants me to ask you why you aren't wearing your choker.

Because I know what it means, and I'm not playing along when he insists on being an arse.

She felt Theo chuckle a little before severing the connection once more, and again she sensed Draco looking at her again, but she refused to make eye contact. She had to find Snape and get this over with.

"There," muttered Ginny, gesturing to a corner cloaked in shadow. Sure enough, Snape was hovering in the corner, rather like a large bat.

Or a cockroach, she was forced to acknowledge, remembering Draco's comment from all those months ago.

"Let's do it," she said under her breath. "If I put the tray down on the ledge next to him, that's the signal that I need you."

"Got it," whispered Ginny, and then she and Luna melted away to serve some guests nearby.

"Evenin' Sir," she said as she approached him, offering him the last glass on her tray. "Champagne?"

Snape took it with a murmured thanks, his eyes roving over her. Hermione had decided that the blunt approach was best. She wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"Me employer is sayin' that you is wantin' to speak to me, Sir," she said.

God she was really bad at this accent.

Snape raised a single eyebrow. "Indeed. You scurried off too quickly last time, Miss..."

"Goodman," said Hermione promptly. "Annabelle Goodman."

He inclined his head. "Very well, Miss Goodman."

Hermione saw him eyeing the G on her necklace, and then her hair and eyes.

"I confess I find you to be a fascinating puzzle," he said.

"Oh?" she asked in a bored voice. "Ain't nobody ever been thinkin' I'm fascinatin' afore."

Nobody talks like this, Hermione. Channel Hagrid. HAGRID.

"I find that very hard to believe," he said wryly. She felt that press of legilimency on her mind and immediately began visualizing the bottom of a cauldron to block him from going further.

He paused, and his eyes narrowed.

"Yes, you *are* quite fascinating, aren't you? A pewter cauldron, size three if I'm not much mistaken? We will have to do something about that, Annabelle. I and... others... always favored size two for our brews."

What the hell, Hermione.

Why, *why* did her best occlumency have to involve potions? That had been Lily Evans's best subject in school, not to mention Snape's.

She switched to the more chaotic mental rambling method she originally used, this time thinking about movies she had seen years ago.

"Hmm, the women in your head are certainly pretty," he said with a slight laugh in his voice. "But you're very beautiful too."

Hermione was internally cringing and tried to keep it together.

"Mmmm," she said, looking away. "If you say so. But Sir, I really must be gettin'—"

"Stay," he said. "That's an order."

"*Sir*," she said, "I'm just here to serve some drink and earn some galleons. Tha's it. I can't be socializin' with the guests for more than a mo'. He'll fire me arse."

Hermione tried not to wince at her atrocious accent.

"He will not," said Snape firmly. "I've made it clear I wish to speak to you. Draco will not interfere."

That's what you think.

Instead she gave an impatient sigh. "I'm not sure wha' yeh be wantin' Sir. I'm just a waitress."

"I want to get to know you, Annabelle. You're beautiful, fiery, obviously intelligent, and far better educated than you are letting on. I need at least an hour with you, if not the whole evening."

Oh hell no.

Hermione idly wondered what Snape would say if he knew who she really was. No doubt he would be revolted. They knew each other well but had never gotten on for obvious reasons. And here he was, practically propositioning her.

"Sir, I'm not good company like yer suggestin'," she said. "I'm seein' someone."

Snape's expression darkened momentarily.

"You're seeing Draco?" he asked coldly.

If only.

Instead, she made herself burst out laughing, as though it was the most preposterous thing she had ever heard. She wiped her eyes with her free hand.

“Oh tha’s rich, Sir. Me an’ a Death Eater... that ain’ never happenin’!”

His expression darkened further at this. “You seemed rather close to Rodolphus the last time I saw you... and then you disappeared at the same time as Draco.”

She gave him a marvelous eye-roll. “Honestly, Sir, that man... Rodolphus did yeh say his name is? He’s the type to see a pair o’ nice tits and throw a galleon a girl’s way. Easy pickin’s and no real work for me. And as for Mr. Malfoy... well I don’ know nothin’ about disappearin’ when he did. I just went to the kitchens to get a potion for me stomach, and Mrs. Higgins held me back. I reckon that old bat was afraid o’ me infectin’ the party.”

She planted a hand on her hip and tried to look confident in her lie. His eyes narrowed.

“Who are you seeing then?” he asked softly.

“Ain’ none o’ your business, if you don’ mind me sayin’,” she said.

“But I do mind. I would very much like to know which man has drawn your attention, Annabelle.”

Hermione gave a long suffering sigh and debated with herself about their emergency plan. She should last longer than this. She really wasn’t thrilled about executing it, but he was awfully persistent, and Hermione wanted to be done with him. She decided there was nothing for it.

She placed the tray on the ledge near him, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Ginny and Luna moving toward her.

“Well I did try to warn ya, Sir that it’s none o’ your business. But I s’pose some people just gotta see with their own eyes.”

Then she turned toward Ginny. “Hey! Maya!”

Ginny glided over.

“Yes, Annie?” she said in her faux American accent.

Hermione gave her a smirk. “I’ve been missin’ you and Fara.”

Ginny gave her a concerned look and reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Don’t tell me you’re working too hard. We can’t be having that.”

God she sounds exactly like Draco.

Hermione had the oddest urge to laugh, and she thought Ginny’s eyes were twinkling in Maya’s face as she reached up and stroked her cheek.

“I’ve gotta show this one why I’m not good company for ‘im.”

Ginny shot Snape an irritated look.

“She’s taken, you know. Our little trio is quite enough without *you* butting in.”

Then Ginny gripped Hermione by the cheek and leaned forward to kiss her.

It was a bit different kissing Ginny as Maya, but something about it was still very familiar. They had done this before, after all, just a few times in their early teen years. They spent weeks at a time sleeping in the same room at the Burrow and then Grimmauld Place, and naturally they had experimented with each other just a little bit.

Ginny opened her mouth to deepen the kiss, and Hermione let her eyes flutter closed and decided she might as well enjoy it. It wasn’t like she was being kissed on the lips by anybody *else*, though she sensed his gaze on her even as she pulled Ginny close.

“What about me, hmmm?” came Luna’s light voice, and Ginny and Hermione broke apart to see Fara raising one elegant eyebrow.

“O’course, Fara,” said Hermione with a smile, and this time she initiated by pulling Luna in. Now *this* was new. Luna had kissed her on the cheek before, but never like this. And unlike Ginny, Hermione knew that Luna had been with women for more than just a few snogs.

Sure enough, Luna was experienced and a bit demanding, but still gentle. Her fingers brushed Hermione’s hip and up her rib cage before settling on her waist.

When they broke apart, Hermione sensed they had drawn a few more stares, but she made herself ignore it as she turned to Snape.

“See now?” she said bluntly. “I ain’ no good for no man. No offense, o’course, I jus’ don’ like... all that.”

She gestured vaguely toward his crotch, which was something she sincerely hoped never to do again.

“And we’re together,” added Luna. “All three of us. I do think a fourth would be too many for our dynamic, and I’m afraid you don’t have the correct equipment, Sir.”

Hermione had never seen Severus Snape truly shocked before, and she took a moment to relish it.

Then Ginny finished with her usual bluntness. “Just because Mr. Malfoy puts us in outfits that shows off our goods doesn’t mean we’re into it.”

“Of course,” he said in a slightly strangled voice. “My mistake.”

“Can I get back to servin’ then, Sir?” asked Hermione pointedly.

“Yes. Yes, of course, I... I must be going.”

Hermione gave him a tight smile and picked up her tray to move away. Only then did she allow her gaze to find Draco’s. But he was studiously ignoring her and was instead flirting outrageously with Astoria Greengrass in the corner. As she watched he reached for her hand

and kissed it, giving her that twinkling dimpled smile that Hermione thought was all hers. She came to a complete halt as she watched him on the other side of the room. His gaze slid over Astoria's shoulder and met hers just as his lips connected with her cheek and lingered there. He whispered something in her ear that made her fling her arms around him and press herself against him, and he pulled her close, all while staring at Hermione with a challenging smile.

Hermione thought her heart might be breaking. Yes, she had just rather publicly snogged Ginny and Luna, but it didn't *mean* anything. It was part of the plan to get rid of Snape for good. Theo and Blaise had been in on it, and they promised they would tell Draco about it too. He must have known the whole thing was nothing more than a show.

But this... this was personal. He was punishing her, she just knew it.

"Take it," said Hermione, wrenching her ring off and handing it to Ginny, who was shooting a murderous look toward Draco.

Hermione tore her gaze from Draco just as the smile was sliding from his face, and his brow was furrowing with something that looked like confusion as he watched Hermione react. He was still hugging Astoria though, and Hermione couldn't bear to look at him.

"Hermione..." said Ginny, as her hand closed around the ring.

"No," she said. "No, I can't do this tonight. Just... cover for me, yeah? I need to be alone."

Hermione spun and strode toward the door to the service area, carrying her empty tray like a shield to part the crowd. She hoped he would think she was just going to restock, and by the time he realized she was gone she would be well ahead of him.

She was in luck to find Mrs. Higgins with her back turned, preparing several trays of canapés, and Hermione ducked past her and slipped through a door to the servant's hall. She made her way down the stone corridor for several paces before picking a door at random and opening it. She found herself in another hallway, this time more formal with old fashioned wallpaper and wood paneling. She had no idea where she was, but it appeared to be deserted. Hermione strode quickly, the carpet muffling her footsteps. It wasn't until she got to the end of the hall and turned a corner that she felt Theo pushing through their bond.

Hermione, where are you? Draco is getting worried.

Screw him, she retorted. I'm not interested.

Hermione, please don't do this.

Do what? Allow my heart to be played with by that giant git? It's too late.

He didn't know! Blaise and I didn't have a chance to tell him before you started snogging them! You three went to plan B much faster than we were expecting! We just told him it was all fake, and he feels terrible. Please come bring us a drink so he can talk to you himself.

Hermione came to a halt as she considered this. No doubt he had been blinded by jealousy if he truly didn't know. Then again, it was her two best friends in front of Snape, whom he *knew* they were trying to get rid of tonight. It didn't take some great genius to conclude the whole thing was set up.

No. He becomes petty and cruel the moment something doesn't go his way. He never gives me the benefit of the doubt. He takes his anger out on me. I'm done.

Hermione you can't be done!

Theo was sounding frantic now, but Hermione had enough. She pushed him out of her head, and she felt him pounding on their connection, but she didn't let him through.

She knew she would only have minutes before Draco was after her. She had no idea where she was going, but she had only one clear thought in her head: she had to stay within the wards of Malfoy Manor.

He would have to leave the party and go to Grimmauld Place to find her while she was in a property ward this heavily.

Or at least that's what she hoped.

Hermione knew she couldn't hide forever. At some point she would need to face him and his anger and her terrible, horrible, bloody *inconvenient* feelings. Because even as she wanted to rage at him she found herself softening.

She hated, *absolutely hated* the fact that she secretly liked his compulsion to be so territorial that he couldn't even identify an obvious hoax when it was staring him in the face. She hated that she loved the fact that she seemed to be the only one who ever made his veneer really crack. She hated that she craved feeling his eyes on her as though she was the only person in a ballroom that could hold hundreds. She hated that she had caved and had forgiven him so readily for marking her because she knew deep down that it was more than a simple tracking spell, and he had done something intimate with his own brand of family magic.

She hated all of it just as much as she loved it. And bloody hell, she needed some space to *think* properly and calm down before she saw him again. If she saw him right now she might stab him. Or kiss him. Or both.

She had just said she was done, hadn't she? She had told Theo that mere moments ago. And she should be done. She knew she bloody well should be done.

She wasn't done.

She made a frustrated noise and chose a door at random, opening it softly and slipping inside. She just needed to think and breathe and find some way to siphon these feelings herself without Theo's help. He was still pounding on their connection, but she couldn't let him in like this.

Hermione closed the door silently behind her and then came to an abrupt halt as she heard voices.

She was in a room she didn't recognize, paneled in dark wood. As she breathed in, the smell of whiskey and cigars wafted gently through the air, and she wrinkled her nose, trying not to sneeze.

She reached behind her for the doorknob and was about to turn it when she heard one of the voices say, "...Malfoy?"

Shit.

She shouldn't be here. She really, *really* shouldn't be here. She had no wand, and she was disguised as a waitress for heaven's sake. She could slip out now. She *should* slip out now.

But they had just said Draco's name, and Hermione couldn't let it go. She cared too much about the stupid prat to ignore a rumor or threat to him. She had to know what they were saying.

She edged forward, willing herself to melt against the wall, and suddenly the marks on her palm started to tingle.

Draco was tracking her.

She didn't know if she felt relief or terror at this.

She edged ever closer until she could see where the figures were sitting. They were deep in conversation in a couple of armchairs, facing an unlit fireplace. She strained to hear.

"... jumped up. I know he's my nephew, but he's risen too high, too fast."

"He'll never have the sway at the Ministry that I do. I delivered an entire department to our Lord."

Hermione froze at the sound of the second voice, and fear flooded her. She needed to get out. She couldn't be here. This was a bad, terrible, *awful* place for her to be, but she couldn't seem to move. She couldn't fucking move because Cormac McLaggen was raising his right hand to show Rodolphus Lestrange his missing fingers.

"That sadistic little fuck chopped off every one of my fingers.... Slowly, mind you. All because I touched that mudblood he killed. But I didn't even *fuck* her, you know? Just touched her and slapped her around a little. He kept me in his bloody dungeon for *weeks*."

Hermione closed her eyes and willed herself to breathe. Instinctively she opened the connection to Theo, and she felt him jolt as he sensed her utter panic.

Hermione, where the fuck are you? What's happening?

I'm stuck in a room with Rodolphus and Cormac. They don't know I'm here, but... oh God, they're talking about that day... Theo, I need him to die. Tell Draco I really need him to

die...

I will. Do you know where you are? Draco can tell you're somewhere in the West Wing of the Manor, but he is having trouble finding your exact location through the wards.

No, I've never been here before.

Describe it, quickly, we are leaving the ballroom now.

It's dark wood paneling and there are two leather armchairs in deep red and a fireplace. They are smoking cigars and drinking whiskey. There are some bookshelves on the wall and a couple of large windows looking out toward the gardens. There's a portrait of Lucius over the fireplace. Oh God, he sees me Theo, he's staring right at me...

Stay calm, he won't say anything. He knows Draco will destroy his portrait if he gives you away. We know where you are and will be there in less than two minutes. Just breathe alright? Give me your emotions.

Hermione tried, but it wasn't enough. Rodolphus was asking for details, and now Cormac was regaling him with the story as though it had been a personal triumph.

"I had her pinned to the wall, naked," he said. "She was pretty, you know. Feisty. Tried to fight back, but a few smacks and she was moaning for me."

It's not true!

Hermione was seething, paralyzed with anger and fear. She made the tiniest sound of protest, and the wizards fell silent and turned around to find her staring at them, eyes huge and face pale.

Oh no.

"Annabelle?" said Rodolphus, standing to give her a twisted smile. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Who is this?" demanded Cormac.

"One of Draco's servers. A little pet, yes? She flirted with me so prettily the other night before disappearing with my nephew halfway through the party."

Hermione's heart was pounding, and she felt Theo trying to take her fear, but there was too much. This couldn't be happening again. No, it could *not* be happening to her again.

Theo they found me.

Don't hesitate to take them out if you need to. We will be there in thirty seconds.

She tried to breathe.

Thirty seconds. Just thirty seconds.

She was shaking, as Cormac tilted his head to study her. “Draco dipped his cock into this one?”

“I reckon,” said Rodolphus, sneering now. “Shame, too. I had such high hopes for you, pet.”

Hermione tried to control her shaking. “He didn’t,” she said in a quivering voice.

“Oh how pretty,” said Rodolphus, now starting to walk toward her. Cormac began to follow him. “Shaking and trembling like a kitten, aren’t you, pet? I can see why Draco was so eager for you.”

“I’m not keen on his leftovers, but I saw him watching you tonight,” added Cormac.

Cormac was at the gala tonight?

Of course he was, nearly all of the Death Eaters were there. And why else would he be here in this room? But how had Hermione not noticed him? Why hadn’t her instincts gone haywire the moment she stepped into the ballroom? How on earth had they failed her so badly?

“...I *am* keen to take the thing Malfoy wants,” Cormac added.

At these words, Hermione found her voice.

“Don’t come any closer.”

“Oh I’m afraid we must, pet,” said Rodolphus. “My nephew can’t have all the fun. And don’t you know, he stopped my friend Cormac here from playing with his last little bitch. Draco owes him this one, I’m afraid.”

They took one more step closer, and Hermione finally unfroze.

“*Stupefy! Stupefy!*” she called in rapid succession. It wasn’t strong enough without a wand to fully knock them out, but it slowed them both down. The spell behaved a bit like an *impedimenta* when done wandlessly.

She hit both of them thanks to the element of surprise, and their eyes were huge as she turned and started to flee. That burst of magic was already making her shake again, and she fumbled with her sleeve to pull her knife out of her arm holster just as Cormac broke free and grabbed her by the wrist.

Hermione spun around to stab him, but at that moment she heard the door burst open, and less than a second later something silver flew within a few centimeters of her cheek and lodged itself firmly into Cormac’s right eye.

Hermione blinked in shock as blood spurted, and something gelatinous oozed out, and he seized. He was screaming as he started to fall, still clutching at her and pulling her down

with him. Hermione tried to scramble away and only then registered the duel taking place behind her.

It was two on one, and she heard Theo and Draco sending non-lethal spells toward Rodolphus while he returned *Avada's* with reckless abandon, forcing them to dodge. She knew why they were holding back from using the killing curse: she was too close.

Her adrenaline and instincts taking over from all the years she fought with Harry, Hermione reached down toward Cormac, who was still spluttering blood, his screams becoming fainter as he continued to twitch. She knew he was dying a very painful death, and his body was giving out. She fought the revulsion in her stomach as she quickly searched him and then she found it: his wand.

She had done all of this with her back turned. The three wizards were wholly preoccupied with each other and hadn't noticed. As she slid Cormac's wand out of his robes pocket, her magic pulsed just a little to be connected to a wand again.

Still, the wand didn't particularly like her, and she absolutely despised *it*. The wand's master was somebody she loathed, and she thought the wand could sense it. She could feel it fighting her, but she gritted her teeth and bore down. She would have one chance to do this before Rodolphus's attention was squarely on her.

Gripping her knife in one hand and the wand in the other, Hermione twisted around on the floor and shouted, "*Stupefy!*" at Rodolphus.

He jerked in surprise to see the red jet of light coming toward his knees, but he was too late. Her spell connected, and he collapsed, out cold now that Hermione's magic had been directed with a wand.

Cormac's wand and her knife went clattering on the floor, and she raised her hands to her face. She was trembling badly.

She felt Theo start to siphon again as the scent of Draco filled her nose.

"Hermione," he said gently, pulling her hands away from her face. She opened her eyes to find him crouched down staring at her, eyes darting over every part of her face. He looked terrified, enraged. His anger was palpable, rolling off of him in waves.

"Did either of them touch you?"

She swallowed hard and shook her head. "No, you saw it. Just my wrist."

Draco nodded once. "McLaggen is dying. Do you want to watch or would you like for us to take you away from here?"

She took a shaky breath to steady herself. "I need..."

Her throat closed as she tried to say the words.

“What do you need, little dove?” he asked. His voice was gentle, but firm. “Tell me.”

“I need to be able to cast *Avada Kedavra*. To end it I mean... to end her. And him. I’ve never done it before. I don’t want you to kill him, Draco. You’ve killed too many people. I need to do it. I need the practice, and I don’t want his life on your conscience.”

The words just spilled out involuntarily. She didn’t mean to tell him this, but she was so stunned, so shaken, she couldn’t help herself. He stared at her, and she could see him turning over innumerable questions in his mind.

“Alright,” he said slowly. “Once this is all over you’re going to tell me exactly what you mean by that. But if you’d like to practice, this is a good opportunity. He’s going to be dead in the next few minutes anyway.”

Hermione nodded, and he helped her stand. He slipped his wand into her hand, and just like the last time she had faced Cormac, he wrapped his arm around her waist and braced her.

“You have to call death when you say the words,” he said. “You don’t just have to want it, you must *summon* it. Death is inside all of us, waiting to claim us at any moment. Draw him out to take McLaggen instead.”

It was a curious description indeed. But Hermione remembered that wizards had always personified death in a way. It had always been depicted as a figure lurking in the shadows, waiting for that perfect moment to strike. Wasn’t *The Tale of the Three Brothers* precisely this?

She raised Draco’s wand and thought about what he said. She closed her eyes and willed death to emerge from her soul. She would crack it open, ever so slightly and pull it out of herself and force it upon him.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” she whispered, and Hermione felt her soul cleave in two as something dark and thick emerged, traveling down Draco’s wand in a rush of green light. It bathed Cormac, and he stopped twitching. For the first time ever, Hermione felt someone else’s magic extinguish as the death that was waiting for her took him instead. She gasped as it was sucked back into the wand, and her soul began to heal, though not in exactly the same shape as it had been.

“That was beautiful, sweet girl,” he murmured in her ear. “Now Rodolphus?”

“Obliviate him,” she said. “I’ll do it.” She saw Theo looking surprised and sensed Draco’s reluctance, but it was for the best. He was too highly ranked, and his death would require far more explanation than Cormac’s.

She pulled herself free from Draco and approached Rodolphus with a grimace. She crouched down and whispered, “*Obliviate*.”

Immediately the spell connected, and Hermione began to sift through his memories. She was an expert with this spell, and she knew she could craft something innocuous that would make him forget the entire thing. She was relieved to find that he hadn’t been in the room

terribly long. He met Cormac here. She replaced the memory of their conversation and subsequent duel with something mundane: he waited for Cormac and drank some firewhiskey and smoked a cigar and then another drink and another. Cormac never showed, but Rodolphus drank himself into a stupor, which would explain why he would be waking up here the next morning.

Then she went back even further and found herself. She erased his memories of her as Annabelle. She replaced herself with a plain witch who held no interest for him that first night. He would have no motivation to ever seek her out.

Spell complete, she levitated his body to one of the chairs and then vanished one of the glasses of whiskey on the coffee table in front of it.

“You’ll need to get rid of Cormac’s body and the blood,” she said stiffly, as she handed Draco his wand back. “Rodolphus will wake up thinking that Cormac never arrived, and he just got drunk and fell asleep. I erased every memory he had of Annabelle. He will have no idea who I am.”

They nodded, and Draco looked at Theo.

“Theo, can you...”

“Yes,” said Theo, looking a bit pale. “I’ll dump his body and make it look like the Order killed him. You’ll want to get your knife though.”

Hermione watched as Draco approached Cormac’s body and placed his foot on his chest for leverage as he bent down and gripped the hilt of his knife. She looked away as she heard a terrible sort of squelch, and then the sounds of a spell vanished the remains of his eye and brain on the blade.

Hermione wanted to vomit.

She heard the knife sheath, and then she felt Draco behind her gripping her arm to lead her away.

“Come along,” he murmured. “Back to your room, and we’ll get you settled in.”

They were silent as he led her through the corridor and into a different door that connected to a servant’s hall behind it, up a staircase, and then another, before emerging in the wing near her room. They saw nobody, but she didn’t feel Draco begin to relax until they passed through his wards.

He released her arm when they crossed the threshold to her room, and she hurried away from him, heading toward the window seat. She was still angry with him, still jittery from the thing she had just been through, and there was something else... something that felt unsettled inside of her.

She was a murderer now. The fact that Cormac had been dying anyway was little consolation. Her soul was no longer pristine.

She didn't know if she cared.

"I'm staying with you tonight," he said. "That was your first *Avada*. There might be aftereffects. But I need to go back to the gala first. I won't stay longer than an hour."

Hermione said nothing and just curled on the window seat. A moment later Crookshanks streaked over and hopped in her lap, giving Draco a soft hiss as he did it. Hermione sank her fingers into his fur as she stared out at the balcony and gardens shrouded in moonlight. Something of Columba stirred inside of her, and only now did she remember that doves didn't just symbolize peace. They also represented death.

"Hermione," he sighed.

Again, she ignored him, and she heard him mutter a curse under his breath as he started to move to her door.

"I'll be back in an hour," he said.

She heard the door snap shut, and tears began to fall.

Chapter 18: Crush

His little dove had killed McLaggen. She had actually fucking killed him. She had cast a perfect *Avada* on her first try. It was so strong, so beautiful, so...

Draco shuddered as he saw Theo slip back into the ballroom. Astoria was trying to get his attention, but he had gone back to ignoring her. Theo and Blaise *claimed* that kiss between their respective witches had all been a set up to make Snape go away, and once again Draco had fucked it up by overreacting and making her run.

He still wasn't certain there wasn't more going on there. He knew Hermione loved Ginny and Luna in her own way, and perhaps...

His gut twisted. He felt ill and helpless as he considered it.

No. No, they said it was fake.

It had to be fake. He didn't know what he would do if Hermione was really into witches, and he could never truly draw her attention the way he needed. The thought was intolerable. It made him feel violent and reckless. That stunt with Astoria had been stupid, but he did it because he had to get *something* from Hermione to convince him that she cared.

He had gotten it, alright. His darling girl had fled and then committed murder to save Draco from taking yet another life, even though it was one he really wanted. McLaggen's death had been one he fantasized about often.

But she wanted it for herself. She said she needed practice, and she was so sweet to be concerned for *him*. How could he ever say no to that?

Surely she wouldn't do that for Ginny and Luna. Surely it was special. It just had to mean something.

As much as he was clinging to this, he hated that she had been in that room in the first place. He hated that he hadn't killed McLaggen already. She had been scared, hurt, and now she was angry with him again.

She will forgive me. She has to forgive me.

Theo caught his eye and made a gesture toward a side door with his head that told Draco he needed to follow. There was an uncharacteristic harshness to Theo's expression. Draco had seen that precise look on Hermione's face a few times now, but it was rare seeing it from his best mate.

Draco knew he had fucked up. Theo was itching for a fight.

Draco started to move toward him, and Astoria clutched at his arm.

“Get off, I need to go,” he said harshly.

Hurt flashed across her face. “But I thought we were—”

He spun to glare her. Yes, that moment with Astoria had technically been his fault, but Draco was more than happy to cast some blame upon her for it as well. If she wasn’t so fucking *easy* and always *hovering* he would never have used her this way.

“*We* are nothing. And this party bores me. I need to tend to my boon.”

At the reminder of his boon, Astoria’s expression hardened. “You won’t be able to keep her forever.”

Draco just raised one eyebrow. “Watch me.”

He stalked off, leaving a fuming Astoria behind, and he joined Theo, who said nothing, but turned to lead Draco through a side door into a small room that was empty.

As soon as the door shut, Theo spun to glare at him.

“I dumped his body just off of Diagon Alley and burned the Phoenix symbol over his Dark Mark.”

Draco nodded. That was good. The Order had started doing that recently as a way to claim kills. He, Theo, and Blaise all knew the spell for the Phoenix brand in case they needed to use it for a situation like the one they found themselves in tonight.

“And I wrecked the art you left on his stomach,” added Theo.

Draco swallowed hard. That was also good.

“You fucked up,” said Theo coldly. “You *really* fucked up this time. It’s *your* fault she was in that room with him in the first place. You’re the entire reason she cast her first *Avada*. If you hadn’t been such a bastard to her the last few days she never would have run, not even while you were jerking Astoria around in front of her.”

Draco’s heart sank. Theo was right.

“I know, alright?” he said. “I know it’s my fault! I just love her so much and —”

“If you love her Draco, then you need to fucking *act like it!* Did you know she was in tears before the gala even started? You’ve been a right arse to her for days, and she told me she couldn’t let you break her heart like this!”

Draco went cold.

“No,” he whispered. “No, I haven’t broken her heart. She’ll forgive me, I’ll go see her right now and—”

“Stay the fuck away from her,” Theo said in a harsh voice. His eyes were flashing. “Stay away until you can treat her the way she *deserves*. She is so close to accepting all of this, Draco, but I will not let you hurt her again!”

Draco felt his lungs closing in. Theo was right. Of course he was right. Draco had been stuck in a cycle of jealousy and fear when it came to Snape and then thrown for a loop when he watched Hermione kiss the other witches. But if he couldn’t get it together, then he would push his sweet girl away from him for good. She was too sensitive to be on the receiving end of his anger. She was too innocent. And she might not ever forgive him, and then she would never be his and...

She will. She WILL forgive me. She always does.

She had to be his. There was no alternative. Draco would let Theo get it out of his system and then go to her right away. He would plead with her. He would do anything he needed to bring her back around to him. She was angry, she was hurt, but didn’t she always forgive him eventually? Didn’t she always let Draco get close to her and lower her walls even more every time they argued? He needed her. He fucking needed her, and he wouldn’t be staying away, no matter what Theo had to say about it.

Draco said nothing as Theo withdrew his wand. “We had a deal, remember? About what happens if you hurt her again?”

“Yes,” said Draco hoarsely. He deserved it. He knew he deserved it. Theo would not be gentle, but Draco didn’t want him to be.

They said nothing more, and Draco exhaled to prepare himself while Theo waved his wand. He silenced the room and then turned it on Draco.

“I’m giving you five tonight. One for every day you’ve hurt her.”

Draco nodded mutely and closed his eyes.

“*CRUCIO!*” cried Theo, and Draco’s nerves lit on fire.

He dropped to his knees and began to scream.

Hermione was alone for mere moments before Poppy arrived in her room, exclaiming in dismay at the blood streaking her cheeks and hands. Hermione didn’t have it in her to protest as Poppy gently extracted Crookshanks, shoo’d her into the loo, forced her into the tub, and then scrubbed Hermione’s skin raw.

Her curls, too, received some attention, as Poppy declared there was blood matted in them, no doubt from being pulled down with Cormac. Hermione didn’t care to look, but the water

did turn a very faint pink as the bath wore on.

Once Poppy was satisfied she hauled Hermione out of the tub, produced a nightgown with a fierce look and then made her sit at the dressing table in an effort to tame her curls at least a little bit.

“We is needing to work quickly,” she said. “But a drying charm without your hair potions will make them...”

She made a gesture with her hand as though something was exploding.

“Right,” said Hermione dully.

Poppy worked as fast as Hermione had ever seen her, massaging several of those French products into her hair, section by section, before drying it. She finished with a ribbon of course – pale green this time – and again Hermione didn’t have the capacity to protest. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed.

As she was slipping under the covers, her door opened without knocking, and Draco strode in, still in his dress robes. He took one look at her and nodded firmly.

“Right. I’m done downstairs. I need to change, and then I’ll be back in a moment.”

Hermione noticed his hands twitching ever so slightly as he moved to the door. He had a slight stiffness to him as well, along with a limp. As he passed Crookshanks, Draco picked him up, ignoring the cat’s protests, and carried him through the connecting door, which he slammed shut behind him. His hand gave a mighty tremble just as the door closed, and a moment later she heard him lock the flap on the cat door too.

Hermione frowned, considering this as he disappeared into his room. She hated that she cared, but she *did*. She wasn’t terribly inclined to ask him, though. An idea struck her, and Hermione reached out to Theo.

Theo, what happened to Draco? He’s twitching.

Is he in there with you?

Theo’s voice in her head sounded angry and agitated.

No, she said quickly, slightly alarmed by the venom in his tone. He’s in his room. He just looked in on me, that’s all.

Hermione tried to ignore the fact that she was implicitly lying to him. She knew Draco would be back at any minute.

Good. I told him to stay the fuck away from you until he can treat you better.

A suspicion crossed Hermione’s mind.

Was it you? Did you do something to him that made him so... twitchy?

I just reminded him of our deal, that's all.

And what deal was that?

He hurts you, I cruciate him.

Hermione blinked in shock. She had never believed Theo was actually *serious*. He was so mild-mannered, especially compared to his best friend.

Then again, he had warned her, hadn't he?

That was entirely unnecessary.

No, it was completely necessary. He hurt you badly enough that you ran away and got yourself trapped with a couple of Death Eaters again. It was all his fault. He knows he deserved it. He didn't even fight back.

Theo...

Don't, Sis I'm tired of his bullshit.

Theo severed their connection, and Hermione sighed. She couldn't even pretend to understand the nuances of Theo's and Draco's relationship, nor those with Blaise for that matter. All three of them operated in a world where punishment was meted out with pain and sometimes death.

It was still shocking to her, though. She tried to imagine casting a *crucio* on Ginny or Luna or even Harry or Ron and couldn't do it. The fact that Theo's curse had been strong enough that Draco was still trembling from it...

No, I'm not going to forgive him just because Theo punished him too.

She was still angry with him, and she had a right to be. Even if she could overlook his behavior with Astoria – after all, he *hadn't* known about the girls' plan when she executed it – there was still the matter of being so cold toward her in the days leading up to the gala. He had given her emotional whiplash for something that was in no way her fault.

She didn't have it in her to forgive him just yet. He *had* pushed her to the breaking point, and he was a major reason why she had ended up in that room with Rodolphus and Cormac. Theo was absolutely correct about that.

The entire experience had been so terrible that she didn't even remember to collect Cormac's wand. Not even after she murdered him.

Because she *had* murdered him.

She killed him so Draco wouldn't be responsible for yet another death thanks to her. She killed him for *practice*.

She felt some tremors course through her as she thought about it, and it felt like the crack in her heart was opening again.

Calm. Breathe. It's an after-effect. You read about this.

Hermione knew it could take some time for the soul to stitch itself back together again after performing murder. That was why it was possible to make a horcrux with it – the horcrux extracted part of the soul after it cracked. A wizard could make use of that fragile time in the immediate aftermath while the soul was still healing from such a heinous act. The quickest and fastest way to heal the soul was with remorse, but Hermione truly *didn't* feel remorse for killing Cormac. That meant she would have to ride this out the hard way: with time, as her soul settled into its new shape with that fissure from the thing she had done. It would solidify eventually, and she would move on. But it would never look the same again.

The shaking subsided just as Draco's door opened.

They stared at each other for several seconds, neither one moving or speaking. He was dressed in a soft T-shirt and muggle athletic shorts. She had only seen him like this in the middle of the night. It was how he slept.

He moved into the room slowly and closed the door behind him softly.

He seemed to be weighing something as he approached her, cautiously.

"I need to stay with you tonight," he finally said.

"Theo told you to stay away."

She hadn't really intended to say it, but some part of her wanted him to know that *she* knew about his conflict with Theo because of his behavior.

He froze and gave her a wary look. "I know. But somebody needs to be with you after that. He told me to stay away until I could treat you better. I am determined to do that."

Hermione gave a mirthless laugh. "Right," she said a little bitterly. "You're going to treat me better now that you've been reminded of just how dangerous all of this can be."

His expression turned a bit frantic, a bit desperate.

"Hermione... *please*. I'm just... I'm sorry, sweet girl. I'm really, *really* bad at this. I know I am. I was an arse."

Hermione felt herself softening, and she hated it. She hated how much leniency she gave him because of the attention he would give *her*. She was determined to stay firm, at least until she had a chance to say everything she needed to say.

"It felt really terrible," she said slowly. "The last few days... I know this isn't a crush for you," she said, and Draco shook his head hard.

"No. No, it isn't," he said in a hoarse voice.

“Well...” Hermione trailed off, unsure of how he would take this next thing, but she had to say it. “Well it started to become a crush for me. Maybe. Or maybe not, I’m not certain...”

His eyes widened, and he went pale.

“...but I can’t let you do this to me! I can’t have a crush — or a *not crush* — on somebody who takes it out on me every single time something doesn’t go his way! Don’t you understand that? Don’t you realize how much I have overlooked when it comes to you? You treated me horribly for years. You torture and kill people without a second thought. You took me prisoner and marked me in a way that means I will never truly escape. And I was prepared to overlook all of it until you reverted to that version of yourself from Hogwarts that made me despise you! I have to have *some* standards, Draco! I can’t be your whipping boy — or girl, I suppose — whenever things start to spin out of your control!”

He looked like he had stopped breathing.

“Please,” he whispered. “Please don’t... just let me make it up to you. Let me show you, Hermione. I can’t... I’ve wanted...”

He moved his hands to his face, and his fingers laced through his hair, clutching at it. He looked slightly deranged.

“I don’t know,” she said a bit sadly. “I don’t like it when—”

But she was cut off by another tremor. Her feelings about Draco, all of the confusion, the compromise, the pain and fear and anger made her shake. Her eyes rolled back as she tried to control it.

Breathe. Calm. It’s normal. It will pass.

She smelled him before she felt him. That scent of cedar and spice wrapped her up before his arms did.

“You have to let yourself feel it,” he murmured. “You have to acknowledge it. If you don’t, it will just get worse.”

She knew she should push him away, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. His scent and arms comforted her like they always did. And she trusted that he knew what he was talking about when it came to the tremors. How many times had he cast this spell? How many times had he been through this himself?

She made herself face it squarely.

I am a murderer. I killed Cormac McLaggen.

The death in her heart stilled for a moment and retreated, but Hermione knew it was temporary. There would be more tonight.

She slumped in his arms, and only now did she tune in on his words.

“Good... you're doing so well with it. Just breathe, yeah? Please let me stay with you, at least for tonight. There will be more. You need somebody to be with you.”

Hermione said nothing to this, but just laid back in bed. Draco took her silence as implicit consent and moved with her, tucking her into his chest like he had that night he brought her back when exploring Columba.

She knew she should kick him out, but she was so drained. She was so tired of all of it. And he said he wanted to make it up to her. Maybe this could be a start.

He let out a sigh of relief that she wasn't ousting him, and he pulled her in tightly. She felt him bury his face into her hair as he breathed.

“I'm sorry. I'm really, truly sorry. Especially for tonight,” he added.

“Why did you do it?” she asked in a small voice.

He was silent for a long while.

“I just... I saw you kiss them. Theo and Blaise didn't tell me it was a setup. I know I should have figured it out, but you looked like you were enjoying yourself. And I thought...”

“You thought what?”

“I thought maybe I had read this all wrong. I thought maybe you were into witches, and all the times you let me touch you really *were* because you needed me to move past your trauma. And if that was the case, there would be nothing I could ever do to make you feel... well, I'm sure you can figure it out. At least with another bloke, I could maybe... I don't know.”

He trailed off a bit lamely, and Hermione paused as she considered this angle. Perhaps she should have thought of it at some point over the last couple of hours, but so much had happened that it hadn't crossed her mind. How would she have felt if she had found Draco snogging a man?

Disappointed. Utterly helpless. Desperately hopeful that he was bisexual so I would still have a chance, but terrified that he wasn't. Almost certain that he would never be mine, and there wasn't a bloody thing I could do about it.

Oh.

“I'm not into women,” she said simply.

“You aren't?”

She heard hesitancy and some muted hopefulness in his voice. Even now he wasn't certain, despite Theo's and Blaise's reassurances.

She sighed.

“No. I’ve snogged Ginny before of course, but—”

“Wait, *what?*”

Hermione huffed with frustration and spun around in bed to face him squarely.

“Yes, I’ve snogged her before tonight. Technically she was my first kiss. I’m not into women though.”

“But if you...”

“Honestly, Draco, how do you think I *know* I’m not into women? Ginny and I shared a room at the Burrow for years whenever I visited, and we snogged each other a handful of times when we were younger. It was just some experimentation. We figured we should try it because maybe we would like each other in *that way* if we did it, and that would be a hell of a lot faster than waiting for Harry and Ron to get their heads out of their arses and actually notice us. Neither of us felt anything from it though. We did it a couple more times just to practice. You know, so we wouldn’t be terrible at it when a boy finally *did* kiss us... but it has been years.”

He was staring at her in some disbelief.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never snogged Theo or Blaise,” she added.

“No,” he said in a rough voice. “Never.”

Hermione was a bit surprised by this, but she just shrugged. “Well I did. Ginny’s the only witch I’ve kissed before tonight. Luna was new.”

“And Luna is...”

“Bisexual, but she’s in love with Theo. She’s told me before that she only has friendly feelings for me. It was all an act, Draco. We wanted Snape to think precisely what *you* thought... that he would never stand a chance with Annabelle due to something that was entirely outside of his control. It never occurred to me that you would believe it too.”

She felt him relax.

“Alright,” he said. “That’s good. I’m sorry I tried to test you with Astoria, I just—”

“Wait, what do you mean, *test* me?”

He gave her a bewildered look. “To see if you reacted? Because I thought maybe you were into women all of a sudden? I don’t know, I just wanted to see if you even *cared*.”

“Of course I bloody well cared!” she insisted. “I thought you were punishing me for kissing Ginny and Luna!”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, that wasn’t it...”

She gave him a stern look.

“Alright, well that wasn’t *all* of it. I just... I don’t know, Hermione, I was thrown off and wasn’t thinking, alright? I wanted to draw some reaction out of you to reassure myself that I hadn’t been wrong this whole time. And then of course you *ran*, and then you ended up in that room, and it was all my fault.”

He said this last part bitterly, and she sighed. Her anger was dissipating. He had been foolish and rash, but she could understand why he had done it. The part with Astoria had been an enormous misunderstanding. She had a hard time imagining how she would react to the same thing.

“Fine,” she said with a deep sigh. “I get why you did it, and I’m sorry too. I thought Theo and Blaise had explained everything to you in advance. And it’s not like I have some claim on... well anyway. I just... it’s the way you’ve behaved the last few days that really bothers me. I don’t like it when you’re cold with me. It feels really bad when you push me away.”

Her eyes dropped as she said this, and he gripped her hand with the mark on it as he pulled it to him. She raised her eyes to find him staring at her, more intently than ever.

“Hermione, I’m an idiot. I’m a huge, bloody idiot, and by all rights you should hate me. Trust me, my darling, I am painfully aware of that. I treated you horribly at Hogwarts, and I’ve never even apologized for it, because frankly I don’t deserve your forgiveness for that. But you also need to know that regardless of what I do or say — or *don’t* do or say — I can never get away from you. Not ever.”

He raised her hand and opened it, tracing the marks on her palm.

“Columba...” he whispered. “My little dove.”

He brought her palm to his lips and kissed her seven times, one on each mark. Her eyes were huge, her heart started to race.

Those suspicions that had been building about her mark – her sense that this was far more than just a tracking spell – bloomed.

“Draco,” she said. “What else does it do?”

“Not yet,” he said simply, still tracing the mark. “I promise I’ll tell you eventually, but... please, not yet.”

She knew she should press him on it. But like so many things when it came to Draco she let it slide.

“Alright,” she sighed. “But tell me someday.”

“I will,” he said, now lacing their fingers together.

Hermione felt another tremor begin, and she closed her eyes as he began to stroke her face, her hair. He whispered words of encouragement to her. He was so soft like this and just

hers. This was the side of him she had fallen for. This was the thing that made her so weak.

“Confront it. Own it. You were spectacular tonight. A successful *Avada* on your very first try. You had barely touched a wand in months. I could scarcely believe it.”

I am a murderer. I killed Cormac McLaggen. I don't feel sorry for it. He deserved it, and I did it. I would do it again.

Draco was still speaking.

“It was the most extraordinary thing, watching you snuff out his life like that. I was so proud of you. You’ve never been more beautiful than when you ended him. I could watch that memory in a pensieve a thousand times and never grow bored of it. It made me... *fuck*, you have no idea...”

God, he sounded... *turned on*?

That was... that was... Hermione didn’t know. Terrifying? Sexy? Very, *very* wrong?

Yes, it was all of those things.

Her tremors subsided, and she stared up into his face. His eyes had grown dark as he watched her work through them.

“How many more times will that happen?” she asked as she swallowed hard. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from his face.

“At least a few more. You’re doing well with them, though. And the next time you kill it will be easier.”

He was stroking her face again, and it was so distracting. Her eyes fluttered closed at his touch.

“Next time?” she asked faintly.

“Mmmm. You implied you needed to do it at least two more times,” he said casually.

Her eyes opened again, and there was that dark longing in his gaze, but also some determination. Her words from earlier that evening were about to come back to haunt her. Her defenses immediately went up.

“I’ll tell you later. Not now.”

“Yes now,” he pressed. “I’m going to need time to prepare myself for it.”

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because whatever it is, it’s bound to be dangerous. It’s going to send my anxiety to the heavens. And then when you do it – because you *will* do it – I need to be ready for the personal aftereffects.”

“Personal aftereffects.”

“Mmm, yes. The personal aftereffects of watching you take a life. It’s just so...powerful. So... *perfect*.”

She unconsciously shuddered, and his thumb moved to trace her lip. Without considering what she was doing, her lips parted.

“Yes, so perfect,” he said again, his voice deepening and his eyes fixed on her lips. God, but his voice was mesmerizing, almost hypnotic. “You’re going to test every bit of self control that I have, aren’t you darling girl?”

He pressed his thumb on her lip a bit harder until it was moistened ever so slightly. And then he raised it to his own mouth and sucked.

Heat blossomed in her lower belly. What *was* this? How was this happening now, *tonight* after she had killed somebody? Why wasn’t she thinking about her anger, her sadness, all the things that had gone so terribly wrong tonight? Why was she fixated on that thumb in his mouth?

“Orange blossom,” he sighed contentedly. “You taste of orange blossom. It’s my favorite.”

Did he taste of cedar and spice? She was suddenly, *urgently* desperate to know.

“Tell me, little dove. Who is on your list?” he said in that same, low voice. He moved his thumb back to her lower lip and brushed it again. Unconsciously her own tongue flicked out to taste.

Draco’s expression changed in an instant, and his pupils blew wide. She had only seen him like this a handful of times before – completely focused on her, nearly vibrating with anticipation as he watched her.

She did it again, and he jerked ever so slightly.

Was this how she would do it then? Was this the way to keep her secret? She wondered if she could remember that Veela magic from Nita and serve as a distraction, but he was distracting *her* just as much.

Draco pressed his thumb on her lip a bit more firmly, and Hermione closed her lips around it.

“Oh *fuck*...” he breathed, his eyes huge.

Instinctively she began to suck, and his breathing became shallow as he watched. He was so affected like this, and it affected her. She had never felt so powerful before, not ever. Torturing another person or taking a life had nothing on this heat, this control.

But then he took it right back from her.

“Suck it all off,” he whispered. “Be sweet for me and lick off every drop. Gods you’re perfect...”

Something about it made Hermione feel small, protected, and yet eager to please. It was so odd, but she found herself obeying him without a second thought. He did taste of cedar and spice, and it was making her feel slow, languid. She barely had a thought in her head like this.

“It’s the Dark Lord, isn’t it? He’s the man you were talking about...”

Hermione was feeling almost drunk as she nodded.

“And the woman... Bellatrix?” he guessed.

Hermione shook her head no.

He slipped his thumb out of her mouth and the fog started to clear as she looked up at him with some confusion.

“*Not* Bellatrix? Then who?”

Hermione blinked, as she realized what he had just done.

“You... you...” she stuttered.

“Shhh...” he said, brushing a stray curl from her face. “I needed to know. And you were so good to tell me the first one. Now tell me the second. Let me help you. I’ll admit that I’m surprised it’s not Bellatrix. There aren’t many women who are marked Death Eaters, and she’s the highest ranked by far. It certainly makes things much simpler though. She can stay on Theo’s list.”

“She’s not on your list then?” Hermione asked, a mixture of curiosity and betrayal warring inside of her. He had used her moment of weakness to coax this information out of her, though she supposed that Voldemort was obvious. Still, she would have to remember this and guard against it in the future.

And why *wasn’t* Bellatrix on his list? Draco had brutally tortured Cormac and would have killed him if Hermione didn’t step in to finish it first. He had exacted revenge against Umbridge. Why not Bellatrix too? The woman had injured her, tortured her. Was it because they were related? Did he care about his aunt more than Hermione?

She felt oddly hurt by the thought.

“There are complications when it comes to murdering one’s family members in certain pureblood lines. The Black family is one that strongly disincentivizes it. Murdering her would make me impotent and end my line for good. That doesn’t even get into the legal complexities with inheritances, though admittedly the Malfoys have always been stricter about that than the Blacks. But as it stands, it’s much simpler and more straightforward if we leave her for Theo. I’m taking Dolohov instead. You told me he nearly killed you in the Department of Mysteries.”

Hermione paused as she thought about this. “But Bellatrix killed Sirius, and they’re both Blacks.”

“Yes, but she had no concerns about becoming barren. She’s not terribly maternal, you know. Nor did she worry about losing an inheritance, as she had a fortune of her own already. In my case, I *do* need to be concerned about at least one of those things, so it’s much less complicated if Theo does it.”

“Less complicated,” she repeated.

“Right. Less complicated. But that’s not what we’re talking about... you were about to tell me *who* that mysterious woman is. Who is your target?”

Hermione stilled as she weighed this. She didn’t know if telling him would benefit her or not. If he knew he might try to keep her away. Then again, he didn’t seem at all surprised by Voldemort. Surely Draco knew she had been seeking his death this entire time, and he was still willing to bring her to Nott Castle.

Maybe she could tell him in the same way she had told Ginny and Luna – just the target, not the reason why she was important.

“It’s not a woman,” said Hermione.

She saw his brow crinkle at this. “It’s not? But you said she...”

“Because it *is* female. It’s Nagini.”

Draco went very still. “You want to *Avada* the snake.”

“Yes,” admitted Hermione.

“Why? What did she do to you?”

“She hasn’t done anything to me,” said Hermione. It was mostly the truth. Nagini *had* snapped at her during their foray at Bathilda Bagshot’s house, but she was really after Harry that day. Hermione had just gotten in the way.

“Why do you want to kill her?” he demanded.

Hermione shook her head. “I’m not telling you that.”

“Hermione...” he said, and his voice dropped low again.

“No. I’m not falling for that again. You have your secrets, and I have mine.”

He didn’t look pleased by this, but she gave him an obstinate look.

“If I tell you about the mark on your hand, will you tell me this?”

Hermione stilled.

“A secret for a secret?”

He nodded.

“I need a little time to think about it,” she said.

He had already promised to share that secret of the mark with her eventually. She would be giving him information about the horcruxes simply to learn about it earlier than she otherwise would. That wasn’t a great trade, she knew.

To her slight surprise, he backed off. “Alright. Think about it. I want to know all of your secrets.”

“And I want to know yours,” she insisted.

He reached for her hand again and traced the mark.

“I have many,” he said quietly. “There are things you deserve to know that I’ve been too cowardly to say. There have been times I’ve misled you to keep you safe. There are truths I’m burning to share with you, but can’t speak of just yet. But perhaps someday I’ll be able to tell you everything, and you can do the same with me. I’ll admit I wish that there were no secrets between us.”

He fell silent, and Hermione studied his beautiful face in the low light cast by the single lamp on her nightstand. He was achingly handsome, wickedly smart, dangerously amoral, and had a possessive streak that could turn violent in a moment. But like this, he just looked like a young man, somebody who was pining for things he couldn’t yet have.

There was one secret, however, that *she* was burning to know – even more so than the mark on her hand.

“I know it’s not a crush...” she said.

His eyes flicked up from her hand to stare at her face.

“No,” he said.

“And I’ve been wondering... how long has it been... not a crush?”

He swallowed hard, and Hermione thought that he had never looked so nervous.

“Years,” he said simply. “Quite a few years.”

She blinked in surprise.

“Was it... ever a crush?”

He shrugged. “Maybe? Possibly? I’m not sure. But you always made me feel things. Most people don’t make me feel very much at all, but whatever you made me feel – jealousy, anger, joy – you have always drawn out the strongest version of it, even when nobody else could. I know I haven’t handled it well. When we were younger I didn’t know *how* to handle it. And then our families and friends pulled us to opposite sides of the war before it ever started in earnest, and that pushed you further away from me than ever. I don’t know if

there was a day when I woke up and realized that it... wasn't a crush. All I know is that at some point I finally accepted that it wasn't, and it's been motivating me ever since."

Hermione's heart was racing. She knew what he was telling her. She was more sure than ever. But she wanted to hear him say it.

"So if it's not a crush... then what is it?"

He shifted a bit closer to her and started to trace the planes of her face. His expression was so open, and he looked almost defeated as he studied her. Hermione sensed that he had fought this thing that was so magnetic between them before finally giving in. He had resisted it well before he was old enough to even understand what it was. She had only been fighting her feelings for him for a few months, and she had all but given it up as a bad job, even though she had a dozen reasons not to want him. She wondered how he had ever managed it.

By being cruel. By being cold. By calling her names and bullying her best friends and pushing her away.

"It's..." his voice sounded choked. "It's a fixation. An obsession. A fascination. A beautiful, wonderful, awful need for you to see me like I see you. I can't... I can't even *breathe* sometimes. A crush is innocent and fleeting. It's a brief attraction, maybe a fun flirtation. There is nothing about this that is fun or fleeting or innocent."

Hermione was utterly spellbound.

"It's maddening," he continued. "It's painful. Sometimes you look at me, and I think I'm finally getting close. And then somehow my own feelings always get in the way, and I fuck it up. Over and over again, I fuck it up. I have no excuses for it, none. I *know* this. I know that you deserve some righteous, blameless, Gryffindor bloke. I tried to step aside for Weasley, I really did. But even then I couldn't do it. I didn't want him to have you, not when his feelings for you were so much *less* than mine..."

Hermione froze. "You didn't... *kill* him, did you? I know he died at Hogwarts, but I don't know how..."

He shook his head, and Hermione felt nearly lightheaded with relief.

"No," he said. "No, I didn't. But I also didn't... Well, let's just say that I might have been able to stop it if I had stopped looking for *you*. He was dueling Avery, and I saw them but didn't pause to help. I was too eager to find you."

Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about this.

He might have been able to save Ron.

But then again, battles were hectic. Maybe she would have lost Draco too if he had stopped to help. Maybe a different Death Eater would have captured her instead. The thought made her feel cold.

“I’m glad you found me,” she whispered. “That night I mean. I don’t know what would have happened if you didn’t.”

It was the first time she had said this out loud – the first time she had ever even admitted it to herself. But she *was* grateful to him. By the sound of it he had a singular focus in the battle that night. He had saved her and her two girlfriends.

It was enough.

“Me too,” he said simply.

Another tremor started, and Hermione breathed through it.

I killed Cormac McLaggen. I’m glad I did it. Draco helped me do it. I’m learning to kill just like him. I will kill for him. I will kill for myself. He still thinks my soul is beautiful, even when it’s damaged like this.

When it finally passed, she looked up to find him watching her with tenderness, but also that same heat. It seemed that with every tremor he was reminded of the moment she had officially fallen off of her pedestal. She had cracked herself open. She had evened the playing field between them and could no longer claim such moral superiority.

She suddenly felt shy. She had never bared her heart to a boy before, not ever. And she still didn’t really understand what she felt for him. He had evidently been examining his feelings much longer than she had. But she knew there was something between them – something a little dark and twisted, but also incredibly powerful – and whether he was good for her or not, that bond drawing them together continued to grow stronger. She couldn’t do anything about it. It seemed to transcend logic, morality, or even hope. It was indelible.

Besides, she was a murderer now. Perhaps they deserved each other.

“Draco...” she said, feeling inexplicably nervous. “I don’t know what this is. It’s all very new. And despite what you have said in the past I *am* a bit damaged and imperfect. But for me, it is... not a crush, either. At least I don’t think it is. It’s hard to say *what* it is, precisely, but I expect it’s bigger than that or could be bigger with time.”

She looked at his face, knowing that her declaration wasn’t even a fraction of his. But he still looked stunned, like he had been hit by a bludger.

He reached up and gripped her face. “Hermione,” he said softly. “Hermione, please say you forgive me for the last few days. *Please*. I can’t... I just... I need you to say it first. Please.”

“I forgive you,” she said, because she did.

Why was it so easy to forgive him? Why was it so simple to let her anger go?

Why did it even matter?

They were in a war, and nearly everybody thought she was dead. But Draco knew the truth, and he had secured a place in her heart that would never belong to anybody else, no matter

the pain he caused her or the atrocities he committed.

“Thank Merlin,” he breathed, and then his face was so close to hers. He hesitated, lips hovering over hers for just a moment.

He was giving her a chance to back away, but Hermione didn’t want to. She was so tired of fighting this war, but most of all she was tired of fighting him.

She paused for a heartbeat longer and then let her eyes flutter closed. With a whisper of a breath he pressed himself toward her until their lips finally connected.

Chapter 19: Animagus

Chapter Notes

Our girl deserves a bit of a break in this chapter.

It was the softest thing at first, tentative, hesitant. Hermione could scarcely believe they were doing this – that he was kissing her and that she was letting him do it.

Her pulse picked up in that familiar way, but tonight it wasn't because she was afraid. It was excitement, wanting, months of build-up to this.

His lips were warm, soft, and his thumb stroked her cheek. He kissed her like she was made of glass, as though she was some fragile thing that was utterly precious to him.

That was how it started. And then in another breath his mouth teased hers open, and he groaned into it as his tongue traced her lip.

The sound stirred something deep in her belly. It unlocked some place inside of her that had never been properly explored. Her previous snogs had been innocent by comparison, even those that ended with teeth and tongue. They had never been *his* teeth and tongue though, and that made all the difference.

He was intense, bold, utterly focused. She knew this about him, and he was pouring it into her. Years of taunting, fighting, arguing, and now saving each other. It had all been building up to this.

His hand was shaking as he moved it from her face down to her neck – that place where he loved to touch her, ever since the very first night she had asked. The spot that was just his now.

He pulled back and stared down at her, disbelief and longing etched on his face.

He looked wrecked. Hermione had done that to him.

“Hermione...” he said in a rough voice.

For once he seemed struck dumb. The beautiful words he liked to use to coax her had vanished, leaving behind nothing but need.

“Please can I... again?” he asked.

Hermione's own voice left her, and she just nodded.

His hand on her throat tightened ever so slightly as he groaned with relief and kissed her again more fervently this time, more confidently. She was pinned there, face tilted up toward him, entirely at his mercy. He could have ended her at any moment, but she knew he never would. No, it appeared that Hermione was the one who might end him.

His tongue pressed into hers again, and now it was Hermione who made a little whimper. Draco's hand spasmed at the sound, and he quickly moved it back up to her face, gripping it tightly enough that she knew he would have been suffocating her if he had left it on her neck where it had just been.

It was so much feeling, so much sensation.

He pulled back again and closed his eyes as he swallowed hard. His forehead dipped to hers as he spoke.

"You don't have to push yourself for me," he said, and Hermione wondered if he was really talking to her or if was trying to convince himself. "I swore I would never... I'm not going to... what I'm trying to say is you're in control of this part, yeah?"

Hermione had no words to this, but something in her stomach eased. For all of Draco Malfoy's flaws — and she knew he had many — he had always been very careful about the way he touched her. Even when he tried something new he did it slowly, cautiously, always gauging how she handled it before pressing on with it. Hermione might not be in control of any other aspects of her life, but she was certain that if she ever told him to stop or slow down, he would do it immediately.

"What do you want from me, then?"

The question just slipped out, but Hermione was dying to know. She sensed that this was emotional for him, but how committed to her was he outside of their beautiful prison? Would he publicly date more suitable woman? Did he envision keeping her here for sex once they worked up to it?

Was she really a boon now?

The thought made her feel nervous and a bit ill, but also oddly anticipatory. She didn't know how to sort her feelings about it.

"Anything you'll give me," he said instantly. "Any scraps you can spare for me, I'll take them. I want all of it."

Hermione blinked in surprise. "You're certain?"

He nodded. "I know I might want more than you're willing to give right now. That's alright. I can manage. I just... you have no idea, I never really thought I'd be able to..."

He cut himself off by leaning down to kiss her again. When he pulled away for a third time, Hermione was breathless.

He was giving her a serious look.

“What I’m trying to say is don’t be afraid to stop me, yeah? Don’t ever be afraid of me, sweet girl.”

Hermione knew her eyes were huge, and she nodded, and a look of relief seemed to cross his face.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good. Because I know I might want too much...”

His words trailed off, as he moved to his side and propped his head on his hand. One finger trailed down her face. It moved from her cheek toward her ear and down her neck, where she was still wearing that necklace with a G on it. He touched it pensively.

“This is pretty. Who gave it to you?”

Always jealous.

“My parents.”

His expression lightened a little. “Good. I know I didn’t earn your cooperation with the choker tonight. Maybe next time...”

Hermione was surprised by this. “Will there *be* a next time?”

He frowned a little. “Perhaps. We’ll see. I know the last two have been rather poorly done of me. But with Severus off the scent and Rodolphus forgetting everything about you, perhaps we should try again at some point. There’s no doubt the veritaserum is useful.”

Hermione nodded a little, and he fell silent as he continued to trace the curve of her necklace. Then his finger dropped a bit further to follow the outline of lace on her nightgown. It was only now – at this moment – that Hermione remembered she was dressed for bed and wearing something rather thin and sheer. She had been so distracted by everything else she had forgotten about it entirely. Her face turned crimson.

“What’s making you blush so beautifully?” he murmured, still running a single finger along the edge of the lace. Hermione’s heart started pounding again, and her throat went dry. Her skin erupted in goosebumps, and something odd seemed to tighten in her chest and around her nipples. She knew what was happening, and her nightgown was too sheer for this. She closed her eyes for a moment. Maybe he wouldn’t notice. Maybe he couldn’t see through her...

“I dream about touching them all the time, you know. Thank you for giving me a small peek, my darling. Someday when you’re ready, I would love to see them clearly. You never have to hide them from me.”

Oh God.

She forced her eyes open and saw that he was staring right at her chest, the white fabric leaving far too little to the imagination, even in the low light.

Something of her panic must have shown on her face because Draco's eyes met hers for a moment, and then he reached down to tug the covers up over her.

"Breathe."

He reached across her and turned off the lamp, and only then did Hermione feel herself start to relax again.

He slid back down next to her and put his arm firmly around her, his hand gripping hers and pulling it tightly against her body.

"I'll be here if you have any more tremors," he whispered. "And any other night you want me."

The next few days were tense, though for once Hermione was not in the middle of it. After hearing the story of Cormac's death from Theo, Draco was on thin ice with Blaise, Ginny, and Luna too. Ironically, only Hermione seemed to have forgiven him.

It was rather gratifying to know that her brother and her friends had taken her side this time. But after Draco showed up one evening with a split lip, she finally put her foot down.

Theo, that's enough.

I'm not done, Hermione.

Yes, you are. He has apologized repeatedly. It's time to move on.

It took another two days before things finally went back to normal with the others, and Hermione was forced to confess to her friends about that night he kissed her the first time to finally convince them.

After that night he didn't come back to her bed. Hermione woke up the following morning feeling shy, hesitant, and he seemed to know better than to push his luck. But he had cupped her face and kissed her a few more times, and Hermione's heart skipped each time he did it. He was becoming more openly affectionate with her in front of the others, and Hermione wondered if they would be giving Blaise and Ginny some competition soon.

The girls' animagus transformations continued to progress, though Hermione was well ahead of both Ginny and Luna, despite the fact that her transformation was the most challenging.

"You were always going to be twice as fast as us though," said Ginny with a huff after she managed hooves for the first time. "This is good, really. You'll have both of your forms done in the time it takes us to do one."

By the time Hermione and Theo's birthday rolled around in late September, her transformation was on the verge of being complete.

She woke up that morning, prepared for an eventful day. The girls would be going to a Death Eater event that night, but this time as boons. Luna had been to one already and reported back that it wasn't too bad. A couple of Death Eaters had approached Theo for a trade, but he handled them well enough, and they backed off.

Hermione had to admit a small part of her was looking forward to it. There was no mission except to be seen in order to give Draco and Blaise some cover. They were the only Death Eaters left who had not brought their boons out in front of the others, and it was time to fix that. Both of them were said to be fond of their boons, so for once Draco wouldn't have to try to hide how much he wanted her, and Hermione would be able to stay with him all night and ignore any advances from the others.

It almost felt like a date, which was entirely strange.

Before that, however, the girls met with Hermione for their daily animagi practice. The previous day Hermione had come so close to finishing her transformation that she thought another day or two might crack it.

"I can see why it took Sirius and James a couple years to manage it," declared Ginny, whose face was screwed up. "Between doing the research to learn all the steps and the potion and then the actual *practice*... well, it would have taken us ages too if Draco didn't already have the instructions in his library."

A moment later there was a pop and then a handsome tail emerged, which she turned around and swished.

Hermione and Luna chuckled. Unlike Hermione and Luna who had a sacrifice, Ginny's form was more nebulous. She had not been able to clearly determine her markings or coloring from her vision, and it had been fascinating to watch everything emerge as she practiced body part by body part.

Hermione was convinced Ginny's breed was an Arabian. She was a true chestnut with a coat that looked red in certain lights, and her eyes were dark and expressive. Blaise had been pleased when he heard Hermione's guess, as Arabians were known to be excellent jumpers and could keep up in a hunt. They were a very compact breed but could carry heavy loads and had good endurance.

"Small but mighty," were Blaise's words.

"Stubborn and proud," was how Draco described them. "Mine likes to take a bite out of me whenever I hurt her feelings."

"You're still smarting over the fact that she threw you when you were twelve," said Theo, rolling his eyes.

It was a rather perfect fit for Ginny, Hermione thought. Everything the boys told them about the breed seemed to align.

Hermione was focusing on her vision now, trying to nail that final piece of her own transformation. She had managed every part of the dove so far except for the beak. For some reason, it had eluded her for weeks.

Hermione closed her eyes and remembered eating the berries from the vine. Then she had perched on Draco's hand and eaten berries from his palm. It had been sweet, nourishing, the flavor bursting on her tongue.

She had used her beak to drink from the birdbath. The water had been cool, refreshing, and precisely what she needed after such a long flight.

She breathed in and out, focusing, concentrating. She called to Columba inside of her, trying to remember every part and put it all together.

There was a faint *POP!* and Hermione found herself on the floor, her eyes suddenly able to see the tiniest speck of detail all the way across the room. She gave a little hop and her wings rustled, and at that moment Ginny turned around and noticed her.

"HERMIONE!" she cried, with an enormous smile on her face.

DANGER!

For a split second Columba's instincts took over, and Hermione found herself suddenly in the air. Then Hermione's own mind realized what she was doing, and she gave a frantic flap to land on the closest piece of furniture, which happened to be the *escritoire*.

She saw Crookshanks in the corner of the room, and her heart nearly failed again, but she tamped down on the bird's instincts to stay very far away. As for Crookshanks, he just narrowed his eyes at her. Hermione recalled he was rather good at spotting animagi.

Her tiny heart was still racing frantically, and she was staring back at Ginny and Luna with shock at what she had just done.

Hermione tried to calm down and take stock. She had small claws that were gripping the carvings in the wood. She had wings and was covered in feathers. Her eyesight was extraordinary, and yes... she even had a beak.

She opened it and let out a tentative *coo*.

Ginny and Luna started hopping up and down cheering, and again Columba was startled and tried to fly away, but Hermione suppressed it and forced herself to stay precisely where she was.

Ginny turned and started pounding on the door to Draco's room, and a moment later he opened it, looking around him with alarm.

"Draco! Look!" squealed Ginny, pointing at Hermione.

Draco stared at her for a full three seconds in disbelief, and then his face broke into a broad smile too.

“You did it!” he cried. “Hang on, let me get the others!”

He disappeared for a few moments and then returned with Theo and Blaise in tow. All three of them approached her and instinctively Hermione took a step back. Draco threw out a hand to stop them.

“Hermione, can you understand us?” he asked, cocking his head to study her.

She cooed, and a small smile crossed his face.

“I’ll take that as a yes. But you still have bird instincts?”

Another coo, and he nodded thoughtfully.

“Alright. So we’re all much bigger than you. We will stand back. Do you think you can fly to my hand?”

He stepped slightly away from the others and held out a palm. They were all watching eagerly, and Hermione canted her head to stare at it.

How on earth do I fly?

Launching herself into the air gave her some mild anxiety, but not as much as she had expected. Columba wasn’t afraid of it at all, and Hermione tried to find that flight instinct inside of Columba without turning everything else over to her too.

Fly, she thought, and Columba spread her wings and with a few flaps settled onto Draco’s palm, albeit not very elegantly. Hermione wasn’t sure how she managed it, but she actually stumbled on the landing.

Draco didn’t seem to care though, his smile was blinding.

“Brilliant. This is absolutely brilliant. Alright, time for a birthday present then.”

He motioned for the others to follow him, and he carried Hermione over to the door to the large patio that had remained locked for the entirety of her stay at the Manor. He pulled out his wand with his free hand and muttered a complicated unlocking spell before gripping the knob and turning.

Then she was outside, and Hermione was almost grateful that she was a bird because her emotions were shocking.

She hadn’t been outside since the Battle of Hogwarts, not a single time. The September air was warm, but autumn would be coming soon. It was a glorious day, sunny and breezy. Even as a dove Hermione’s eyes closed to feel it on her feathers. She had missed this so much.

“Let’s fly,” said Draco simply, crouching down to the ground so she could hop off his hand. “Hang on, I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared back into her room and reemerged moments later with his broom.

“We’ll start on the patio before trying open air. Hermione, are you okay?”

Hermione was nervous, but she told herself they could start small while she was getting used to managing the flight instinct. She didn’t have to launch herself off the balcony just yet.

She gave a small coo, and Draco grinned again.

“Alright, little dove, see if you can fly from the ground to Ginny’s head.”

Ginny grinned and stood perfectly still about ten meters away.

Hermione reached toward Columba’s flight instinct and flapped to rise into the air. Before she knew it she was settling on Ginny’s head with more grace than when she had landed on Draco. Ginny giggled to feel Hermione balancing herself.

“Alright, now back to the ground,” said Draco.

This was a little different since she was already on a perch. Columba told her to open her wings and glide down, with just a few flaps at the end to steady herself.

She was getting it.

“Fly some laps for us,” suggested Theo. “Maybe to the end of the balcony and back. Do it a couple of times.”

Hermione cooed and, confidence building, rose into the air and flew to the end of the balcony until she had to lean on Columba to figure out how to turn. She angled her wings out and to the side, and she coasted a bit over the edge of the rail, which nearly startled her into falling, but she pulled on Columba’s instincts, which told her she was perfectly fine.

Her heart slowed as she made her way back to her friends. She tried it a couple more times, and at the final turn she intentionally went out into open air for just a few meters before turning and gliding back.

When she landed, Draco was gripping his broom.

“Right,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “I’ll race you.”

He flung a leg over his broom and kicked off into the air. Columba was startled for a moment, but Hermione’s competitive edge had been piqued, and she flapped hard to get speed and air. She tried to reassure Columba that the large flying thing meant her no harm, and Hermione leaned on her flight instinct as she caught up to Draco, who was whooping with delight as she outstripped him.

Hermione did not like heights. She *knew* she didn’t like heights. But this... this was...

Freedom.

The books had been right after all. Connecting to the bird's flight instinct took only a little time, and she was quickly learning how to leverage the instinct while keeping her own mind at the forefront. It made her natural reticence diminish.

How glorious was it to finally face a fear and overcome it with no exposure therapy and no real work other than achieving an advanced magical form. She might never wish to be in the air as a human, but she wouldn't have to be. She was a bird now.

Hermione's heart squeezed with her bittersweet success as it reminded her of Harry and Ron. What would they say if they could see her now? Flying around, as though she was made to be here because she *was*. The part of her that was still Hermione missed them more keenly than ever. But this success of hers — this ability to now fly in the air more gracefully than they ever could — made her feel connected to them in a way she had never experienced while they were alive. She finally understood them, that unnatural urge to spend hours on a broomstick. It had driven her mad for years. It was only after they died and she started this project that she finally saw the merits of it. She felt it gave her a link to them.

Hermione would fly now because they couldn't. There was still a member of their trio in the air.

And the air made Columba so happy. It was enough to pull Hermione's mood away from that pang of loss when she thought of Harry and Ron and toward an unbridled joy she hadn't felt in months.

Draco was happy too. He was doing corkscrews at a breakneck pace, and while Hermione wasn't keen to race him like *that* her bird's confidence in the air made her less worried about him than she otherwise would be as she watched. She drifted toward the ground with a few flaps, where she finally got to see the Malfoy gardens up close for the first time.

Her excellent eyes saw a thatch of bilberries in a wilder part of the garden, and she flew over to eat one. If she had been able to smile, she would have.

"Come on little dove, let's go back to the others and get you some proper food," came Draco's amused voice.

Hermione said a wistful goodbye to the garden, hoping very much that she would be able to visit it again soon. With a few flaps of her wings, she was back in the air again, heading up toward the balcony where the others were still gathered. She settled onto Theo's proffered arm who carried her inside, as Draco dismounted and flung his broom over his shoulder, looking dashing in a rather windswept sort of way.

They moved indoors, and Hermione fluttered from Theo's arm to the ground and then prepared herself. The transformation back to human was easier than moving to the animal because it was her normal form and something she could easily visualize. With some focus and concentration there was another *POP!* and Hermione was sprawled on the ground, wearing the biggest smile she could remember since Harry and Ron had died.

Her friends cheered for her, and Draco in particular looked ecstatic as he reached out a hand for her to haul her to her feet and then lifted her up in the air. He spun her around, laughing, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

Without giving it another thought she leaned down and kissed him, which Draco immediately deepened, before backing her against a wall for support. It was only the sounds of protest from their friends — and Theo's threat to disembowel Draco if he didn't stop ravaging his baby sister — that made them come up for air.

Hermione was breathless when she stared down at his gray eyes, which were almost blue as they crinkled at her.

"I'm so bloody proud of you," he whispered, and Hermione found herself beaming again before leaning down for another kiss before Theo's disgusted sounds made her pull away.

"Thanks," she breathed. "The bird was a brilliant choice."

Draco smiled brighter at this, obviously pleased that he had been right all along.

"You're the one who's brilliant, little dove," he said. "I bet you set some sort of record."

"I can't wait to do it again," she confessed. "Fly, I mean. I can't believe I'm going to say this because I still very much do *not* like heights in my own body, but as a bird... well, it's extraordinary."

He smiled again and pulled her back to the group, who immediately launched into a conversation about the thing she had achieved that day. She felt normal like this, just a girl with her boyfriend and brother and friends celebrating a personal achievement. There was no war, no gilded cage.

She was a bird now and had flown free.

Poppy outdid herself with a birthday celebration. Since the group had plans that evening, Draco declared a birthday tea was in order.

Much like Ginny's birthday, there were balloons and streamers and confetti. Unlike Ginny's birthday, they held it on the balcony, and a few decorations spilled out into the gardens below.

"I thought you might want to be outside," said Draco quietly to her. "It's a beautiful day."

"Does this mean my door will be unlocked more often?" she asked breathlessly. Getting a glimpse of real sunlight had done wonders for her mood. She had always enjoyed having a sunny spot to think and read. She spent most of her childhood reading on her parents' garden bench, and she always loved to work under the large beech tree at Hogwarts.

He studied her for a beat, and she knew his eyes missed nothing. He saw her face turned up to meet the sun, her eyes alight with happiness as she breathed in fresh air.

“Soon. I think we can do that soon. You have to be careful about guests outside though. Mother hosts garden parties year round. The gardens are charmed to always stay warm.”

She knew this and had seen a few from her window, though she had never gotten a clear view as a human.

“I’m a bird now.”

“I know you are, my darling. That’s why I’ll allow it once I put a few safety measures in place. It won’t be long.”

Wards. He means wards.

Hermione felt the prison bars materialize again as she wondered what, precisely, he had in store to make sure she couldn’t fly away. And then there was that tracking spell...

“Will the tracking spell work through my animagus form?” she asked.

He just gave her a stern look. “Let’s not find ourselves in a situation where we have to learn the answer to that, yes?”

A slight shiver hit her at the unsaid warning in his words. But she pushed it away. She wouldn’t allow anything to upset her today. It was her birthday, and Theo decided to celebrate his birthday today too, since it was his *real* birthday. He had grown up believing his birthday was the week prior, and he declared to Hermione that he would never celebrate it on that day again. She had been allowed to go outside for the first time in *months*, and she had achieved something profoundly magical and impressive earlier that day. She would always remember it.

No, she wouldn’t let *anything* get her down today.

In lieu of cake Poppy had presented some truly stunning and decadent petite fours as part of the tea in several different flavors: there was lemon and chocolate and strawberry and even pistachio. They were tiny, ornate little bite sized treats that thoroughly charmed Hermione and were an excellent accompaniment to the elaborate tea service she had set out for them.

“I had them brought in from France,” Draco said into her ear as she ate her third. “Do you like them?”

She blushed and nodded, and he leaned in to kiss her cheek. “Good. Surely you know by now that I’ve dreamed of spoiling you for a very long time.”

“Is that why you filled my room with things so quickly once you caught me?”

He looked at her seriously. “Oh I was preparing long before I caught you sweet girl. I had an idea about what you might like. You’ve never told me, though. Did I get it right?”

Another shiver passed over her, as she realized just how long he had been planning her captivity. He had once told her he had a rough plan in place before the Battle, but if he had been preparing the room in advance as well...

She didn't know what to think, so she just nodded.

"Good," he said, brushing her hair back and kissing her on the forehead.

"Hey Hermione, turn into a bird again — I want to try something!" came Theo's voice, pulling Hermione's mind away from Draco.

Hermione turned and gave him a questioning look, but he was just grinning mischievously.

She shrugged and closed her eyes, remembering the feeling of the transformation from earlier. It would take time before she could do it on a whim, but that would come. The first full transformation was always the hardest, and now that she had done it once she had more than just a vision to focus her body. She had a clear memory of precisely how it felt to be Columba.

There was a small *POP!* and she was a dove again. She gave a soft coo.

Theo grinned and then she heard something in her head.

Does our bond still work?

She instinctively flapped her wings in her shock, but then her own mind regained control and she tried it.

Yes?

Holy shit I'm talking to a bird. This is way better than Potter talking to that snake.

Honestly, Theo.

Your feelings are different like this though. Less complex.

I suppose that's to be expected.

He broke their bond and turned to the others.

"We can still talk through our bond, even when she's a bird!"

Draco looked surprised, but intrigued by this. "That could come in handy."

"I know, I wasn't sure if it would work. Her feelings are a little different, but we could communicate clearly. She chastised me and everything."

The others laughed as she focused hard and then transformed back into herself. She was grinning too.

“I’m glad you didn’t try it for the first time while I was in the air. I might have fallen in my shock.”

“Never, Sis,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “You fly better than Draco now.”

Draco smacked him on the head, but he was smiling too. He looked exceptionally pleased, as though he deserved every bit of credit for her achievement.

Their tea wrapped up soon after, and they headed inside to separate and prepare for the gathering that evening.

She certainly wasn’t expecting any gifts, not really. The party had been lovely, and she felt as though she had given herself the best gift possible with her accomplishment that day.

Perhaps that was why she was surprised when Draco pulled her aside as the others were leaving.

“I have something for you. I’ll admit I’ve been debating about when to give this to you, but you solved my dilemma perfectly.”

She quirked an eyebrow in question, and he held up a small box.

“Happy birthday, little dove. And happy animagus day too.”

Hermione smiled as she slowly started to unwrap it. The box was long and thin, adorned with a silver ribbon tied in an elaborate bow.

“Keep the ribbon,” he said. “It’s rather special, and we may need it later.”

Hermione studied it with curiosity and thought she saw the faintest outlines of a crest woven into the silk. She could barely make it out though, so she simply untied it carefully and placed it in her nightstand. She saw Draco making a mental note of precisely where she stored it. He seemed pleased.

She carefully removed the paper and found herself holding a handsome wooden box. She quirked an eyebrow at Draco questioningly.

“Go on and open it,” he said, watching her carefully.

She lifted the lid and discovered a necklace. The chain was fine, and it contained a delicate pendant, with seven diamonds, seemingly at random, connected by thin silver bars. Hermione gasped as she held it up and studied it. She recognized it immediately of course.

“It’s Columba!” she said with delight. She turned to beam at Draco, and he smiled too.

“As I said, I couldn’t decide if I should give it to you for your birthday or your animagus day. Then you solved the problem for me by making them the same. It was quite thoughtful of you.”

She laughed, and he held his hand out for it. She lifted it out of the box and handed it to him and spun around to face the vanity mirror, while holding her hair out of the way so he could clasp it around her neck. His fingers brushed her nape, and it made goosebumps erupt all down her arm.

She saw him watching her in the mirror as his finger traced down the chain to the pendant that was settling below her clavicle. The pendant was stunning – abstract, but perfect. It was precisely the sort of thing she would have picked out for herself. The diamonds had an unnatural sparkle to them and drew the eye. He tilted his head as he studied it.

“It suits you. We haven’t had a Columba for hundreds of years. The necklace has protective enchantments. It will deflect most minor hexes and jinxes, though it doesn’t stop truly dark magic. The Black family has always given enchanted jewelry like this to its daughters upon a significant life event — coming of age or finishing Hogwarts or becoming engaged and leaving the protection of House Black. The last witch who owned this received it as a coming of age gift. Eventually she was removed from the Black family tree for marrying a muggleborn, but she kept it her whole life. Black family heirlooms have a habit of always finding their way home again.”

Hermione’s breathing went shallow. This was a family heirloom then, not just a pretty gift.

“Is that why...” she trailed off.

“I chose a dove? That was one reason, yes. I considered several options, but I’ll admit this necklace helped tip the scales. Columba was a renowned beauty in her time. She was said to be gentle and kind – the very spirit of the dove she was named for. She tried to make peace with the Black family for her entire life after they disowned her, but they never accepted her again after her choice of husband. When she died, letters were delivered to every family member who was still alive. In those letters she forgave them for how they treated her, and the necklace was returned, along with a few other heirlooms she had taken with her.”

Hermione’s eyes softened as she listened to the story. Columba sounded like a lovely person. It was an honor to wear her necklace.

“And the eagle...” she prompted.

“Practical. Powerful. And also a constellation, you know.”

“Aquila,” she said, nodding.

Draco smiled at her in the mirror. “Very good. You were always top of the class in Astronomy.”

“And you were second,” she said.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “It’s true.”

They were quiet for a moment as they looked at each other in the mirror.

“Draco... do you really think I’ll be able to have a second form?”

He smiled slowly. "I've never doubted it."

"I just--"

"I think you should start tomorrow," he added.

Hermione physically jolted at this. "Tomorrow? But I just finished the first form today!"

He shrugged. "Precisely. No need to delay. If you get started with it now I think you'll finish it around the same time as the others get their forms in place too. Then we can take all three of you to Nott Castle. The hunts will be starting soon."

Hermione exhaled. It was fast, but she supposed he was right. There was no reason to delay it now that she had done it once. She could continue getting faster with her dove form while she worked on her eagle.

"Alright," she said. "I suppose we can do that. I'm not excited about..."

Her stomach twisted as she thought about the sacrifice.

He reached up and gripped her shoulders. "Don't think about it tonight. There's no need to ruin your birthday like that. Besides, you've already done it once. Think of all the *other* things you've done since then too."

I've kissed Draco. I've taken yet another person's memories. I've become a murderer.

"Okay," she said softly. "Tomorrow then."

"Good girl. Now wear that necklace for me tonight, yes? It will give you some added protection and help remind you of who I really am while I have to be in character."

She reached up and touched the necklace.

Just who was Draco Malfoy?

Sometimes Hermione still wasn't sure.

Chapter 20: Amalie

Chapter Notes

TW: References to domestic violence (not depicted)

Hermione got to see herself as Amalie Beumont for the first time that night. Draco actually performed some legilimency on Theo to remind himself of what she looked like, claiming he was so distracted that day by other things he couldn't precisely recall everything they had done to her.

"It doesn't have to be perfect because nobody will remember you," he said. "But it can't be *too* far off."

Ginny and Luna, of course, were going as themselves, but the entire group gathered around while Hermione's transfiguration took place, offering suggestions here and there.

"There was a lot of dirt on her," said Blaise. "You could keep the freckles."

"And her hair was pretty lank, but she's been cared for since then," added Ginny. "It can look better now."

The end result was a rather pretty girl who had Theo's eyes, Ginny's nose, Luna's hair in a medium brown, and Hermione's lips.

"I'm not kissing anybody else's lips," he whispered to her as he finished.

Just like her transfiguration into Annabelle, Draco did nothing to her body, claiming that she needed to be able to fight in it if there was another emergency. Privately, Hermione thought he had other reasons for keeping her body intact too, especially since he once again did not camouflage any moles or beauty marks. This time her skin tone stayed the same shade as well.

Hermione thought that if she squinted very hard she could still see herself underneath the disguise. But it was different enough that she didn't think anybody else would notice. The Death Eaters would see what they expected to see, and what they expected to see was a continental pureblood.

"You may want to speak with a slight accent if you have to talk," said Draco. "Or in French if you prefer. I know that you can speak it. I can too. But it would be best if you don't say much and just let me lead."

“How did you know that I...” but she cut herself off when she remembered who she was talking to.

Draco seemed to know almost everything about her. Sure enough, he rolled his eyes as though she was being dense for questioning him about it.

After Hermione’s transfiguration was complete, the others wandered off to get ready, though Draco pulled her aside before he left too.

“You are aware of what the Death Eaters think we do, yes?”

“Sex,” she said, blushing a little.

He nodded. “And I’ve made it clear I enjoy it. We’ll have to pretend.”

Hermione bit her lip nervously. “Will I need to...”

“No,” he said firmly. “Nothing too gratuitous unless you want to. Just play along. Tap me anywhere three times if anything becomes too much, alright?”

She swallowed but nodded. “Okay. But Hannah and Susan really just sat there.”

“Hannah and Susan are frequently rented out to others,” he said. “What we are doing tonight will be more intense than what you saw. I keep it fairly tame whenever I host, but we won’t be at the Manor tonight.”

Hermione blinked in surprise. “We won’t?”

“No, the gathering tonight is at the Flint home. It’s likely to be more explicit. There will be a lot of boons there tonight, that’s why we chose it for your debut.”

“Oh,” said Hermione quietly. “Okay, but...”

“Nobody will touch you except for me. And I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do, I promise. I’m just trying to warn you. I will have to say things about you that will probably embarrass you. They all know I’m very fond of you, but I also have a reputation for having certain... preferences. They all think that I traded Ginny Weasley for you, so...”

“So presumably I match your preferences,” she finished.

He inclined his head.

“Alright. I’ll just... it will be fine. You said I don’t have to speak much?”

“No. In fact, it would be better if you don’t.”

Hermione exhaled in relief. “And if you embarrass me and make me blush?”

He smirked. “Then you’ll be perfect.”

Hermione frowned. “I’m not sure I understand these preferences of yours.”

He raised a hand to her cheek. “Nothing to worry about. I can assure you that you already fit them very well when you decide to be good for me and cooperate. I just ask you to stay quiet and follow my lead.”

His hand moved down to her neck, and her eyes fluttered closed as if on instinct. “Precisely like that sweet girl,” he murmured. “You’ll be perfect.”

He leaned in to give her a lingering kiss before releasing her. “Now it’s time to get ready. Poppy knows what you are to wear.”

He cast one last look at her as he swept out of the room, and Poppy soon appeared and began to fix her hair and makeup.

“Master Draco is replacing your lipstick, Miss,” she said, as she pulled out something in deep red. “He is saying no cherry.”

Hermione watched as her eyes darkened, her lips were stained, and even a bit of shimmer appeared on the apples of her cheeks.

“Now your dress, Miss,” she said.

Poppy produced something tiny and white that appeared to be sequined. Hermione stared at it in disbelief.

“Poppy, that’s not going to cover much.”

“Twill cover enough,” she insisted. “You is simply needing to wear small things underneath.”

The ‘small things’ were small adhesives for her nipples and thin lace knickers, both nude. The neckline was a halter that dipped in a V, the lowest point of which was below her breasts. The back was rather low too.

“We shall keep it together with magic,” insisted Poppy. “Twill stay on you unless somebody moves it.”

Sure enough, Hermione practiced leaning forward, and the fabric seemed to magically cling to her. There would be no wardrobe malfunctions, but it was still more skin than she had ever shown in public in her entire life.

She took a deep breath to steady herself as Poppy arrived with Hermione’s normal golden shoes and thigh holster for her knife. The hem of the dress covered the holster while she was standing, but only barely.

“Poppy, should we disillusion it?” she asked with concern.

Poppy shook her head. “No, Miss. Master Draco is saying it is fine for the others to know you have it.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this, but decided not to question it. She had to trust that he knew what he was doing.

The last thing she added was her new necklace and large diamond stud earrings that Poppy pulled out of her jewelry box.

Hermione stared at herself in the mirror and thought she looked like a very expensive escort, paid for with gems and questionable ethics.

Then again, that's exactly what they think I am.

She traced the Columba pendant with her finger and now realized what Draco meant by remembering who he was while she was wearing it. Nobody else at the party would understand its meaning. But *Hermione* knew. It was a sentimental, family heirloom to memorialize an exceptional magical achievement and had nothing to do with sex. It didn't matter how he dressed her tonight or what the implications of it were. The pendant was meant to remind her that she *wasn't* his whore. She was far more than that.

She could do this. She could play along to give him the cover he needed with the other Death Eaters, and she wouldn't forget who either of them were while it was happening.

She approached his door and knocked. A moment later he opened it, fiddling with some cufflinks as he did so. He paused what he was doing when he saw her and gave a long, appreciative look over her figure.

"You'll forgive me if I look at you from the neck down," he said. "Those parts are still you."

Hermione dipped her head as he finished with his cufflinks and then took his proffered arm. He was surprisingly formal tonight in a tailored oxford with a jacket and no tie. As they stepped into the hallway they met the others, and Hermione saw that neither of them were out of place. Ginny was in a red minidress that was backless and Luna was wearing something that looked more like a black slip than a dress.

"Ready then?"

All three girls nodded.

"Two rules," said Draco. "First, you stay with us and follow our leads. Second, if anybody but one of us touches you then I want you to draw on them."

Hermione's eyebrows flew up. "Seriously?"

"Yes," said Draco curtly. "You and Ginny especially. There have been mixed reactions to our swap. Scare the shit out of them, and then one of us will take it from there."

Hermione felt a sense of foreboding at this, but she and Ginny just nodded as they gripped the wizards' arms and headed toward the exit of the wards. Hermione looked around curiously as she was led through a part of the Manor she had never seen before to reach a floo parlor. She made a mental note of the path and landmarks as she went. She knew most of the

fireplaces in the Manor either weren't connected to the floo at all or only had one or two connections. But this one would have access to everything.

Draco threw some powder into the fire and called, "Flint House!"

They spun through the fire and emerged on the other side into a dim room. There were already several dozen people there, and Hermione looked around with some shock at what she was seeing.

The room was filled with Death Eaters and their boons in various stages of undress. One group was at a card table making bets while scantily clad women were draped around them. Several others were lounging around on sofas with boons spread out below them as they took their pleasure. Hermione swallowed hard to see one woman she thankfully did not know on her knees between the legs of a man she recognized as Thorfinn Rowle. And there was even a small stage where several women were stripping while an audience milled about and watched.

In addition to the boons were women who were obviously prostitutes – far more than the three Draco had hired for that night at his home. Several Death Eaters were being pleased by their boons and a prostitute at the same time.

Hermione swallowed hard and made herself breathe.

A few conversations came to a halt when they saw Draco, and then eyes flitted to her standing next to him. He slipped an arm around her waist and snagged a drink from a floating tray nearby and handed it to her.

"Don't drink it," he said, leaning down into her ear. "Flint occasionally spikes them with hallucinogens or lust potions. It's entirely random. Just vanish it slowly through the night."

Hermione nodded and accepted the glass as he pulled away. She saw Ginny and Blaise were getting just as much attention as she and Draco were. Quite a few people had stopped what they were doing and watched as they split and made their way to opposite ends of the room.

"Let's greet our host," said Draco quietly. "Then we'll find a place to sit."

Hermione nodded as Draco gripped her hand and led her toward Marcus Flint. He was groping a prostitute, who was topless. Hermione averted her eyes.

"Flint," said Draco as he approached. He turned to look at Draco and then Hermione.

"So she's real," he said. "I was starting to wonder."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I told you that Blaise and I switched unofficially awhile ago. It took some time to train her."

Flint cocked his head and studied her. "Amalie, right?"

Hermione dipped her head but didn't say anything.

“Pretty thing,” he commented. “But not your usual, Draco.”

Draco scoffed. “Like you would know anything about my usual.”

“I know enough,” he said.

“Whatever Pansy has told you is a load of bullshit. Speaking of which... does your fiancée know that you’re fucking prostitutes? She made you give up your boon, didn’t she?”

Flint turned red, as he glared at Draco. “And does *your* fiancée know that your boon is alive and well in whatever hidey hole you’ve been keeping her?”

Hermione froze.

Fiancée?

She felt Draco grip her waist a bit harder, as he responded in a drawling voice. “Please. I would never be stupid enough to get engaged after Father died. Surely you know me better than that.”

Flint scowled. “It’s not so bad, Draco. She’s a lovely choice.”

Draco gave a careless shrug. “Until she learns to fuck the way I like, I’m not interested. Amalie, though... she keeps me on my toes, don’t you, sweet girl?” Draco trailed a finger down her arm, and Hermione tried to smile, but she was sure it came out more as a grimace. Draco seemed to sense her tension because his grip against her hand was slightly painful.

“Well you may want to tell *her* that,” said Flint wryly. “And Pansy and your mother for that matter. All of the ladies are under the impression that you’re still engaged.”

“I’m not,” said Draco shortly. “And as mother very well knows, I never really was. Tell Pansy to stop spreading rumors about it or I’ll tell *her* where you’re sticking your prick on the weekends.”

Flint sneered and turned away as Draco dragged Hermione to a free seat.

“Come sit on my lap. I’m sure you have questions.”

He sounded resigned, and Hermione nodded.

He settled down and patted his knee. Hermione perched on the edge until he yanked her toward him, and she gave an inelegant tumble against his chest.

“That’s better,” he murmured, as he nuzzled her neck. “Now then. Before you ask, no I’m not engaged. Father put together a contract last year, but nothing ever came of it, and then he died. That’s all there is to it.”

Hermione didn’t relax yet.

“Who was it with?”

“I’m sure you can guess.”

“Astoria,” she said, her heart sinking a little.

He nodded, and pulled her in tighter. “Theo had the same arrangement with Daphne. In fact, both of our fathers schemed with Reginald Greengrass together. But neither Theo nor I participated, and then Lucius and Tiberius both died at Hogwarts. There’s really nothing Reggie can do to enforce it, but that’s why there are rumors. The Greengrasses aren’t stupid enough to tell *The Prophet* we’re engaged, because they know we’re not. But evidently they are telling the other ladies about the old contracts.”

“And you’re sure they know you aren’t engaged?”

He pulled back and looked at her. “There’s been no tying ceremony, and I’ve never given her *anything* that might be construed as a token.”

She furrowed her brow. “What’s a tying ceremony? I’ve read about them before in the papers, but I don’t know what they are.”

“It’s a ceremony to become engaged. Not everyone does them anymore, but it’s still very common for purebloods. I wouldn’t get engaged without one.”

“So you haven’t done a tying ceremony,” Hermione repeated.

Draco looked relieved that she wasn’t shouting. “Absolutely not. Astoria and I are not tied, and I can assure you they know we aren’t. Whatever they are saying about it is just wishful thinking.”

Hermione finally relaxed, and Draco sighed with relief as she sank into him, but then she looked away.

“Did you really... you know... with her.”

He gripped her face and made her look at him.

“You shouldn’t spend any time worrying about the witches I may or may not have fucked and then discarded while dreaming about you. I have a history, but it’s meaningless, my darling. I have everything I want right here.”

He pulled her in and kissed her, deepening it immediately. The room around them seemed to melt away, and Hermione’s tension faded. Perhaps he was right. Did it really matter who he had been with before her? She decided that it probably didn’t, not really. As long as Draco wasn’t with some other witch at the same time as Hermione, she could leave the past in the past. Her own past before Draco seemed like a different life. Perhaps his did too.

As he kissed her Draco maneuvered her until she was straddling him, and then he broke away to whisper in her ear.

“Tell me when I need to stop.”

He pulled her earlobe into his teeth, and Hermione's hips jerked involuntarily as she gasped. She felt something hard between her legs, and she blushed to realize what it was. But there was no question she was in a skimpy dress, with her breasts near his face, and he was starting to kiss her in places that were unfamiliar. Maybe it was alright that he was turned on.

He began to work down the column of her throat, and Hermione pressed herself in closer. His hands were skating along her bare back, skimming the edge of her dress, making her shudder. It was so different like this, so sensual. Her hips rolled again, and he groaned beneath her. She did it one more time, and then he broke away and stared at her, with dark, dangerous eyes.

"Don't start with me. You are not prepared for all the ways I want to wreck you."

Hermione wasn't sure what had gotten into her. Maybe it was the look in his eyes. Maybe it was the danger and debauchery surrounding her. Maybe it was her suspicion that he *had* shagged Astoria at some point. Whatever it was, Hermione made the very rash decision to look him in the eye and rock her hips into him one last time.

His hand shot out and gripped her behind her neck, pulling her within a breath of him. Then his palm flattened over her shoulder and started to trail downward, over her Columba pendant and down the open space of her dress between her breasts. Her heart was pounding as he slipped his hand under the fabric of her deep neckline and rested it on the skin of her ribcage, just under the swell of one breast. She felt his thumb brush the bottom of it, and she shuddered involuntarily.

"Is that what you want?" he asked, with another brush. "You want me to touch you there? I bet they're getting so tight aren't they?"

Hermione scarcely knew where she was anymore. Every bit of attention was focused on him and his words and his thumb which was hovering so close to some place she had never really explored before. It intrigued her as much as it terrified her.

She just swallowed and nodded, and he made an approving sound as he brushed again.

"Are you frightened? Your heart is pounding."

She nodded again and squeezed her eyes shut.

"That's alright. You can give it all to me. You do such a good job turning over your fear to me. You know I won't hurt you."

Hermione nodded again, and this time his thumb crept higher until he touched the thing covering her nipple.

"What's this?" he murmured.

"An adhesive for my... you know," Hermione managed to say.

"Vanish it," he ordered.

Hermione gulped, but with a small flick of her hand, it disappeared, and now she could feel herself bare against the fabric.

“I’m not going to let myself look yet,” muttered Draco as his thumb started to circle around it. “No, I have been imagining that moment, and I know exactly what it will be like. You’ll be in bed with me, wearing one of your pretty little nightgowns and a ribbon in your hair. They’re so lovely on you, you know. The white with the lace just does something to me, I can’t explain it, and the matching ribbon fucking ends me every single time. I’ll make sure a lamp is on so I can see everything properly, and then I’ll tease a strap off one shoulder and then the other. Should I do the right first or the left? I can never decide, sweet girl, and I’ve thought about it extensively. Whichever one I choose, I know you’ll be afraid. You’re always nervous and quivering for me the first time, but you’ll be so good and let me do what I want anyway, won’t you? You’ll let me pull down the fabric and see you bare. I bet they’re pink and perfect, and they’ll turn into lovely rosebuds as soon as I look at them. Tell me I can do that someday...”

Hermione was entirely lost in his words, in the fantasy he was building for her. It was so simple, but she could see it. She could see every moment of it. She nodded again, and he moved his lips to her neck.

“Thank you darling girl. You do such a good job giving me the things I want. And you’ll let me feel them now, won’t you? I don’t want to see them yet – no, not here – but I want to know... how tight do they get? How hard? What will you do for me when I touch them?”

Hermione was breathing rapidly in anticipation, and then his thumb moved up to swipe across one bare nipple. She nearly convulsed at the unusual, *wonderful* feeling, and her hips rocked across his harder than ever. It created some odd pressure down low she wanted *out*, and some part of her thought that if she rubbed against him enough she would get it.

Draco swore and then did it again, this time pinching her nipple between his thumb and finger and rolling it a little, almost as though memorizing the precise shape.

Hermione felt herself shaking.

“So responsive,” he murmured. “And so pert. I can’t wait to lick them. Do you want me to do that someday? Lick and suck them for you? Maybe a little bite?”

Hermione groaned, and at the sound she made he palmed her entire breast and gripped it hard.

She suddenly froze, adrenaline and memories of Cormac flooding her, and she gave a wet gasp of shock.

He immediately loosened his grip and started making soothing sounds.

“I’m sorry, little dove, I quite forgot myself. You need a lighter touch, don’t you? Of course you do, something so sweet and perfect shouldn’t be manhandled.”

He gave another gentle brush with that hand as the adrenaline drained out from Hermione, leaving her shaking a little. She slumped against him as he made soothing sounds, continuing to touch her lightly. Then he moved his hand out of her dress and slipped the other one in on the other side.

“What about the other, hmmm? Can I touch that one too? Gently though, never rough with you. I promise I’ve learned my lesson.”

He started the process all over, this time on her other side, and it wasn’t long before Hermione forgot all about Cormac and the damage he inflicted on her, and instead was enjoying Draco’s light teasing. When he finally touched that nipple too, Hermione ground into his hardness, seeking something she couldn’t quite define. It was a tightness, almost painful, in her lower belly.

“Draco, I need...” she whispered.

“Shhh, I know. I bet your little cunt is so wet and throbbing for me, isn’t it? My poor, sweet girl. I can’t touch you there right now. I have plans for that too, and they can’t be done here. But if you want to rub on me and leave a spot on my trousers, I certainly won’t object.”

Hermione was torn between longing and mortification. Was she really grinding on him so hard she might leave something behind?

Yes.

She swallowed and stilled. He tutted a little.

“It will be harder for you tonight if you don’t keep going. You’ll have to wait until you’re back in your room to help yourself.”

“I’ve never really...” she confessed. “I haven’t...”

He pulled back and slipped his hand out of her dress as he stared at her in amazement. “Herm – *Amalie*. Do you mean to tell me you’ve never touched yourself before?”

She turned crimson, and her eyes dropped. “It’s not that... I mean, I’ve done that a *little bit* of course, but I’m not very good at it and...”

When she chanced a glance back up at him, he looked spellbound and cautious.

“Have you ever gotten yourself off before?”

She was slightly mortified, but she shook her head.

“And nobody else has either, right? You once told me about your sexual history, and it sounded like nobody else had touched you like that... In a pleasurable way I mean.”

Again, she shook her head shyly, and he inhaled, looking like all of his dreams had just come true.

“That’s perfect,” he whispered. “Promise me you won’t do it. I know you need it, but please save that for me. Keep your hands to yourself.”

Hermione nodded, feeling this was a rather easy promise to make. Yes, she needed *something*, but she had never gotten there before so why try now? Hermione knew that most witches her age did that now and then, but Hermione wasn’t one of them. Hermione had never been terribly boy crazy, and the few exploratory swipes she had taken over the years had been largely unsuccessful and faintly embarrassing. It was one of those things that sounded lovely in the few romance novels she had read — blinding pleasure, deep release, and spinning off into space — but in real life it took practice to get it right.

When, exactly, was she supposed to practice? She certainly wasn’t going to touch herself while sleeping in the same room as Ginny at the Burrow or Grimmauld Place. They may have kissed each other a few times, but touching *like that* was entirely different. Hermione would never experiment around her roommates at Hogwarts and certainly not while she was on the run with Harry and Ron. Other than the few weeks she had spent with her parents during her early years at Hogwarts, she hadn’t had the privacy to explore her own body in earnest until she moved to the Manor. Cormac had burned out any inclination to try before she arrived.

It wasn’t like she had wizards to do it for her either. She had been on a few Hogsmeade dates and enjoyed a handful of snogs, but they had all been fairly innocent. Hermione knew she was very behind on this compared to others her age, even compared to her two friends who lived at the Manor with her. But again, when exactly was she supposed to take a lover who could have given her those experiences in a natural, organic way?

Should she have been doing those things with Viktor Krum, who was almost four years older than her? Four years wasn’t a large age gap as an adult, she knew, but she had only been fifteen when he expressed an interest. She had never been able to fully shake the sense that something wasn’t quite right when he - at almost nineteen - asked her to the Yule Ball. She had largely avoided anything physical with him other than some rushed kisses.

Should she have let Justin Finch-Fletchley touch her like this after the few dates they had? She had gone to him with Hogsmeade several times, but it wasn’t until sixth year that he worked up the nerve to kiss her. During that single kiss she learned she would only have friendly feelings for him.

No, the boys most likely to introduce her to sex and pleasure would have been Harry or Ron, but the first was like her brother and the second was just as stubborn and awkward about romance and sex as she was. Besides, she and the boys had far more important things to be dealing with for the last few years.

Like war.

Hermione felt sexually stunted. She knew this. She didn’t particularly like it, but only because she hated to fall behind on *anything*. When it came to her nonexistent sexual history, however, she had accepted it because it was private and wasn’t something she could prioritize while trying to bring down Voldemort. She would have happily sworn off men forever if it meant having Harry and Ron back in her life or if it was somehow the key to killing

Voldemort. In fact, it was only recently — perhaps that very evening — that she found herself thinking seriously about sex again, thanks to Draco. He wanted her to wait to experience that release she had read about in those books, so she would. She knew from experience that the odd tightness would ease eventually.

He exhaled with a broad smile and leaned in to give her another deep kiss as his hand migrated back to the inside of her dress. He was just closing his palm over the whole thing — much gentler this time — when a voice made her jump.

“Draco, I require a word.”

Hermione peeled her mouth off of Draco’s and turned to find Snape staring at them. He was glaring at them both, Draco’s hand still very obviously inside of Hermione’s dress and covering her breast. She belatedly remembered where she was, and she supposed that compared to some of the things she saw when she had walked in this was rather tame, but Draco’s hand was still *right there*, and Snape was *right there*, and oh God he had taught her in school for six years...

She knew her panic and mortification was showing on her face, because Snape’s eyes — which had initially dismissed her — slid back to her and then looked harder. She saw him studying the necklace and then perhaps her lips and her chest where a few beauty marks were located... beauty marks that had not been covered when she was Hermione *or* Annabelle...

On instinct Hermione turned away from him and buried her face in Draco’s neck, angling her chest away from Snape and kissing Draco aggressively just below the ear.

He made a slightly strangled sound as he leaned back and let her do it.

“I’m rather busy at the moment, Godfather, as you can see...” he gasped. Hermione felt his head tilt back to give her better access, and she kissed back up to his ear.

“He was looking at me closely,” she whispered so faintly she wasn’t sure he would catch it. “He looked suspicious.”

Draco gave her a little squeeze with the hand that wasn’t inside of her dress to tell her he heard her as she resumed what she was doing. He relaxed into it with a groan.

“I don’t care what you’re doing, I need a word. Go send your whore to the buffet for a few minutes while we speak privately.”

Draco stilled, and then he spoke in a cold voice. “She’s my boon, and I was just getting her warmed up.”

“She can stay warm with one of the others then,” said Snape dismissively. “I need five minutes, Draco. *Now*.”

She could tell Draco wasn’t happy about this, but Snape *did* outrank him.

“Fine,” he snapped. “But if her cunt dries out and I have to start all over, I will be taking it out on you.”

She could practically feel Snape roll his eyes, as she blushed with embarrassment. “I care not for your vulgar methods. Just cast a lubrication charm like all the others and be done with it if you must. Now send her away.”

Hermione froze again at the mention of a lubrication charm. Cormac had used that on her, hadn't he?

Yes, she distinctly remembered that trickle of viscous liquid down her inner thigh. She closed her eyes and willed herself to stay calm.

Draco sensed it of course. He always knew when she became tense.

“Now see what you've done, you've upset her!” he said angrily, and Hermione could feel that odd shift in the atmosphere that always meant Draco was teetering on the edge of violence.

“It's alright,” she said, doing her best to force it back down as she pulled away from him, though she still kept her upper body angled away from Snape. She remembered to use a very light French accent at the last possible moment. “I can go. I'm hungry anyway.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Fine. But I'll be over there in five minutes.”

She nodded and scooted off his lap, blushing mightily as she discovered she had indeed left a wet spot on his trousers that he was making no effort to hide at all. He spread his legs and lounged in an insolent way, making a gesture to Snape as though to say, *get on with it*.

As she was heading toward the food she heard Snape say, “That girl, Draco...” and she tried not to wince.

Now that she wasn't in the sphere of Draco's heat, Hermione permitted herself to look around again. The room had deteriorated since her arrival. Several boons must have been drugged for the enthusiasm they were showing their Death Eaters. The strippers were now entirely nude and dancing for their small audience. Ginny and Blaise were in one corner, Blaise looking like he was ready to draw a wand on whoever was conversing with them. Ginny was shrinking into him, and Hermione was sure that the other Death Eater was asking to buy her.

It took a bit longer to find Luna and Theo, and Hermione gaped when she saw them. They were positioned much like Draco and Hermione had been just moments earlier, though Theo's hand was clearly inside of Luna's knickers, and her dress was peeled down all the way to her waist. She was topless as he licked... well, Hermione could imagine, since Draco had just asked her about doing that too.

It was... odd seeing them. It was her brother and good friend. They typically behaved with much less open affection than Ginny and Blaise or even Draco did around the others. But here....

That thing in Hermione's belly tightened again, and she swallowed hard and turned away. She wished she could go to Blaise or Theo while she waited for Draco, instead of being alone for even a moment in this crowd. But Blaise was beating back offers from the other Death Eaters, and Theo was extremely busy. She straightened up and looked around again. She

wasn't the only woman standing alone. Surely she could do this for five minutes. She marched over to the buffet and pretended to make a plate she absolutely would not eat.

She sensed Draco's gaze on her back. She could always feel it, and while it often made her feel a bit exposed, right now it gave her some confidence. If anybody did something more than speak to her, she was sure that he would be over in a flash.

She lingered over the buffet, pretending as though she cared about which strawberry she was selecting. It wasn't long before a figure sidled up to her, and Hermione tensed.

She glanced sideways and recognized Walden McNair. She shuddered, remembering Buckbeak.

"What are you doing all alone?" he asked.

Hermione affected her very light French accent. This one was much easier than Hagrid's accent for her. Between Fleur and trips to France as a child, she could maintain it without much thought or effort. She belatedly wondered why she hadn't chosen it for Annabelle the first time she encountered Snape.

"My master sent me to fetch refreshment. He is expecting me back shortly."

"Your master? You call him master?"

She said nothing but continued to fill the plate slowly. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Draco still in conversation with Snape, but he was watching her too.

Good.

"And tell me... Amalie, right? What has he done that makes you so docile and obedient? Everyone knows the Malfoy's like to be in control, and they can be violent. His father was the same way with dear Narcissa, you know. Does he beat you? Lucius used to beat Narcissa. I saw him do it once. She misbehaved, and he knocked her out with a single blow. Does Draco do that to you, love? I have to beat my boon on occasion, but she's getting better at following orders."

Hermione froze, wholly unprepared for this dump of information about the Malfoy's. She wasn't surprised by McNair. In fact, she was sure that most of the boons were abused. But Lucius and Narcissa? Had Draco seen it? Was that where his violent streak came from? Was that why he was always telling her not to be afraid of him? Was it why he didn't seem upset that his father was dead? But he had always revered his father as a young child, hadn't he?

It was all too confusing, and she struggled to come up with a response. She decided to hedge.

"My master has had to discipline me, but I am not to speak of it," she said quietly. "I am obedient, and he is generous with me when I do as he says."

“I must say, he’s done an excellent job on you,” said McNair, now brushing her arm with his hand. Hermione shivered and jerked it away.

“Oh come now, don’t be like that. My boon is working for me tonight. I’m all alone. And everyone knows he shared you with Zabini for a long time. I must say, there is a certain fascination about you among our group. What convinced Draco to give up the Weasley girl? She was the biggest prize of all, and he only got her for capturing that mudblood he killed. We could scarcely believe it when he gave her up for you. What is it about you, hmmm?”

Hermione was staring at her half-full plate of food as she moved a bit further away.

“My master does not share me any longer,” she said. “He has no need for gold.”

McNair sneered. “You think we sell our boons for gold? No, girl, it’s to trade favors and to teach them their place. Perhaps Draco hasn’t done such a good job on you after all.”

He gripped her arm hard very hard and jerked her toward him.

Hermione reacted on instinct.

She dropped the plate she was holding and went for the knife at her thigh. Within a second she was holding it against his throat, and he was staring at her in disbelief. Nearby, several people fell silent, and then a few more, and soon the whole room was quieting to observe the confrontation. She realized a bit belatedly that they were giving the room a clear view, and the table wasn’t blocking them. Any Death Eater could easily curse her at any moment, and she would have to rely on her necklace to help her.

But there was nothing for it.

“I said,” she enunciated very slowly, loud enough so her voice would carry. “He. Does. Not. Share.”

She felt a gentle touch at her back, and she didn’t even need the cedar and spice scent to know it was Draco.

She pulled the knife away from McNair’s throat and stepped back toward Draco.

He held out a hand silently, and she placed the knife in it.

“Thank you Amalie,” he said, loud enough for others around them to hear.

Then he made a show of lifting the hem of her dress and sliding the knife back in the holster on her thigh so everyone would know she had it.

McNair’s face was twisted.

“You allow her a weapon?” he demanded.

Draco’s arm slipped around her waist, and he pulled her back against his chest.

“Why wouldn’t I allow it in a crowd like this? She’s perfectly capable of helping herself if someone like you touches her. She has her orders, don’t you sweet girl? Gut anybody who touches you.”

She nodded.

McNair was looking at them in disbelief.

“She’s very good too,” continued Draco, now leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. “The first time I tried to fuck her she got my own knife off of me and nearly killed me with it. I’ve never been so hard in my life.”

McNair’s eyes widened, and Hermione shuddered at the heat in his voice and how easily the lie slipped out.

“And then I discovered something else about her,” Draco added. “When I do this...”

And now he drew his own knife from his sleeve so fast it was a blur. He pressed it against *her* throat, and Hermione’s heart started to race. She made herself breathe slowly through it.

He will never hurt me.

It was exactly like training. He had held her like this dozens of times by now, and she always reacted the same way.

“...she melts for me,” finished Draco. “She loves feeling my knife against her throat, just like I love feeling hers against mine. Isn’t that right?”

He slid the short blade down her throat and teased the edge of her neckline open with it before he slipped it under. The flat edge passed over one nipple, and she shuddered as the cold metal made them both peak.

Good God, she should not be so affected by this, but she *was*. Perhaps it was because Draco had never once, in all of their training, given her so much as a scratch with his knife. His control was so precise that she trusted him implicitly not to hurt her. But she also had to stay very still and do exactly what he said so as to not hurt herself. It turned her on in a way that felt so unexpected and a little wrong.

“You see how hard her nipples get for me like this? And that greedy cunt gets so wet when I do this. You’re wet right now, aren’t you, little dove?”

“Yes Master,” she breathed.

Draco jerked a little at this and immediately flicked his knife away from her skin and out of her dress. But his other hand wrapped around her throat from behind, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Yes, that always makes you so eager to please me,” he crooned. Hermione sensed the room was spellbound as they watched. “And tell McNair again, do I share you any longer?”

“No Master.”

“Who do you belong to?”

“You, Master.”

“Who owns your tits?”

“You do, Master.”

“Who owns your cunt?”

“You do, Master.”

“Who owns your arse?”

“Just you, Master.”

They were falling into a rhythm now. Hermione felt warm like this, safe. It was such an odd sensation in a room full of Death Eaters, but he was making her speak a truth out loud that was solidifying something between them. It was showing itself again, that dark and twisted thing between them that should terrify her, but didn't. Because he had taken her fear and studied it, trained it, refined it. She was still afraid of many things, but she was no longer afraid of him.

“And are you obedient?”

“Yes, Master.”

“If I tell you to cut McNair, what will you do?”

“I'll open his carotid, Master. Or the femoral artery on his leg. It will be fast and fatal.”

“Good girl. And have you ever killed someone for me before?”

“Yes, Master,” Hermione said, as she finally opened her eyes to stare at McNair who was looking at her with fear.

I am a murderer. I killed Cormac McLaggen. Draco started it, but I ended it. I killed him for Draco. I killed him for myself. I killed him for both of us.

His hand released her throat, and he sheathed his knife. She glanced around and saw the room was utterly still. Even the dancers on the stage had stopped what they were doing to watch. She saw Theo out of the corner of his eye. He had a dark expression on his face, but it was directed toward McNair and not Draco. He wasn't knocking on their bond. He knew that she was perfectly safe right where she was.

And Theo also knew that Draco had always been adept at creating a spectacle.

“I suggest you keep the lady’s advice in mind. I. Do. Not. Share. I made this clear to you and the others before I brought her out tonight. Do not think for a moment that I haven’t armed her and trained her to follow my orders, including in this. She knows that nobody but me gets to touch her, and she also knows she will be punished mercilessly if she allows it. Make no mistake: she will not allow it. *I will not allow it.* If you wish to share a boon, you will need to ask one of the others who haven’t put in the time and effort and gold to train theirs into perfect obedience.”

McNair’s eyes darkened at this, but he said nothing. The message was clear.

“Now then, I must go inspect her for bruises. You better hope I don’t find any. And then she gets a reward for being so good, don’t you darling girl? Maybe another pretty bauble to wear when you’re naked for me? I know how much you like those.”

At this, McNair’s eyes dropped to her necklace and earrings, and she felt other eyes on her too. While Hermione’s dress wasn’t terribly unusual for this crowd, she suddenly realized that her accessories stood out. They were far more expensive than what most of the other boons were wearing. She now understood the narrative Draco was crafting: she gave him sex, yes, but she was treated more like a mistress than a true whore. He had first extracted her obedience with threats of violence, but he had earned her loyalty by being indulgent when she followed orders. He was wealthy of course, and diamond earrings and necklaces would be nothing for him. He could dress her up like a pretty doll to keep her complacent, and she followed his orders in exchange for his protection and gifts. It didn’t matter if they had true emotional affection for each other. They had landed on an arrangement that suited them both.

She wondered for a split second just how much of that was a lie and how much of it truly reflected their relationship now.

The Columba pendant seemed to burn against her chest.

Remember who he really is.

Hermione said nothing to reveal the nature of her thoughts, but she didn’t resist when he slipped a hand into hers and tugged her toward a side door. She could feel dozens of eyes tracking them as he opened it and stepped inside to find an empty room that appeared to be a study. As soon as the door was shut behind them, he turned and cupped her face, searching it for something.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she said. “He just grabbed my arm, and I reacted.”

“Show me,” he demanded.

Hermione stepped back, and pointed to her right bicep. A handprint-shaped bruise was already forming. He touched it gently, and she felt the air begin to destabilize again.

“I can make him hurt for this.”

“Draco,” she said, but he wasn’t listening to her.

“*Draco!*” she tried again. His eyes snapped up to hers. “Don’t. It’s not worth it. You intimidated him well enough.”

“But —”

“*No*,” she insisted. “Don’t. It startled me, that’s all. But it’s just a bruise, it’s not a big deal. You know things like that are bound to happen around this crowd. You trained me really well for it, and I had it under control. Then you stepped in a few seconds later just like you promised. Everything is fine. You can’t have the others asking too many questions about why you care so much.”

He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. “I hate seeing bruises on a witch,” he said quietly. “Especially you.”

Lucius and Narcissa.

“Have you seen it often?” she asked carefully.

“My father was not a nice man,” he confessed. “He could be so warm and loving toward my mother and then turn on her in an instant. He used to say he liked to see her fear. And...” he hesitated. “... and I understand it. There are times when I wonder if I’m not exactly like him. When you are afraid, it... affects me.”

Hermione went cold, and he watched her face.

“Just like that,” he added a bit wryly. Then he closed his eyes and exhaled. “But my mother grew to hate him for it. He never hurt her in front of me while I was a child, so I didn’t understand *why* she was so terrified or had the occasional bruise on her arms or neck until I was older. Then one day he struck her in front of me, and I almost killed him for it. I realized what was happening, and I swore I would never scare you like he scared her. I would never raise a hand to you except to train you to defend yourself. And the thought of anybody else doing that to you... hurting you, marking you, doing *anything* to exert their power over you... it makes me want to lock them in my dungeon and force them to die a very slow death. I should be the only one who gets to see your fear. And whenever you give it to me, I will help you overcome it instead of making it worse.”

Hermione’s anxiety started to ease.

“Good,” he said as he watched her closely. “Don’t ever be afraid of me.”

He rubbed her arm a bit, and she leaned into him. He let her, seeming to relish the contact she was initiating.

“Don’t go after McNair,” she said. “Don’t turn this into a bigger thing than it already is.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” she said.

He just nodded, and they were quiet for a time.

“What did Snape want?”

“The Dark Lord has plans to interrogate the Wizengamot to find those who are disloyal to him. Severus wants me to help him with it.”

A shiver of distaste passed through her.

“Hey, that’s a good thing,” he insisted. “Severus knows I’m not loyal to the Dark Lord. We will find a way to do it subtly.”

She relaxed a little. “I suppose you’re right about that.”

“And also…” he added, hesitating a bit.

“Also what?”

“He wanted to talk about you. And Annabelle. I think he’s suspicious.”

Hermione groaned in exasperation. “Surely he’s not interested in Amalie. Amalie doesn’t look a thing like Annabelle.”

“No, but he said that something about you reminded him of Annabelle. I don’t know what it was. Maybe your beauty marks.”

He grimaced a little, but reached out to touch one.

“I know I should have removed them,” he added. “But I already had to change your face. I’ve been fascinated with these ever since I saw your dress at the Yule Ball. I want the parts of you that I touch to be all yours.”

Hermione blushed and then sighed.

“Honestly Draco, maybe we should just tell him. He’s the one who is most likely to figure it out. He knows both of us too well.”

“We can’t tell him, I’ve told you that before.”

“But why not?” she insisted.

Hermione froze as a familiar voice spoke from the corner. He must have slipped in silently while they were wrapped up in each other.

“Because Draco assured the Order that he killed you, Miss Granger. And he assured *me* of that fact too.”

Chapter 21: Severus

Chapter Notes

TW1: Referenced domestic violence (not depicted)

TW2: Gaslighting

Hermione gasped as Draco grabbed her hard and shoved her behind him before spinning around. His wand was drawn and on Snape in an instant.

Snape, however, had his wand drawn too. It was tense as they were both silent, waiting for the other to make a move.

Hermione couldn't see Snape properly, with Draco's hand still gripping her to hold her behind him. But as the silence stretched she felt Draco's hand release her and trail down her stomach and then her leg.

What on earth is he...?

For a split second she wondered if he was trying to feel her up *now*, but then she realized he was holding his wand with his non-dominant hand. No, he wasn't trying to feel her up. He was trying to find her knife, since it was closest to his throwing hand.

Hermione moved as little as possible as she reached to slip it out of her thigh holster and pressed the hilt into Draco's creeping hand. As soon as he felt it he palmed it and shifted his weight ever so slightly. Hermione knew he was a hair trigger away from launching it at Snape. From this distance he would not miss, even if Snape tried to curse him first.

"What on earth were you thinking, Draco?" asked Snape, in a long-suffering voice.

It was such a familiar tone of dry exasperation that Hermione felt herself relax ever so slightly, but Draco seemed to tense even more.

"You know exactly what I was thinking. The Order wasn't willing to risk a swap to save her, and I was."

Hermione jerked at this.

The Order hadn't risked a swap? Snape was actually telling the truth? So that meant that Draco...

“You know why,” said Snape harshly. “It was *one life*, Draco. Just one life to secure your position in the Dark Lord’s ranks – to give the Order their second spy, one that he would truly never suspect since you were never asked to be a double agent like I was! So I repeat myself: *what were you thinking?*”

Draco’s anger was palpable.

“You’re right,” he hissed. “It was just one life, wasn’t it? But I was *thinking* that it didn’t have to be *her life*! I told your Order from the beginning that Hermione didn’t have to die to give them what they wanted. But none of you – *none of you* – cared about her enough to let me try! The Order was so convinced I would slip and show the Dark Lord the truth in my head that they were willing to just cast her aside and make *me* kill her! They thought I would fuck it up somehow, didn’t they? None of them believed I could do it. But I did do it. I saved her, just like I told you I could, and now she is *mine*.”

He was breathing hard, and Hermione sensed a bit of madness about him. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but instinctively she knew that it was the truth. There were elements of his story that she had always found a little odd. She had never been able to pinpoint the things that bothered her about it, but she had always felt that she didn’t know everything about that day Draco supposedly executed her. Finally, she was learning truth. She was learning why Draco didn’t trust the Order and why he had been so agitated when Snape expressed an interest in her. He wasn’t just a sexual rival; it was because Draco lied to Snape to protect her.

She didn’t know what to think.

“Why?” she asked from behind him, and she stepped out ever so slightly.

Draco stepped back in front of her, and she gripped his arm. “Please, Draco, I need to understand.”

He did not move aside, but he allowed her to poke her head around him so she could see Snape. He had an odd look on his face as he stared back at her.

“Tell me why, Professor.”

Snape seemed to jolt at the reminder that he had once taught her. Then he sighed.

“None of us were happy about it, Miss Granger, but we needed a second set of eyes in the Dark Lord’s inner circle. I could only do so much, especially now that I am assigned back at Hogwarts on a daily basis. Draco was perfectly positioned for it once Lucius died and he captured you. And by getting him to cooperate, the Order was also able to arrange deals with Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini too. All three of them had resources the Order desperately needed, and Draco’s favor enabled Nott and Zabini to climb rapidly too. It was enormously important to make sure the execution went perfectly, and I’m sorry to say that you had nobody left who would advocate for you, except for...”

He trailed off delicately.

“Except for Draco,” Hermione supplied.

“Yes,” conceded Snape. “You must understand it was nothing personal.”

Hermione felt bitterness well up inside of her. “The Weasleys. Did they know?”

“Ginny Weasley’s safety was more important to them than yours,” he said. “As the plan was coming together and terms were negotiated, she took priority over you. Draco made a Vow protect her. It was admittedly a bit generic, but everyone knew that it meant he had to perform the ritual which involved killing you before claiming her. We couldn’t get her out any other way without risking exposure. Too many people saw her get captured, and she was being watched too closely. He agreed to claim her and turn spy for the Order in exchange for a pardon. I’m afraid the Weasley’s weren’t willing to risk Draco getting caught with a swap. Draco would have been killed too, and Ginny would have gone to somebody else.”

“Why didn’t you just claim her then?” demanded Hermione.

A look of distaste flashed across Snape’s face. “That would have been out of character. It was much more convincing for Draco to do it.”

“So the Weasleys know she’s at the Manor?”

Snape rolled his eyes. “Of course they do. Don’t you think they would be scouring England if they thought she was in danger? Malfoy Manor is a fortress. It’s the safest place in the world for her, especially under the care of a Death Eater who will die if he harms her.” Snape eyed Draco wryly now. “I’ll admit that switching up boons concerned them at first, but I was able to convince them that Zabini seems to genuinely care for her, and he *has* been working with the Order too. Besides, she is still living in the Manor under Draco’s eye. If Zabini harms her, odds are good Draco’s Vow will be broken.”

So Draco had lied about the Weasley’s involvement. Of course he had lied, and she had barely questioned it because it was right after her supposed execution when her emotions were all over the place. It was obvious now that she really thought about it. The Weasleys would never sit back and allow Ginny to be placed into hiding without them knowing precisely where she was. And since they knew *that*, then of course they must know Draco wouldn’t harm her or they never would have allowed it. But they didn’t know about *Hermione* because evidently Draco had lied to the entire Order about her.

She felt slightly faint, but she had to be certain she understood this.

“Draco said the Order made him promise to protect *me* too,” she said slowly. “Me and Luna both.”

“If he told you that, then he lied,” said Snape simply. “It was just Ginny. The Order has little interest in Luna Lovegood, and they needed you to secure Draco’s position.”

She felt Draco stiffen in front of her.

Hermione didn't know why this made her want to cry, but it did. Hadn't he told her he misled her? Hadn't he said there were things he wanted to tell her, but couldn't? So why was this lie so painful?

Because it made you think you were still important to the Order.

But she wasn't important to the Order. Hadn't Draco told her the day she arrived at the Manor that she and the boys had been reckless? That the Order needed her contained so she wouldn't help spark another battle that caused so many deaths? Dumbledore had given her a mission, it was true, but the others didn't know about it. From their perspective, Draco was far more important than she was – so important that they were willing to kill her to solidify his spot next to Voldemort. They wouldn't even risk a swap in case it went wrong, not even when Draco suggested it. She was expendable, and he had intervened for her against their explicit instructions.

She felt ill.

Draco shifted again in front of her, and Hermione's attention snapped to him. He still had his wand on Snape.

"Can you both just... lower your wands please?" she asked, feeling exhausted. "We're all on the same side here."

Even if both sides wanted me dead, she thought bitterly.

Both Draco and Snape stared at each other intently, gripping their wands hard. And then at precisely the same time they slowly lowered their wands. Hermione glanced down and saw that Draco's grip on the knife behind his back had not loosened at all.

Hermione forced herself to set aside her feelings about the Order. She would have time to wallow in self-pity later, but there were things they had to sort right now, and there wasn't much time before somebody might look in on them.

"How did you figure it out?" she asked. "Did you overhear us or...?"

Snape gave her a marvelous eye-roll.

"Please. It was obvious once I realized you and Annabelle were the same person. Draco practically *begged* the Order to let him swap you, and they threatened to withhold the Vow for a pardon if he didn't drop it. Eventually he let it go, but I was sent to the ceremony to watch to make sure he really did pull it off and claim Ginny. He executed you so neatly that I wondered if it was really you. But Draco put on a good show, and when I questioned him about it later he made sure to sound heartbroken enough that I was convinced. I'll admit the Annabelle trick threw me at first. She reminded me of... someone... and it distracted me. But there were things about her that were odd. Her knowledge of magic was far too extensive to be a squib, but if she had been a British muggleborn she would have gone to Hogwarts, and I would have recognized her. That and her accent was bizarre. I knew she was hiding something. I saw him watching Annabelle in precisely the same way he watched

you tonight as Amalie. And there is only one witch he has *ever* paid that sort of attention to, Miss Granger. I watched my godson stare at the back of your head in Potions for five years.”

Hermione’s heart stuttered, and she glanced at Draco. The little bit of his face that she could see was pink, but he looked determined. Then Snape continued.

“I’ll admit the only reason I needed to confirm it for myself was because I never imagined he would actually convince you to work with him like this. You have never seemed to care for him at all, and this is quite a bit more promiscuous than your usual hijinks.”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to burn scarlet with embarrassment. Draco glanced back and saw the look on her face. He snarled, and Hermione saw the knife twitch.

“You have *no fucking clue* what we’ve been doing,” he said. “The minute the Order wrote her off, then her business was no longer their concern.”

Snape raised one eyebrow. “I think we both know that’s not true, Draco. As soon as they find out she’s alive, they will try to extract her.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped.

“What? Why?” she demanded. “They were willing to kill me!”

Snape gave a disapproving sniff. “Their stomachs are not that strong, Miss Granger. Once the deed was done, I’m afraid there were some... second thoughts. Plenty of remorse and ‘what did we do’s.’ That sort of thing. They will be quite happy to learn that Draco did in fact manage the switch. It will assuage their collective guilt.”

“No,” said Draco. “They will not find out. They will not take her. Her home is with *me* now.”

Snape looked at him with something like pity.

“No, Draco, it’s not. I understand you pulled the wool over their eyes, but —”

“But nothing!” he said, his voice raising. “They were more than happy for her to die! *You* were more than happy for her to die, even though you *knew* how good my occlumency is! You knew I could pull off a switch, don’t deny it! You just sat back and let them call all the shots in that meeting!”

Snape’s face turned cold. “You’re right. I did. Because she needed to be out of the way for you to perform your duties, Draco. You have been distracted by her since the day you met her. I’ve known you for your entire life, and I could see the signs even when you and your parents were in denial about it. She’s a liability, a weakness. She makes you reckless. I mean, look at you, Draco. You are transfiguring her and letting her prance around with Death Eaters, acting like your whore, when it’s obvious to anybody who looks carefully that she has little experience with men. Don’t you realize that a simple *finite incantatum* would make the whole thing fall apart? I made an Unbreakable Vow to your mother more than a year ago that I would protect you! My Vow didn’t just end when Dumbledore died — I am still beholden

to it! That means I had to make sure you went through with the ceremony! It bought you favor with the Dark Lord, it secured your own Vow for a pardon with the Order, and it rid you of your biggest distraction all at the same time! The plan was perfect, or it would have been had you actually followed through with it!”

Snape was sneering by the end of it, as though he was disgusted by Draco’s willingness to save her. Hermione started to shake as the truth of his words hit her. Draco had risked everything to save her, and he *had* been reckless. She reached out to grip Draco’s jacket to steady herself, and he stepped in front of her ever so slightly.

“You’re not taking her,” he said quietly, and Hermione heard the danger in his voice. “Nor will you tell them that she’s alive. She is mine. She belongs to me. There is not a single thing you could give me that would make me give her up. The switch is done, and nobody but you is aware of it.”

“Miss Granger belongs with the Order,” insisted Snape. “You know she does, Draco. You are living a fantasy.”

Hermione couldn’t say why this struck her, but suddenly she was angry. She was *so angry*.

“I rather think,” she chimed in sharply, “that it should be *my* decision where I belong. And I don’t appreciate either one of you making that decision for me!”

She sensed both men go completely still, and she stepped out from behind Draco so she could look at Snape squarely.

“You have dismissed my talents for years, Professor,” she said. “And apparently my life is worth so little to you that you had no problem asking your godson to execute me, despite being aware of his feelings.”

Snape’s black eyes glittered, and he opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione cut him off.

“I think Lily Evans would be ashamed of you.”

As she watched, Snape’s face drained of what little color it had.

“What?” he whispered.

“Lily Evans,” she said. “That’s who Annabelle reminded you of, isn’t it? You were in love with her. You’re *still* in love with her. Are you saying that you wouldn’t have done precisely what Draco did if the Order had asked *you* to kill Lily?”

Snape looked like he was seeing a ghost.

“No...” he said. “No, there’s no way for you to know that...”

“It wasn’t that hard,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Just as you figured out who I was, I figured out who *you* were — who you truly were. When you told Annabelle that she reminded you of somebody, I looked in the mirror and saw her. Perhaps you’ve forgotten

that her son was my best friend, and I've seen every single picture Harry had of her many times."

Snape's face looked bloodless as he stared at her in disbelief.

"And Lily never would have done it, Sir. She never would have advocated killing an innocent woman like that, no matter *what* the Order might have gained from it. Especially not when the Death Eater in question was willing to perform a swap for somebody who was dying anyway. And if Lily had been the sacrifice, you would have done exactly what Draco did. You would have hidden her away and taken her all for yourself, despite the fact that she had a husband and a son."

Snape seemed to be speechless.

"I will acknowledge that you have made a few good points. You're right that we've been reckless, and I'm rather inexperienced in certain matters."

She eyed Draco now.

"But then again, nobody but you has caught us, and you're the only one who actually knows me. And after tonight... well I think the others will leave me alone, don't you?"

A muscle in Snape's jaw twitched.

"So that brings us back to where I belong. And I..."

She hesitated, scarcely believing she was about to do this.

"I belong with Draco," she said simply. "For many reasons, but the biggest one is that he valued my life when the Order did not."

She glanced behind her at Draco and saw that his face was almost triumphant. Then she turned back to Snape who had assumed a pensive expression, but he said nothing as he absorbed this.

"Godfather," said Draco, and Hermione was surprised to hear him take on a pleading tone. "Please don't tell the Order. She's my... she's mine. She's my Lily."

Hermione's heart clenched at this. Surely he didn't love her like that, not really. Snape's love for Lily had evidently transcended death and was decades old. Draco's feelings for her were darker and more obsessive. They were probably unhealthy. But perhaps he believed it. Or maybe he simply knew it was the thing he needed to say to make sure Hermione stayed with him.

Snape's face fell, and he looked resigned. "Fine," he said. "I won't breathe a word."

"I'll need a Vow to that effect," said Hermione.

Both men looked at her in surprise.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said, scowling at Draco. “You’ve been throwing around Unbreakable Vows for the last few months, haven’t you? I want one from Professor Snape that says he won’t knowingly tell the Order *or* the Death Eaters that I’m alive and staying with you. That’s all.”

Snape looked like he was about to refuse, but Hermione interjected.

“You owe me this, Professor, for being so careless with my life before now. You know you do.”

Again his face fell, but he didn’t object. He gave a single nod, and she approached him with Draco close behind her.

Draco drew his wand as Hermione and Snape clasped hands. She did not give him an opportunity to phrase the promise himself.

“Do you, Severus Snape, promise on your life that you will not disclose the fact that Hermione Jean Granger is alive to any person, portrait, or other magical object or being who is unaware of it, unless I give you explicit permission to do so?”

Snape scowled, but she thought Draco looked impressed with her wording.

“I do,” he gritted.

A gold band shot out of Draco’s wand and wrapped their hands.

“And do you promise on your life to keep Draco Lucius Malfoy’s deception on the fifth of June and every other time he has deceived the Death Eaters or a member of the Order of the Phoenix since that date a secret, until I release you from this Vow?”

He looked more irritated than ever as he said, “I do.”

Another golden band snaked out of Draco’s wand and wrapped around their hands.

“So may it be,” said Hermione.

The bonds sank into their skin, and Hermione felt a tingle.

She released his hand immediately and backed toward Draco, who wrapped his arm protectively around her waist.

“We need to return,” he said. “Godfather, you go first.”

Snape’s lips thinned, but he nodded and tapped himself on the head to disillusion himself. Hermione saw the door open, and then a shimmer disappeared through it.

When he was gone Draco turned to stare down at her.

“I can’t believe that just happened,” he said.

Hermione exhaled and shook her head. "Me neither."

She fell silent. She had picked Draco, yes, but the lies and deception stretched between them. And she was certain it wasn't the only thing he had kept from her. Once again she felt her walls going up, her hesitancy around him emerging.

She touched her pendant.

Remember who he is.

But who was Draco Malfoy, really?

Hermione re-entered the party with Draco a few minutes later and did her best to sit on his lap and pretend that everything was fine, but internally she felt like she might be melting down.

The sodding Order had signed off on her death. *Draco* had been the one to save her. The entire plan had been his. And then he lied about it and pretended like he was acting under the Order's instructions all along.

It was a stupid thing to lie about. Perhaps she could understand keeping it from her before she knew about her relationship with Theo or Draco's own feelings. But as they grew closer, why didn't he say something about it? What could he have possibly gained from it?

She wasn't certain, and it made her feel wrongfooted, despite her choice to stay with him.

Then there was the question of Lavender Brown. Had she really been a volunteer? Was it even Lavender to begin with? He had implied the Order procured her, but obviously they had nothing to do with it. That meant he had lied about that too, or at least misled her.

Hermione wanted to believe that it was Lavender and that she had truly been dying anyway. If not, then the survivor's guilt would be too much, and once again she would see her own face instead of Lavender's every time she thought about that day. But she didn't *know*. They hadn't talked about it yet, and she was distracted as she considered all the ways he could have lied about that too.

Once they were back in the room with the other Death Eaters, Draco made some effort to kiss her neck and draw her interest back to him, but Hermione was lost in thought in the corner of the dark room as the Death Eaters around her drank and fucked themselves into a stupor. The only good thing about it was that the others gave them a wide berth. They looked at Draco with some fear, and she was getting her own looks as well. But Hermione wasn't engaged as Draco tried to draw out the heat she had been feeling earlier that evening. She was stiff and unresponsive, and after an hour of failed attempts at coaxing her he called it and said it was time to leave.

Tension was radiating from him as they floo'd back to the Manor. Ginny and Blaise were already gone, and Theo and Luna were wrapped up in each other again and looked like they would not be leaving for some time. Draco was silent as he gripped her hand and led her through the Manor and across the wards.

The moment they entered her room he muttered, "*Finite incantatum*," and Hermione's disguise disappeared. This did not improve her mood, as it drove home Snape's point about their recklessness.

"You're angry with me," he stated, turning to face her with his arms crossed. He looked slightly defiant, and Hermione mentally braced herself for a fight.

"I don't know what to believe," she said honestly.

"You chose to stay with me," he pointed out.

"Yes, because you didn't try to kill me like the Order did. That's all."

"Is it really the only reason?" he asked, uncrossing his arms and walking toward her. "You're sure there aren't any others?"

Hermione flushed and looked away.

He touched her pendant. "That's what I thought," he said.

Hermione felt a flash of anger and slapped his hand away. "Don't you start."

"And don't *you* be obstinate," he said.

"*Excuse me?*" she asked with indignation. "What did you just say?"

"You're being obstinate," he said, rolling his eyes at her. "And I'll admit that it turns me on sometimes, but I really prefer it when you're cooperative."

Hermione's jaw dropped, and then she turned her back on him. "Get out," she said.

He snorted in disbelief, and she could feel his irritation behind her.

"Stop acting like this," he said curtly. "I went against your precious Order to save your life. And I've installed you in the Manor and kept you safe and comfortable. I'm letting you practice magic. I've given you family heirlooms. I've—"

"Lied to me," she cut him off.

He fell silent for a moment and his voice dropped. "I haven't lied to you since the day you arrived here."

She spun and stared at him in disbelief.

"*Are you being serious right now? Because you did!* You said the Order—"

“I never said the Order told me to save you. I said the Order told me to deal with you.”

“You said there were Order members who knew about me!” she insisted.

“And there were. Me. Theo. Blaise. Even Luna to some degree.”

Hermione stared at him as she tried to absorb this.

“But I thought—”

“You thought many things,” he said. “Quite a few of them were wrong, but I didn’t feel the need to correct you. I did not, however, directly *lie* to you. You asked me not to lie that first time we talked after you arrived, remember? And I didn’t.”

“But you *misled* me...”

“Perhaps, but I told you that already,” he pointed out. “You simply took the things I said and drew your own conclusions.”

“That’s as good as a lie!” she insisted.

“Is it really? When I was trying to preserve your feelings?”

“My *feelings*?”

He moved so close to her she could smell that cedar and spice.

“Of course your *feelings*. Pardon me for worrying that it might make you feel *shitty* to learn that not a single person in your oh-so-sacred Order was willing to intervene for you as the plan came together during that meeting. Not one. The only person who even tried was *me*. But even I can’t overrule the entire leadership, so I had to go behind their backs and arrange things myself!”

Hermione was shaking her head. “No. No, you’re lying again.... or pardon me... *misleading me*. My feelings aren’t the only reason, are they? Because after the ritual was over and the swap was done, they had no reason to want me dead. Snape himself said they feel so guilty about it that they would try to extract me if they knew I was alive.”

His face turned to stone, and Hermione gave a mirthless laugh.

“That’s the *real* reason you didn’t tell me, isn’t it? You were afraid I would run or try to make contact with them – maybe even tell Snape himself – and they would take me away from you.”

He said nothing to this and Hermione scowled as she turned her back on him again. The silence stretched until he broke it.

“You’ve committed yourself to me,” he said darkly. “You said it in front of everyone tonight. You are *mine*. And you chose me instead of the Order. You don’t get to take that back.”

Hermione shook her head, the exhaustion from the day suddenly catching up to her. It was no longer her birthday – it was past midnight.

“Hermione...” he said, some urgency in his tone now. “You *don't* get to take it back. You don't.”

“Did you really kill Lavender Brown?” she asked, ignoring him.

He reached out to touch her shoulder behind her, and she jerked it away.

“Yes,” he said, sounding worried now. “I told you I haven't lied to you.”

“And was she dying?”

He was quiet for a moment.

“*Draco*. Was she dying?”

“Yes... in a way.”

“What do you mean, in a way?”

“She was a prisoner at Hogwarts. She did not receive the medical care she needed to survive.”

A sick feeling started to creep through Hermione.

“Could she have? If she had received better medical care?”

“I don't know,” he said. “Possibly, but it was never going to happen. She *was* patched up somewhat, but by the time the healer who looked at the prisoners discovered what Dolohov had done to her, it was too late. She knew she was dying, and when Theo and I approached her about swapping with you, she was willing.”

“So you what...?”

“Slipped her some draught of living death a few days before the ritual and reported that she died when her heart stopped,” said Draco curtly. “Theo did it. He was on duty that night and was responsible for disposing of her body. He smuggled her out, and we gave her the antidote once it was safe. Nobody was surprised she didn't make it. She was very ill.”

Silent tears started to track down her cheeks, but she kept her back to Draco. She wasn't sure why this was so much worse than what she had believed before that night. Maybe it was because nobody knew just how brave Lavender had been. Nobody in the Order had any idea what she had done. And she had spent her last few weeks as a prisoner instead of in the relative comfort of an Order safe house.

It was awful.

A small sob slipped out, and then she felt Draco's hand on her shoulder again.

“Hermione,” he said softly. She tried to pull away again, but her heart wasn’t in it. Right now it was broken for Lavender, another person whom she hadn’t mourned properly. Before now she had envisioned a martyr’s end for Lavender, and Hermione thought she had made her peace with it. She pictured gratitude radiating from the senior-most members of the Order. She imagined Kingsley and the others lining up to tell her just how brave she was. She had convinced herself that Lavender was given a hero’s send-off and the chance to say goodbye. But now all she could see was a dank cell and a girl alone and in pain as Theo and Draco approached her and asked her to die in Hermione’s place.

“Hermione,” he said, touching her shoulder more firmly this time. “Let me help you. Please.”

It broke her.

She turned and saw concern and worry marring his features. Her face crumpled, and he pulled her in tightly as she began to sob into his chest.

“Oh my darling,” he sighed. “I didn’t lie to you, but I never wanted you to know the whole truth, either. Your heart is too tender for it.”

She wasn’t sure how long she cried, but he held her through it, making comforting noises, as he slowly maneuvered her to sit on the edge of her bed. He called for Poppy and said a few words to her Hermione didn’t catch. But before she knew it he was unfolding one of her nightgowns and slipping it over her head, while she was still dressed. Like most of them it was sleeveless, with a wide scoop neck and edged in tiny lace. Hermione didn’t fight him as he guided her arms through the holes and then he unfastened her halter dress beneath it. He nudged her to stand, and the dress dropped in a puddle at her feet, leaving just the nightgown behind.

How odd that he had preserved her modesty after everything that had happened tonight.

Tears were still staining Hermione’s cheeks as he pulled her back toward him, and he fussed with her hair, tying part of it back with a ribbon, before reaching down and removing her earrings and then her shoes. The necklace, however, he left on.

He pulled back the covers and guided her under them. Hermione sank into her pillow, exhaustion and sadness hitting her all at once.

“I’ll be back in five minutes,” he said, and he disappeared into his room for a short while. Hermione could find no energy to move.

She stayed where she was until he strode in, wearing athletic shorts and nothing else.

Hermione blinked through her tears, surprised to see his chest bare. She never had before, and her eyes unconsciously traced some scars and the Dark Mark that shone brightly on his left forearm.

She swallowed hard and only now realized he had dressed her precisely like the fantasy he had described to her earlier that night.

Surely not.

“I’m still a bit cross with you,” she sniffed as he slipped in beside her. “I wish you had told me everything.”

She should kick him out. Wait, hadn’t she already kicked him out before he told her about Lavender? So why was he still here, *in bed with her*?

He was maddening, but Hermione knew she was weak as her defenses began to crumble.

He slipped under the covers too and settled in close to her.

“You need your rest.”

“Draco, I’m still very frustrated,” she tried again. “I know you saved me, and I’m so thankful for that, but you also misled me about it!”

“Yes, but you know why I did that. I’m sorry for it, but I didn’t want your feelings to be hurt. You’re so sensitive, and you had just been through a terrible ordeal. I didn’t want to burden you with the truth. And you were right – I was afraid you wouldn’t choose me and would try to have the Order extract you. But I was being foolish, I know that now. Of course you chose to stay. This is your home now, and everything you could possibly need is right here. I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”

He leaned in and kissed her softly, reverently on the forehead.

“My sweetest girl...” he murmured, “you’ve had such a big day, and now you’re sad again. Let me make you happy, Hermione. You know I can do it.”

He nudged his nose against her neck and kissed her there. Hermione sighed and tilted her head to give him better access, and he made sounds of approval.

“That’s so much better. You forgive me now, don’t you? It’s the Order that did the unforgivable thing to you my darling. And every single one of them is on my list.”

Hermione froze. “Draco... no.”

“Yes,” he said.

“No,” she insisted. “No, you can’t.”

He pulled away and looked at her seriously. “Hermione, they were on your side and ordered me to execute you anyway. There is no coming back from that.”

“But your pardon!” she insisted.

He gave her a fond look. “You’re too forgiving, and you aren’t thinking clearly. Of course not, you’re feeling anxious. Don’t worry about the pardon, I will make sure to get it first before anything happens to them. They will never know it’s me. And if the Dark Lord ends up crushing them, then the pardon is irrelevant. Either way, I can be patient.”

“Draco...” she pleaded. “Please. *Please* don’t do that. I’m begging you.”

Something flashed in his eyes. “You’re begging?”

She nodded quickly, her stomach lurching a little. “Yes I... if there’s something you want from me... please, I couldn’t bear it if you did that to them.”

He was studying her intently. “You’re willing to trade something for their lives?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Anything.”

“They don’t deserve that kind of consideration, Hermione,” he said. He sounded displeased.

“I know,” she said quickly. “*Really*,” she added, seeing his skeptical look. “That’s why I picked you and not them, remember? I know they don’t deserve it. But...”

“But what?”

“But I’m tired of all the death, Draco. And you’re right, I’m forgiving. I would be happier knowing that they are alive and living with their guilt than increasing your body count. Every time you kill somebody I have to find a way to overlook it.”

The tiny part of Hermione’s brain that was still rational realized just how ridiculous this sounded. Murder was a common enough occurrence around Draco Malfoy that she had habituated to it. She was talking to him like he simply had some irritating habit – like always leaving the kitchen cupboards open or forgetting to put the toilet seat down.

But no, she was talking about killing people.

God, there was something wrong with her. And the thing that was wrong with her was clearly the emotional part of her brain that clung to his warmth and care and protection.

Draco frowned a little as he considered her words.

“You really are a dove, aren’t you? You’re very interested in peace – a bit too interested, in my view, but I know that’s your nature. Very well. Perhaps we can come up with a trade to remove *some* of them from my list. But I will need to think on it, and I want you to think about it too. I’ve never let a slight against you go unpunished, Hermione. Not even while we were in school.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “Even when *you* were the one slighting me?”

“Hermione,” he said patiently. “I suffered for every slight. You never gave me the time of day or any real attention at all. It was maddening. Believe me, you punished me quite a bit.”

“But—” she started.

“It’s true,” he insisted. “Anyway, why do you think I was always targeting Weasley?”

“Because you were jealous of Harry’s fame, and Ron was his best friend.”

Draco shook his head. “No. I was jealous of them both, that’s true, but I was jealous of the fact that they got to spend time around you, and I didn’t. And then Weasley constantly bollocksed it up by hurting your feelings and making you cry. It drove me mad. He didn’t deserve you, and I made sure he knew it.”

Hermione felt an odd blend of warmth and frustration.

“And you must understand,” continued Draco, “my negative feelings toward Weasley, and to a lesser extent Potter, for failing to treat you the way you deserved were nothing compared to the rest of the Order. They told me your life didn’t matter, and I had to be the one to kill you. They were supposed to be on your side. They were supposed to be protecting you when I couldn’t. My anger at them far outstrips anything I ever felt toward your friends, darling girl. So I want you to understand what you are asking me to give up if I take them off my list. I’m not sure I’ll be able to bring myself to do it. But if I think about it and agree, then I will ask for something from you that’s equivalent. You should be very sure you’re ready before you strike that bargain with me.”

Trepidation rolled through Hermione at this warning, but she nodded. He would tell her what he wanted first, surely, and she would have time to back out if it really *was* too much. But what wouldn’t she trade for saving those whom she suspected were in on it – Kingsley, Molly, and Arthur at least – and perhaps others. She was sure he would want sex, and she could give him that once she fully conquered her fear of touch. He would want her to stay with him, and she could give him that too. She suspected that if she could just embrace the part of herself that liked him despite all the red flags, she could even be happy with him.

She had no great need to spend time with the Order members who were a part of it ever again, but she didn’t want them dead either.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll make sure to think about it.”

“Then I’ll think about it too,” he said, leaning down and kissing her again. “We work together so well, don’t we?”

She was quiet as he leaned over her and turned off the lamp. Evidently his fantasy of her would *not* come true tonight then. Hermione was a bit relieved.

He pulled her close, and drew her head in to settle on his bare chest. It was surprisingly lovely.

“This is all I want,” he murmured. “Just you and me, like this. I love having you in my arms. I love taking care of you. I love... well, I love *this*.”

And then she was melting for him again, forgetting his misdirection and all the reasons she shouldn’t want him.

How easily she forgot. How easily she let him care for her. How easily she could be his if she just fell the whole way.

“Draco,” she whispered. “Are you brainwashing me so I’ll accept the things you do?”

“Of course not,” he said earnestly. “If you accept them it’s because you’ve made a conscious choice to do it. I’ll admit I’ve been trying to protect you, and sometimes I take it too far. But you have had a very, *very* rough go of it recently. So many things have gone wrong, and so many people have treated you poorly. I certainly haven’t been perfect myself, and I know that. But I *am* trying to strike the right balance here, I really am. We are in a war, and there’s no map for navigating this, sweet girl. We both have to do the best we can with it.”

God it sounded so reasonable. All she had to do was believe him.

I’m a fool, she thought. *I’m his pretty little fool*.

But once again Hermione could no longer bring herself to care.

Draco was staring down at his Hermione, who had fallen asleep not that long ago. He propped himself up a little so he could see her snuggled into his side, one hand tucked under her face and the other fisting the waistband of his shorts and clinging to it like her life depended on it.

She always clung to something when she slept. He had seen her do this night after night whenever he checked in on her. She curled into a small ball and burrowed herself into whatever heat and softness she could find. Draco adored the fact that when he was in bed with her the thing she clung to was *him*.

She was utterly perfect like this.

Draco had only been in bed with her twice before tonight — the first time when she got lost as Columba and the second time after she killed McLaggen. She had required Draco’s care both times, and of course he jumped at the opportunity.

But this time....

Well it was true she had needed comfort tonight too, but it wasn’t quite the same. They had argued a little, yes, but it hadn’t been quite so desperate. She wasn’t truly angry with *him* when she tried to kick him out, she was simply blindsided by the Order and worried about Lavender Brown. The moment she started to cry, Draco understood precisely why his darling girl had been so upset after that confrontation with Severus. She didn’t want to leave Draco, she was just so empathetic and kind that she could hardly sort her own feelings at first. Naturally she had been distressed to learn the Order didn’t care about her and Brown had suffered before she died. Draco had simply been there to take the brunt of her emotions.

He was more than happy to do it, and this time it didn’t take her long to accept his help once he explained that he had never *truly* lied to her. Of course she didn’t like being kept in the dark, but she surely understood why Draco had done it. And now that she was curled against

him, Draco found he couldn't regret anything he had done that had brought them here tonight. He never wanted to sleep apart from her again.

He decided he would be moving into her bed going forward. It was time.

Besides, it would give him a good opportunity to start exploring that decadent body of hers more thoroughly. Now that he was allowed to kiss her lips and neck, he could barely stop himself from doing it all the time. And *tonight*...

Draco closed his eyes and guided her hand to one side. She could hang onto his waistband as much as she wanted, but he needed access too.

He slipped his hand down into his pants and began those familiar strokes. He would go slow because she was right here. But she slept more heavily than he did, and he thought he could get away with this without disturbing her.

His free hand brushed her curls and then her ribbon, and he carefully twisted them around his fingers. He remembered the feeling of her tits earlier that night as he rubbed himself. Her nipples pebbled perfectly. She gave him such pretty gasps, and she ground her hot cunt on his cock. She had done it instinctively. She hardly even knew *what* she was doing. Draco had to hang on and grit his teeth to guide her through it so he wouldn't embarrass himself in front of her. She had become so sodden for him that she soaked through her tiny knickers and left evidence behind on his trousers. He had not cleaned the wet spot of course. No, he had saved those trousers just as they were and left them in his room to admire later.

He exhaled and tried to stay quiet as he let the memory fill him and his imagination run.

She had responded so well to light, teasing touches. She wanted a gentle caress and no lubrication charms, *ever*. Gripping her breast too hard had made her freeze. The very suggestion of lubricants made her shrink away. She didn't need them though. The faintest touch on those perfect nipples made her wet and greedy for him. It took almost no effort.

Draco had dreamed of it so many times. He loved being gentle with her. It reaffirmed everything he knew about her — her sweetness, her innocence.

Fuck, but she was *so* innocent. No man had touched her like Draco had. She had hardly even touched *herself* like that. Whatever she had done to herself in the past had been unsatisfying, she had made that clear enough, and based on her obvious surprise that night Draco was certain the sensations were all new for her. It was so much more than he had ever allowed himself to hope for. After touching her nipples he was desperate to get between her legs. He wanted to smell and taste the sex on her and know that he was the reason for it.

Being with her was different than any witch Draco had ever experienced before, but he wasn't surprised by it. Draco had had sex before Hermione, though his first time certainly hadn't been his idea. He lost his virginity to a prostitute whose name he didn't know and whose face he scarcely remembered during the holiday break in fifth year. His father had arranged it as one of his Christmas gifts, and at the time Draco felt faintly sickened by it. But there were things about his father he still did not fully understand back then, signs he pointedly ignored in an effort to win Lucius's approval. Draco had gone along with it to

make Lucius happy, never believing for a moment that his dreams might someday come true, and he would win over Hermione in the future. Draco decided it was pointless to wait, pointless to protest when his father insisted that losing it to a professional was the best course of action. It meant that Draco would never suffer the embarrassment of being inexperienced when engaging with a suitable witch going forward.

It was only during the spring holidays of that same year that Draco's blinders came off. The night he saw his father strike his mother for the first time made his head spin, before his anger at his father and also himself for ignoring the signs became so overwhelming that he snapped. Draco dueled his father and lost only because his *mother* intervened. More than two years later Draco still wasn't sure what to think about his mother's defense of Lucius, when it was clear she was terrified of him. He eventually concluded that Lucius had some emotional or magical hold over Narcissa, despite her abuse — or perhaps because of it. The events of that night shattered whatever childlike faith he had in the man.

But the point remained that Draco lost his virginity before he lost his trust in Lucius. And after that, sex no longer felt special.

It wasn't *that* hard to find a willing witch when the rare mood struck him. Draco was very wealthy, very handsome, and generally didn't give a single fuck about most of them. It had proven to be a potent combination for the witches who viewed him as some sort of prize to be won. He certainly wasn't like McLaggen. He didn't *force* any woman to have sex with him. But they threw themselves at him, eager to take anything he would give. Most of the time he rejected them. But now and then he would be struck by a moment of weakness. It was usually after some interaction with Hermione that was particularly negative or when he learned news of her that made him stressed or jealous. When that happened he would either find someone he could torture or else pull whatever witch had been hanging around and fuck her to get his feelings out. Inevitably the witches he used that way discovered for themselves that he had no consideration for them, and he had broken more than one heart because of it.

Draco had never cared about that, though. There was only one heart he had ever wanted.

The ways he used sex before Hermione's captivity meant there were some things he had never done before she finally came to live at the Manor.

He never worried about sex being good for the witch. He never gave them any foreplay. He certainly never stayed with them when it was done.

He had never kissed any of them.

Hermione was his first kiss. She was the only woman he had ever kissed on the lips, and he would never give that to anybody else. It was too special, too intimate for anybody but her. He had promised himself that years ago, and by Salazar he had stuck to that promise.

If he had been able to see into the future, he would have rejected his father's holiday gift that year and saved sex for Hermione too. But he was rubbish at divination so he hadn't stopped it, and sex had become oddly utilitarian as a result. Kissing though, that was different. It was optional. It was affectionate. He did save *that* for her, and then the moment he caught her

and his vague dreams of having her started to crystallize, he turned into a monk overnight and stopped having sex with anybody else.

The times Hermione had frustrated him during her captivity he processed his feelings with torture instead. It was better that way, healthier for their budding relationship. Besides, even his urges to find somebody to torture became lessened whenever Hermione let him touch her instead. Her surprised gasps and lovely reactions when she opened for him and let him comfort her or pleasure her did more to improve his mood than any torture ever could.

Just like kissing, prioritizing her comfort and pleasure was also something that was reserved for her. He had only ever experienced sex that was a bit rough and very impersonal. Instinctively, he knew that *soft* sex, gentle sex... that could only ever be hers.

He had never been particularly gentle before Hermione. Draco didn't do gentle. The times he had turned to sex in the past, he usually just bent them over, fucked them, and then finished. He used lubrication charms and didn't bother to prepare them. He relied on sensation to get off because it was the only way to finish when he wasn't with *her*, especially because his feelings toward her were usually what made him seek out those other witches in the first place. He occasionally fondled their breasts or arses, though of course they had always been a poor substitute for the ones he fantasized about. But otherwise, he just used the other witches until he was done.

It was true he had taken a little time to learn how to make a woman come just in case his wildest dreams came true and he got the chance to do it with Hermione one day. He had done that with Pansy, because he did care about her more than the others. Still, even then he had approached it much like an anatomy lesson to learn the spots and techniques that women enjoyed. It wasn't something that *he* particularly enjoyed while he was learning with Pansy, so once he assured himself he could do it, he moved on from Pansy and never bothered to do it again. A couple of the witches he had been with came anyway while he was pounding them. The others didn't. He never concerned himself with it one way or the other.

But with Hermione, he was positively *desperate* to touch her carefully, making note of every gasp and groan, mapping her entire body with his hands and tongue before he gave himself *anything*. He craved it, but only when he was doing it with her. It was an entirely different side to the physical act he had never experienced before now.

She was everything he wanted. He burned for her.

Draco was lost in his fantasy now. He would pull her nightgown off her shoulders, all the way down until she was bare for him. She would be wearing a pair of adorable knickers. Every single pair she had was edged in lace or had a small bow. He had made sure of it. She would be spread before him, a feast for the senses, and blushing so prettily while she did it. She would look up at him through her lashes, and then her hazel eyes would widen in surprise before fluttering closed as his lips graced her breasts and then her stomach and then finally her cunt.

That was also something Draco had never done before: he had never eaten a witch. He didn't care enough about any of them to bother. But he was eager to taste Hermione. He wanted

her to grind her cunt into his face. He wanted to lick and suck and drink up every bit of her she offered.

He wanted to direct her, to lead her. He wanted her to cry out his name and maybe even call him 'master' now and then. Fuck, but *that* had made him practically lightheaded. He had no idea what inspired her to do it, but it had nearly made him blow a load in his pants in front of McNair. He knew he was the possessive type, the jealous type, especially when it came to Hermione. He was known for very casual, very rough sex and expected his partners to just take it. Before that night he had never realized just how easily he could get off based on nothing more than some words and creative positioning with his knife.

Surely that was because it was Hermione. She was the one who told the others her cunt belonged to him. She was the one whose nipple was under his blade. She was the one who sank into him whenever he put his hand around her neck and turned her fear over to him to direct and control.

Would it have been so hot with anybody else?

Not a chance.

Fuck.

He was pumping faster now, and his darling girl was still asleep. He moved his face closer to her to smell her scent. Orange blossom filled his nose as he kissed her forehead and then her ear, and finally he felt his balls tighten. In her sleep she gave the tiniest little whimper and twisted his waistband harder, and the sound ended him. He was fucking gone as he spurted hot all over his hand.

He slipped his hand out of his pants and started to move it toward her face. He felt like he was in a trance as he took one of his soiled fingers and was nearly touching her lips with it when she gave another sigh that jolted him.

Draco's heart was pounding, and he jerked his hand back as he realized what he had almost done.

No. No, I can't.

He might be obsessed. He might be utterly mad for her. He might torture and kill and set fire to things she held dear to keep her with him. But there were some lines he would not cross. Touching her in a new way without her knowledge was one of those lines. It didn't matter how much he might want to see his cum on her lips, he wouldn't do it until she was awake.

And she will do that for you someday. Besides, think of how much better it will be when it's your whole cock in her mouth.

Draco whispered a spell to vanish the mess before he could be tempted to do it again.

He sighed and slumped back for a moment, flinging his arm across his eyes to control himself. Merlin, but she was sheer temptation. He would be good for her though. He

promised himself he could give her *that*.

With his physical needs sated for a moment, his mind stilled and then drifted to her offer to trade something for the lives of the Order members who had condemned her. He wasn't thrilled by the idea. He had been fantasizing about taking them out one by one when the war was over. He would wait until the very end, after his pardon was issued. He would even save their lives if he had to while the war was ongoing if that became necessary — in fact, he already *had* saved a couple of their lives. He wanted to time it perfectly, and a bit of life-saving would throw suspicion off of him once he was ready.

Then again, he needed a few things from Hermione. He needed her cooperation. And even more than that, he would need her forgiveness.

He glanced down to make sure she was still asleep before shifting slightly so he could reach her nightstand. He eased the drawer open and pulled out the silver ribbon that he had used to wrap her Columba pendant the previous day. He settled back and stared at it, twirling it in his fingers as he studied it.

This was what he wanted more than anything. But he had kept things from her to get it, and there would be more he needed to do before he could tell her everything. Guilt twisted his gut as he thought about it. She might be angry when he finally told her. She might even try to leave. That guilt was still unfamiliar — he had never felt it so strongly before. But it continued to grow with each passing day as she let him get closer to her.

Draco needed her to choose him when the time came. He would give her one chance, and if she chose him he would never let her out of his sight again. And perhaps if she had some incentive to do it.... If there was something he could give her to convince her to forgive him and stay...

He mentally ran through his list of names. He had done it hundreds of times before. He knew precisely how he was going to kill each one of them. Something about exacting revenge for his darling girl always made him hard, and he had gotten off more than once thinking about it.

Could he give that up to buy her cooperation and then later her forgiveness once she learned everything he had done to keep her here? He thought he had enough names for it and even a couple to spare just in case something else came between them in the interim.

He looked at the silver ribbon one more time and clutched it.

Yes. I can give up my revenge for that.

Decision made, he shoved the ribbon in his pocket and then turned to settle in with her.

His beautiful girl gave a soft sigh, as though sensing her lover was nearby, and it made Draco smile.

Because he did love her.

He loved her enough to rise through the Death Eater ranks for her. He loved her enough to respect her boundaries with her body. He loved her enough to give her every single thing in the world that he had to give.

He even loved her enough to abandon his plan for revenge — but only if she forgave him first.

Chapter 22: Aquila

Chapter Notes

TW1: Manipulation

TW2: References to animal sacrifice (the eagle). Not graphic.

Hermione woke the next morning to Draco's face nuzzling her.

"Good morning," he said as he nibbled her ear and then gave a long lick down her neck.

Hermione gasped and arched a bit as her eyes fluttered open.

"Wha –?" she said blearily.

He quieted her with a deep kiss, and Hermione sighed into it.

I'm supposed to be cross with him, she remembered.

But really, she wasn't. In the light of day the secrets he had kept from her about the Order didn't seem nearly as serious. He had his reasons for it – he was trying to protect both of their hearts in a way. Could she really blame him for worrying about her mental state? Could she fault his own fears that she might run when he wanted her so badly?

No, she couldn't.

"Draco," she said. "I'm not angry anymore."

His head lifted, and his eyes crinkled into a smile.

"Good," he said simply, and then he returned to what he was doing. But speaking of which...

"Draco, what are you doing?" she asked as he placed his mouth over one of her beauty marks and started to suck.

"Picking up from where we left off last night," he said as he pulled back and admired his handiwork. "Do you remember how you were feeling before it all went sideways with Severus?"

Hermione nodded and swallowed hard. His gray eyes flicked up to meet hers.

"Can you tell me about it?" he asked. "Tell me everything."

Hermione turned pink and looked away in embarrassment.

“It was... it made me feel...” her voice died in her throat, and she glanced at Draco to find him looking at her fondly.

“Did it make you feel good?”

She nodded.

“Did it excite you?”

She nodded again.

“I know your knickers got damp. And you liked my fingers on your nipples, didn’t you?”

She was crimson now as she nodded.

“Can I touch them again? You don’t have to let me look, but I’ve already touched them...”

Hermione sucked in a breath, but then nodded slowly.

“Thank you,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her again.

To her surprise she felt his hand go under the skirt of her nightgown and start to travel up her thigh.

“Draco, what are you...?” she asked.

“It’s just easier this way. It’s nothing to worry about.”

His hands skated up her thighs, pausing a moment when he reached her knickers. He stroked them for a moment.

“I love knowing that you're clad in lace and satin. I spent hours picking out your underthings, did you know that?”

Hermione shook her head, in slight disbelief he was telling her all of this. But it was doing something to her. It was turning her on. She arched toward him a bit.

“Just like that,” he murmured as his hand continued to travel up until he reached the underside of one breast again.

His touch was gentle, but purposeful as he caressed them slowly. He seemed to be in no hurry whatsoever as he grazed her nipples, which tightened almost painfully under his touch.

“You’re so pretty like this,” he sighed contentedly.

Hermione felt that odd sensation begin in her belly – the one that had made her ache the previous night.

“Draco...” she groaned.

He raised his head to stare at her. “Yes, little dove? Do you want more?”

“I don’t.... I mean...”

She struggled to articulate *what* she needed.

“Is it something low?” he asked. “Is that what you are feeling?”

Hermione squeezed her eyes and nodded.

“Do you like how it feels? Or is it frustrating you?”

“I want...”

“What do you want?”

“I want to get it out,” she confessed.

She opened her eyes in frustration to find him staring at her intently.

“Do you want me to help you get it out?”

“You really want to do that?” she asked hesitantly.

He nodded. “If you wish. I’ll need to touch you in other places though. More than I’m doing right now.”

Hermione licked her lips as she thought about it. Was she ready for this? She had no idea. She didn’t know what she was doing. Nobody had touched her intimately other than Cormac, and he didn’t count.

“It might make me nervous,” she confessed.

“Are you nervous now?” he asked.

She swallowed and nodded a little.

“And what have I told you about that?”

“That you like to see my fear,” she whispered.

“That’s right,” he said. “I like it when you give it to me and allow me to help you. Let me take this fear away from you, Hermione. Let me show you what it feels like. I can make it so good for you.”

“It won’t hurt?” she asked, remembering just how painful the experience with Cormac had been.

Draco’s eyes darkened. “You should never have known that kind of pain, sweet girl. Not ever. The things I will do to you won’t feel anything like that, I promise.”

“Alright,” she breathed.

Before her eyes fluttered closed she caught the look on Draco’s face. He looked transcendent, like she had just given him the biggest prize of all.

Perhaps I should have traded somebody’s life for this.

Only now did she remember their bargain – or their promise to talk about making a bargain – for the lives of the Order members he had marked. But it was too late. He had eased her into this so naturally that she had barely a thought for them as she turned herself over to him.

She felt his hand start to creep down her stomach and then dance on the edge of her knickers. He traced the top edge and then the section that circled one thigh as he slowly edged closer to her center.

Hermione was trying to control her breathing. She was tense, anxious, but she wanted this. She *knew* she wanted this. She wanted to know what it felt like, but even more than that she wanted to know that Cormac had not ruined this for her forever.

Draco leaned in and gave her a deep kiss before pulling back and settling near her ear.

“Breathe,” he whispered, “and open your legs for me.”

Hermione summoned her courage and did as he asked, and his finger immediately traced farther down that lace edge around her thigh.

“I bet you’re already wet, aren’t you?” he asked.

Hermione nodded.

“Let me see for myself,” he said.

He made the lightest brush over the top of her knickers, right on her core, and Hermione gasped in surprise.

He gave a low chuckle. “Oh my darling, if that’s your reaction when your knickers are still on, I can’t *wait* to see what you’ll do for me when my fingers are inside of you. And you’re already wet enough to be soaking the fabric. What *have* you been doing every time you get like this?”

“I just change my knickers,” she breathed.

He gave a deep laugh at that and kissed her again.

“No more of that. From now on you come find me, and I’ll help you get it out, okay?”

She nodded.

“Good. Let me feel you now...”

He slipped a finger under the fabric, and Hermione felt her heart race as he swiped it once against her. He hissed under his breath.

“Fuck...”

Hermione’s own breath caught at the odd feeling. It was totally foreign, and yet she sensed she was close to having something she needed.

She felt him slip a finger into her, and he seemed to twist it a bit. She was nervous, but it felt so different than Cormac or even her few half-hearted attempts at self-exploration. This was okay. She could do this. She gasped at the little burst of pleasure it gave her.

“You like that...” he muttered, as he did it again.

Hermione felt her mind start to float as she settled into the sensations. Then she heard him say, “Let’s see how you like it when I touch you in that special place then.”

“What?” she murmured. She wasn’t paying attention. She was far too preoccupied by his hands.

He froze for a moment, just long enough for her to open a hazy eye and see him staring at her hungrily. “Nothing for you to worry about. Let me handle it.”

“Alright,” she said, as her eyes fluttered closed again. She couldn’t be bothered to question him further, and if she allowed her brain to start thinking then all these lovely feelings might evaporate.

He resumed what he was doing with that finger moving in and out of her, and then she felt him press on something else that made her gasp and arch. Her eyes flew open in surprise. It felt like a jolt of electricity shot through her.

“What was—”

“That’s your clit,” he said, and he did it again.

Hermione jolted again, instinctively rocking her hips against his hand for more. “It’s a bit hidden, but I found it, didn’t I?”

“Oh God...”

“Like I said, you don’t need to worry about it. If you need it to be touched, I’ll do it for you.”

He did it again, and this time Hermione moaned. She felt his breathing going shallow, and she opened her eyes to find his eyes locked on her face.

“Draco, I need...”

He did it again, and her eyes closed again as she sank back into that delicious feeling. Then again and then another. He was slowly increasing his speed, and she wrenched her eyes open

again, begging him for something, but she didn't know *what*. Her hips were rocking in time with his fingers, and she was so close. *So close*.

"Come for me, Hermione," he said darkly. "Give me this. I've dreamed about seeing you like this for *years*. *Give it to me...*"

It climbed and built and she felt herself edging ever closer to something she couldn't identify. That string in her belly was taught, nearly to the point when she thought it might rip. And she wanted it to. She *needed* it to.

Something wrenched, and she fell open with a cry, eyes squeezing shut, legs spread wantonly. Her hands gripped her pillow as she spun off into space.

"*Goddamn...*" he whispered. She heard reverence in his voice, and he sounded awed. She opened her eyes and found that his were nearly black as he stared at her.

"I have never seen anything like that," he confessed. "Not ever. And now..."

She felt him slip his fingers from her and raised them to his face. She was mortified to see how coated they were, but he appeared to be elated by it. Then to her utter shock he opened his mouth and began to suck on them, his eyes rolling back as he gave a great groan of delight.

Hermione's eyes were huge. She was totally out of her element now. What was supposed to happen next? The thing he had just done... it made her excited again. But she was also feeling shy and incredibly nervous.

He opened his eyes slowly and looked down at her.

"I want to see Nita," she said, the words just spilling out of her.

He stilled as he removed his fingers slowly and raised one eyebrow. "Why? You've already let me in, Hermione. There's no reason to enhance the spell."

"No," she said hurriedly. "No, it's not that. It's just..."

She flushed and looked down in embarrassment.

He gripped her chin and pulled her face so she was forced to look at him.

"Tell me. Why do you want Nita?"

"I just... I don't know what to *do*!" she confessed. "I don't know how to... you know... for you I mean, and..."

Draco's eyes began to shine a little. "You want a private lesson with a Veela?"

Hermione flushed. "She's just so confident. She knows what she's about. She made me feel confident enough to pretend as Annabelle. Maybe she can help me get more comfortable with it for real too... with you, I mean."

The truth was she had no idea what she was doing, but Nita would know what to do. Nita had seven previous husbands and surely any number of other lovers in between. Nita seemed to think sexual things were entirely normal and nothing to be ashamed of at all. She was kind and approachable when she wasn't killing her husbands. Hermione needed advice, a confidence boost.

She needed that Veela magic.

He gave her a slow, lazy smile and bent down to give her a lingering kiss.

"Just when I think you can't get any sweeter you go and say something like that. But you don't need Nita for that. You have me. She could tell you what a typical wizard enjoys, I'm sure, but why would you need to know that? It doesn't matter what they like. It only matters what I like and what you like and what we like together."

Hermione frowned at this. "I'm not sure if that will work, Draco."

He looked amused. "Why wouldn't that work?"

"I'm just—"

So inexperienced that it terrifies me.

"—a bit out of my depth."

He gave her a soft smile and stroked her face. "This is all new for you, isn't it? You've never even seen a wizard properly, let alone touched one."

She shook her head hesitantly.

"Hermione, you don't have to know what you're doing. I'm honestly *thrilled* that you don't. It means that the only wizard you will ever know in that way is me, and I'm the only one who gets to know you like that too. I promise you don't need anybody else to tell you what I might like because I am more than happy to do that whenever you are ready."

"But you said you have preferences... and I still don't know what those are..."

He smiled again, and pulled her to him. "Darling girl, I have just one preference, and it's you."

"Draco, that makes no sense."

"Of course it does. You are starting to trust me with your body. That is something I will never *ever* take for granted. You let me have your very first orgasm this morning, and that was *everything* to me. You are trusting me to show you what you like and to guide you toward pleasure. And you also trust me to stop when it becomes too much and to pace things appropriately. Every time you give me your fear it means you are trusting me with that part of you that somebody else tried to take and shatter. The fact that you tell me when you're afraid and allow me to help you with it... it's precious to me, Hermione. So you don't have to worry about any of my so-called *preferences*. You don't have to worry about being

inexperienced. My only preference is that you keep trusting me to lead you in this. That's all."

Something inside of Hermione eased.

"You really don't mind, then? I don't want you to be disappointed in our... arrangement. And I know I need quite a bit of help still and—"

He raised a finger to her lips to quiet her. "This is far more than an arrangement to me. I consider you to be mine. We are living in our home. We are sleeping in our bed. We are having to hide the thing we have together right now for our safety, but I hope it won't be forever. Arrangements have end dates."

"And this doesn't?" she asked hesitantly. She didn't know if she was terrified or thrilled by the prospect.

"All you have to do is accept it, Hermione. I know it can be challenging — I spent a long time in denial about it myself — but we are together now, just as we always should have been. This is not an arrangement with an end date."

Hermione was breathless. Could she fall? Could she finally stop fighting it, stop asking herself if he was really right for her?

She was close, *so close*.

"I'll try to accept it," she said, because that was true. She knew she would never be rid of him now, and she didn't think she would ever want to be. She had never dreamed of finding a wizard so attentive to her, so considerate of her and the things she had been through. But his intensity, his seriousness, his adherence to his own moral code that was still rather different from hers, made her cautious. She was a fly caught in his web, and he was spinning it all around her.

"Good. Now while we're discussing arrangements that *do* have endings at some point... let's revisit the arrangement we discussed last night. I was up late thinking it over, and I have decided that I am willing to trade an Order member's life for something from you — one for one, as it were."

Hermione grasped the change of topic gratefully.

"But there is more than one Order member," she protested. "You said it was a group."

"Yes," he agreed. "So I will need something for each one of them, unless you wish to pick and choose."

Hermione went cold. "How many?" she demanded.

"There were six who were involved in the decision," he said. "Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minerva McGonagall, Molly and Arthur Weasley, Severus, and Aberforth Dumbledore. I intended for all of them to be punished."

“You would kill Snape?” she demanded. “Your own godfather?”

He shrugged negligently. “He’s not exactly the nurturing type.”

Hermione grimaced and exhaled. “Alright... Well if there are six... maybe I could do things to you that you like this morning? Would that be enough for one? And after we work up to it, maybe my virginity for another one or two?”

She went pink, but as she watched his face darkened, and he looked angry.

“You think that’s what I want from you?”

Hermione blinked in surprise. “Don’t you?”

“No, Hermione. If you ever pleasure me like that or give me your virginity it will be a gift, not a trade. Don’t even suggest sexual favors. You aren’t my whore, and you can’t buy their lives with your body.”

Hermione felt an odd spark of shame.

“What then? What do you want from me?”

“Cooperation.”

“Give me an example, please,” she said in exasperation.

Now he gave her a smile as though he had her right where he wanted her. “Today when we do the ritual for Aquila, I want you to use my knife on your other palm. And let me heal it the same way I did for Columba.”

Hermione’s palm with the Columba markings tingled as she stared at him. “You still haven’t told me everything it does.”

“No,” he agreed.

“But it tracks me...” she said slowly.

“When I want it to, yes.”

“And you need to do it a second time?”

“It should make the tracking stronger,” he said simply. “I couldn’t get a good lock on you that night in the Manor when you ran and ended up with Rodolphus and McLaggen. I would have had to go to Grimmauld Place to determine your exact location, and there wasn’t enough time to do that. I was terrified, Hermione, you have no idea. We need to strengthen it, and I think doing it a second time will help.”

Hermione paused as she considered this. He *hadn’t* been able to find her right away, it was true. She had been stuck there, terrified, and it was precisely the sort of thing he had warned her about when he marked her as Columba in the first place. Then again, he was still hiding

things from her about it. She didn't like it, but she didn't know how to get him to tell her everything before she agreed. She was sure he wouldn't.

"And you won't tell me what else it does?"

"I've told you it gives you protection, sweet girl. I will tell you everything eventually, but I'm not ready for it yet. Please trust me that it's nothing bad. It's important enough that I would have done it without asking you, but I know that made you cross last time. So this time I'm asking... and I'm also offering to remove one of the Order members from my list if you cooperate. You get to choose who it is."

Hermione looked away as she thought about it. He was asking her to take a leap of faith and trust him blindly. She didn't like the secrecy, but she knew this wasn't a choice when other people's lives were at stake, not really. She did believe that he would never hurt her. And as for the tracking... well, he could already track her pretty well, and enhancing it would make situations like that night with Cormac less precarious.

"So that's what you mean by cooperation," she said wryly.

He inclined his head. "It's much more important to me than sex."

She exhaled, her decision made.

"Fine," she said, her stomach twisting a bit at the thing she would be doing very soon. "I'll use your knife and let you heal it for me."

His face broke into a broad smile and he leaned in to kiss her.

"Excellent. Now tell me... who are we taking off my list?"

Hermione knew her answer was unstrategic. It was probably the least important person of the whole bunch for a myriad of reasons. She told herself there would be opportunities to save the others too, but until she could think of something else to trade she would have to prioritize. And the first priority was an emotional one, but she felt no hesitation as she spoke.

"Molly Weasley. I want Molly Weasley to be taken off your list."

At first, Hermione was surprised they were still proceeding with the eagle after everything that happened the previous night. But after Draco requested to use his knife and heal her palm, she suspected he had several motivations for pressing onward.

Some part of her wondered why he hadn't demanded it from her before now if it was *really* that important. Surely she could cut her palm open at any time, and it didn't need to be performed as part of an animagus transformation.

But then another part of her thought back to the time they did this for Columba and remembered what he said about being unable to bring himself to cut her. He seemed to have very few qualms about seducing her and desensitizing her and possibly even manipulating her. But he did have some hard rules, chief among them that he would never physically hurt her.

So perhaps it wasn't so surprising that he bided his time and waited until her palm would have to be cut open anyway to do it. There was no getting around that part of the animagus potion, after all, so perhaps he simply viewed it as an opportunity to be leveraged.

Hermione found herself dwelling on this as Draco slipped away for an hour or so in order to get ready, though she was pulled out of her thoughts when he reappeared with Theo for breakfast. Theo looked a bit worse for the wear from the night before, but he listened intently as they told him about Snape and the Unbreakable Vow Hermione had extracted from him.

"You know what? I think it's a good thing," he declared with some relief. "Severus was always the weak point since he knows both of you so well. It could help with future missions too."

Theo was tasked with informing the others of this development during training, which Draco said he and Hermione would be skipping that day.

"We're going to do the next sacrifice this morning, and then she'll drink the potion right after it's done," insisted Draco. "It took hours last time, and we don't need to have another night like that."

Theo was in agreement with this plan, so directly after breakfast he, Hermione, and Draco made their way to the training room where Draco had already set everything up.

"This will be much faster. We just need to reheat the base potion you made, perform the sacrifice, collect the blood, and that will be all."

Hermione's eyes slid toward the cage in the corner with a large feathery lump, and she exhaled as she nodded.

"Right. Okay, I've done this before. It's just like last time..."

She tried to tell herself it would be just like the dove. They were both birds, after all, and she had done this once before. Now that she had some experience she knew that the animal would be living on inside of her once it was complete. She would be killing it, yes, but its *spirit* would persist. Hermione could feel Columba clearly now whenever she reached out, and she told herself Aquila would be the same way.

Still, her hands were shaking slightly as she dumped the bottled potion Draco handed to her in a cauldron and lit it. Theo was busy lighting the candles and arranging the pillow for her to kneel on while she stirred it a few times.

"That looks perfect," said Draco, peering into it as he rested a hand on her shoulder. "You can do this, Hermione. You've done it before."

“I’ve done it before,” she repeated, as she made her way toward the pillow and crouched down.

Draco moved to the cage, and Hermione closed her eyes to steady herself while she waited.

“Open for me, Hermione,” said Theo. “Just like last time. This one might be a bit more shocking than the dove...”

She opened her bond, and Theo immediately settled in as Hermione’s eyes landed on the eagle that Draco was bringing over to her.

God, this was not at all like a dove.

It was enormous – at least a meter tall. Since it was unconscious, Draco was forced to cradle it like a baby due to its size, and when he laid it in front of her she gulped.

“Draco...” she said.

“You can do it.”

“It’s huge.”

“That’s because it’s female. They are larger than the males.”

“I just... she’s *beautiful*. She’s so majestic, and she’s your pet for heaven’s sake! How can you be okay with this?”

He cupped her distressed face and looked at her seriously.

“I’m okay with this because it’s for you. You’re right that she’s magnificent, but so are you. It’s okay, Hermione. I don’t have the same emotional attachment to her that you have with Crookshanks. I *do*, however, have an emotional attachment to you, and I want you to have this.”

Hermione reached out to stroke her a little. Her feathers were a rich golden brown. The eyes, she knew, would be yellow. Her beak was sharp, and her talons looked positively vicious. She was made to hunt game and dominate the skies. It was so very different than her berry-loving Columba.

“Okay...” she said slowly. “Okay. But this is it, right? I’m never sacrificing another animal after this.”

“That’s right,” said Draco soothingly, rubbing circles on her back while Theo began to siphon in earnest. “I’ll never ask you to sacrifice another animal while in your human form.”

Hermione froze.

“You mean... I might need to...”

“Hermione, you know why we are doing this,” he said firmly. “It’s so we can take you with us to Nott Castle when we are called there for games and hunts. You must know what happens on a hunt. But you’ll be able to use her instincts while you do it. I’ll never ask you to kill another animal while you are just you, I promise.”

Think of the snake.

“I don’t want to hunt for you, Draco. Can’t you just show me off?”

“No, my darling. You’ll need to hunt as well. I thought you understood that.”

“I didn’t think...”

“You’ll need to. Nobody brings animals just for show. They are all there to work.”

“I need something else then,” she said, as an idea struck her. She saw Theo peering at them curiously.

“Oh?”

“Yes. Another name from your list. If I’m going to hunt for you and do this... *awful thing*... I need another name.”

“Alright,” he said easily. Too easily.

“You aren’t objecting?”

“Why would I object? There are plenty left for future trades.”

Hermione exhaled. She wasn’t satisfied yet, but she would take it. “Alright then. Arthur.”

“Done,” said Draco. “Now let’s finish this Hermione.”

Think of the snake.

Moments later, Hermione began to chant and drew the knife.

Draco pulled Hermione onto the chaise lounge with him, her back settled against her chest. He held open her palm that now had ten tiny marks, which he traced in the shape of Aquila.

He had given her the same knife as last time when it came time to spill her own blood, and then he healed her wound just as she promised. This time he had chanted so quietly that Hermione caught almost none of it. She had no further hints of what the symbol could mean.

The look on his face when it was done, however, told Hermione that she probably could have asked for two lives if she had been smart about it. She wondered what, precisely, she had agreed to. He assured her he would tell her when he was ready.

And I did get two lives out of it in a way, she reassured herself. *Both of Ginny's parents will be safe.*

They were the most important of course. She would try to save the others from Draco's wrath as well, but if she had to pick and choose... well, she had made her choice.

Draco assured her that Molly was off the list since she cooperated with her new mark and Arthur would be too after completing a full hunt.

"Everything is hard the first time," he said. "After you do it once it gets easier. If you complete a full hunt as Aquila, then Arthur will be removed from my list too. I must say I'm pleased you chose them first. Out of the six, they were the most hesitant even though they had the most to gain from it to keep Ginny safe. I really don't think they would have agreed to it if they hadn't just lost two sons and Potter at the Battle of Hogwarts the night before. I haven't forgiven them for it, but it was obvious to me that they were overset and not thinking clearly. Unfortunately I couldn't give them time to calm down and think rationally before striking my bargain with the Order. There was no time for it."

She leaned her head back against his shoulder, relishing the stillness for a moment. That tidbit about the Weasleys made her feel a little bit better. Though she hadn't forgiven them yet either, she suspected she would eventually. They had lost Fred, Ron, and Harry, along with many of their friends in a single night right before Draco struck his bargain with the Order. And not only that, but Charlie had gone missing, and their only daughter had been caught by the Death Eaters. Out of seven children, only three made it out of the battle unscathed. Of course they had been overset and emotional. Of course they would have agreed to almost *anything* to keep Ginny safe, especially if Draco's ability to pull off a swap had been openly questioned by the others.

Now that she knew they were still hesitant in the face of all of their loss, she was fiercely glad she had gone with her heart and picked them before any of the others. Hermione didn't know if there would be opportunities to save the others too. If there were opportunities, she would leverage them. If not, she was coming to believe she could live with herself and with Draco if he took matters into his own hands and punished them.

That realization was a little jarring.

Draco raised her palm to his lips and kissed the marks as he looked at them one more time.

"Aquila. Fierce. Bold. Beautiful. Strong. She fits you too, just like Columba does. Are you ready to meet her?"

Hermione nodded, and Draco handed her the potion. She drank, and she felt him shift her to a more comfortable position in his arms as she fell back against him and began to dream.

She was hungry.

She was perched on a rocky bluff near her large nest, eyeing her prey below. It was a hare, utterly oblivious that it was about to be eaten.

She tracked it for a few more moments before launching herself into the air.

The hare saw her shadow and bolted, but it wasn't fast enough. The ground had no cover for it, no place where it could hide.

She made note of its progress and the direction it was heading and then flew just out in front of it before she tucked her wings in and dropped. She dove, traveling well over one hundred miles per hour. It wasn't her fastest dive by any measure, but it was sufficient for prey such as this.

At the last moment she angled her body upwards and sank her talons into its neck and abdomen. She squeezed, and it was dead in moments.

She gave several great flaps of her wings, over two meters in length, as she rose from the ground with her catch. She settled with it back in her nest. She leaned down to open her beak and...

"Oh God, no!"

She paused, surveying the dead hare with some confusion. Something stopped her from eating it.

She heard a familiar whistle, and her head jerked up. It was that same man again, waving his arm at her. He was on the other end of the field, trying to coax her to him.

She ignored him, as she usually did, and looked back down at her meal.

"No! Go to him!"

Curious.

The man was jogging toward her. He was larger than her, but she knew from experience that she could injure him. She wasn't frightened, just irritated.

He continued to call to her as he came closer. As usual he was wearing a dragon leather gauntlet and carrying straps for her legs and a hood for her eyes.

She wasn't interested. She returned to her meal.

"GO TO HIM!"

She paused again and eyed him cautiously. He had been trying to command her for a long time, but she had never listened before.

“Hermione!” he cried, as he doubled over, entirely out of breath from running toward her. “If you would just bloody well get down here....”

She cocked her head as he straightened and wiped his brow.

“Come on sweet girl.”

She turned her back on him and showed him her tail feathers. There wasn't anything about her that was sweet.

He huffed a laugh. “Don't tell me you're going to be just as bratty as she was... Merlin, she was impossible.”

She ruffled her feathers in offense.

“Alright, alright, I apologize. You're right of course. You aren't bratty at all, are you? You're proud. Proud and strong and very capable. That's why Aquila reminded me of you.”

She felt something odd emerging.

“Draco?”

“There you are,” he said smiling. “My fierce girl. That was much faster this time. I suppose it's because you've done it before.”

“You're in my head again?”

“Of course. After the last one I wasn't risking it. Eagles can fly well over a hundred miles in a single day. I might have never found you.”

“Surely you would have tracked me with my mark.”

“You know I would have tried, but the logistics of that while in the air and also in your head are somewhat challenging. It was much better to find you like this instead.”

She finally turned to face him. She could see him clearly like this. Aquila recognized his gear, but Hermione had never seen it before.

“She doesn't care for the leash.”

“It's called a jess.”

“That then. It makes her feel trapped.”

He contemplated this.

“That's another thing you have in common with her, isn't it? I've tried to trap you both. And I have failed.”

"You haven't failed at all."

"Oh yes I have. I should never have given you a way out. I really didn't intend to. But within a week of arriving you gave me doe eyes, and suddenly I'm tripping all over myself to train you to fight and help you become an animagus so you can go on missions. Severus was right: I've completely lost the plot when it comes to you."

"And Aquila?"

"Oh I spoiled her terribly. She was so beautiful, and I was absolutely besotted if I'm being honest. That's probably why she would never hunt for me. I never took her in hand properly to bring her to heel."

"I thought you didn't have an emotional attachment to her?"

"I said I wasn't emotionally attached like you were to Crookshanks, and I wasn't. She was never a pet. She was a wild thing, fiercely independent, remarkably talented, the most dangerous creature in the field if she wanted to be. I admired her and wanted to contain her. I wanted to harness her talents for myself. But she always had her own mind about her. She won far more often than I did."

"I'm sorry I killed her."

"You shouldn't be. She reminded me of you the very first time I laid eyes on her."

The presence retreated for a moment, and she eyed the brown strap and hood haughtily. She did not enjoy them, and the figure had been trying to foist them upon her for far too long.

Then the presence emerged again.

"Leave the jess and hood off, and we will both be more cooperative."

He considered this. "Hunting without a jess is uncommon."

"But is it done?"

"Occasionally. When the raptor is very well trained."

"Then you'll just have to trust me not to fly away."

He was silent for a long while, so she continued.

"This morning you told me that I've started to trust you with my body, and that was true. I trust you not to hurt me. I trust you to protect me. I trust that you care about me. But trust goes both ways, Draco. You must trust me to come back. It's something you have never understood about me. You have confined me and marked me and withheld information from me. Over and over again you've tried to clip my wings and cage me. Some of it was for my safety, especially before we understood each other. But it was mostly because you didn't trust me not to leave you. I am so close to accepting the things that are happening between us, but I won't be able to do it unless you trust me enough to let me go."

“Tell me why. Tell me why it has to be that way to make you mine.”

“It’s simple: if I don’t have the freedom to leave, then I can never show you that I choose to stay.”

The presence receded, and she looked at him. They stared each other in the eye for a long while. Then slowly, cautiously, he lowered the strap and hood she so despised to the ground and stood, extending his arm toward her.

“Come to me, fierce girl.”

The presence inside of her lit with happiness before receding once more. She looked at the figure and determined he was finally worthy of her cooperation.

She spread her wings and launched into the air, fluttering a moment later to land on his thick glove, perfectly perched and waiting.

His eyes were silver and seemed to be glinting with a mixture of pride and relief as she stilled.

“Now then,” he said, the anticipation thick in his voice, “let’s hunt.”

Chapter 23: Horcruxes

Chapter Notes

TW: Manipulation (but for once, not Draco!)

After meeting Aquila for the first time, several things changed.

The most obvious thing was Draco's appearance in her bed each night. He didn't talk about it, he just showed up. He still kept most of his clothing in his room next door, but inevitably he would slide in under the covers with her, having deemed her bed to now be *their* bed.

It was remarkably wonderful being able to relax into Draco's warm embrace and wake up with him in the mornings. He was naturally an early riser, much to her surprise, and she always found him already awake and playing with her hair or the lace on her nightgowns whenever her eyes finally opened the next morning.

He was a light sleeper too and always seemed to know the moment a nightmare started. When he slept in his own room it would take a scream to have him appear, but now that he was in bed with her, he seemed to sense her agitation immediately, and it always roused him. Hermione was surprised that he did not seem to suffer from nightmares in the same way that she did, but he had a simple explanation for it.

"My only nightmares involve watching you being tortured at the Manor or fighting during the Battle of Hogwarts or right after McLaggen. I never have nightmares about myself."

The truly shocking thing about having Draco in her bed at night was that he seemed perfectly content to slow the pace of their physical exploration of one another. He had touched her intimately several more times, but he hadn't asked for her to do anything to him in return, and he still had not seen any part of her while he was doing it. Some nights they did nothing at all but cuddle before drifting off together.

The experience was so comforting that those red flags she associated with Draco Malfoy seemed to grow further and further distant.

Just like Ginny had once pointed out, Hermione's whole world had narrowed to Draco and their little group at Malfoy Manor. It was hard to worry about things like morals when the man who could take a life so easily treated her so carefully.

Even when he brought her out as his boon a couple more times he never took it farther than he had that first night. The other Death Eaters steered clear of both of them, and there were no more confrontations or pressure to convince the others that she was his. Some

enthusiastic making out and grinding was all that was needed to convince them, and he didn't seem in any great rush to push her with it, though he did continue to tell her some of his fantasies while he touched her. He seemed to know what it did to her.

Yes, Hermione's walls around him continued to fall. That was especially true when his restrictions surrounding her captivity started to loosen.

"I want you to know I listened to you when you said I need to give you more freedom. This is entirely against my better judgment, but we can unlock the door to your balcony, sweet girl. You can go outside now, though I'd ask you to stay a bird while you are outdoors for your own safety."

For the first week that she ventured outdoors, Draco settled in on the patio to watch. She soared the skies and explored the extensive gardens, soon finding her favorite spots. The Manor itself was enormous, and she spent hours as Columba perching on the various sills and peering through the windows. Her vantage points were, admittedly, not always perfect and a number of rooms kept drapes closed. But Hermione did begin to learn the general layout of the Manor from the exterior, and she made careful mental notes of everything she could see.

Draco's wing, she learned, was on the east side, which accounted for the sunrises she would occasionally catch through her window. She caught glimpses of Narcissa in a room that appeared to be quite similar to Hermione's on the west side. It would be at least a five minute walk from one to the other.

After a week, Draco seemed satisfied that she wouldn't just fly away, and he started to let her go outside without his constant supervision. As she continued her explorations she went further and further afield, until one day she asked Draco where the property line ended.

"I haven't hit any wards yet, and I flew all the way to the nearest village," she said.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I haven't warded you into the estate, just my wing. My wards allow you to pass freely once you leave my wing."

Hermione blinked in surprise at this. "But... why?"

He glanced at her hands. "I'll always be able to find you, Hermione. My only concern about you flying too far is that you might have trouble getting back on your own if you end up in an unfamiliar area. Promise me not to go further than the village until you have the Aquila transformation down too. She will have a better homing instinct than Columba does."

Hermione didn't know if she should be thrilled or wary about her largely unrestricted abilities to fly. She had assumed he would ward her in, but evidently he felt so confident in his tracking spell after enhancing it that he thought there was no need.

Indeed, his tracking spells had certainly left its mark on her. Hermione had transformed into Columba in her loo one afternoon and studied herself in the mirror. Like all animagi there were characteristics about Columba that were very *Hermione*. Columba, for instance, had golden eyes, which were not at all typical for doves. The markings denoting the collar spanned her entire neck instead of just the back, which was also something Hermione had

never seen before. And on her chest were seven small dots in deep charcoal that matched the darker gray of her tail feathers. Most would say her coloring was simply not pristine, but Hermione knew the truth: it was the Columba symbol – the very thing on her palm had manifested itself on her animagus form too. Whatever he had done she felt sure he would always find her, bird or not.

Hermione wondered if a similar mark would appear when she finally managed Aquila. She was a couple weeks into it and things were going rather well. Since she had already managed one bird form, the second one was simpler in some respects. But there were key differences too, such as the talons and size and general breadth and power of Aquila that meant Hermione still required practice.

The truly peculiar thing about adding a second animagus form was that Hermione was now able to feel the differences in characteristics from her first.

Columba was docile and loyal. Hermione had read up on doves as she worked on her transformation and learned that they were actually rather good companion animals once they adjusted. With some socialization they became comfortable with humans, even going so far as to bond to the ones they interacted with most frequently. They were gentle creatures, though a bit skittish when meeting somebody new, and Hermione thought that some of Columba's characteristics must have drawn out Hermione's matching qualities as she was training.

Docile. Accepting. Trainable. Bonded.

In many respects this was everything Draco had wanted from her. It was precisely the way she behaved every time he told her she was sweet or called her one of the many pet names he liked to use.

Aquila, however, was the opposite from Columba in most ways. She was an apex predator and therefore had the capacity to kill swiftly and violently. Though eagles did not view humans as prey, Hermione sensed that Aquila was strong enough to kill an adult man if she wanted to. After all, golden eagles had been known to attack fully grown deer and even caribou. This meant she had no true fear of humans, though she didn't care for them much either. She was unsociable, as Hermione learned many raptors were. She preferred to be alone, though if she ever found a mate she would likely be paired for life. Just like the dove, Aquila was monogamous. She was confident in her ability to defend her territory and would let no other eagle except her own mate into it. She was strong and beautiful and had no natural enemies. She chafed when caged and worked for Draco begrudgingly, though Hermione sensed that Aquila's loyalties *could* be earned with a coequal relationship and a large time investment.

Aquila was as different from Columba as a bird could be, but Hermione felt as akin to her as she did to the dove. And in fact, Aquila drew out aspects of Hermione's character that she felt had been lost a little bit ever since the Battle of Hogwarts: her bravery, her competency, her confidence.

Yes, as Hermione began to learn Aquila she found her confidence coming back. It was like a jolt of that Veela magic she had missed. When she mentioned it to Draco, he pointed out that

Veela had a bit of the raptor in them too.

Hermione wondered on occasion if Draco had been intentional about the order in which he asked her to learn her forms. Had he always known that the dove was sweet and pliant and easier to manipulate? Had he thought that connecting to the dove first might make *her* easier to control while they were still circling one another, growing ever closer, but not yet together?

Did it even matter?

Her forms were a dichotomy, two halves of her. She began to draw on both of them in equal measure. And Draco, she was a bit relieved to learn, seemed to enjoy the Aquila side of her just as much as Columba. He wrapped her up and cherished her when she was sweet and cooperative for him. But when she showed some assertiveness then *he* became the one who melted.

He would give her almost anything like that.

How had she forgotten this? How had she failed to remember those times she wheedled favors and information out of him using feminine charms and Veela magic that felt so similar to the assuredness that Aquila embodied?

Perhaps she could be both fierce and sweet. Perhaps *he* could be both murderous and loving. And maybe he had been intentional about drawing out her Columba first, but a dose of Aquila was all that was needed to bring them into better equilibrium with each other.

It was that bit of Aquila in her that she leaned on when she approached him a couple weeks after she met Aquila for the first time. It was early October now, and the wizards would be going to the first hunt at Nott Castle the next day. While the Death Eaters were occupied for the weekend, Narcissa was hosting their wives and daughters at the Manor.

It was an ideal opportunity for Hermione to spy and the wizards to get a feel for the hunts before bringing the witches with them. But it also meant that it was probably time to let Draco in on one of her secrets — one that had been weighing on her.

She didn't want to tell him without a trade, though.

She needed both of her animagi forms as she thought about how to approach him. They wouldn't be seeing each other for three days, which was longer than they had been apart for months. She knew Draco wasn't happy about it. He never liked to be away from her for very long. So the night before he was due to leave she took a little extra care to select the nightgown with the loosest neckline and sheerest fabric. It was much like the others but it always made her feel a bit more exposed so she hadn't worn it around him yet. It was edged in pink lace, and Poppy found the matching ribbon and even applied a faint blush of pink to her cheeks.

Draco had told her he wouldn't let her trade her body for the Order members, and that wasn't *precisely* what she was going to do. But Draco was going to be in Voldemort's vicinity for three days. There would be recreation and down time. For once he wouldn't be on a strict

schedule filled with business and pandering. She couldn't let him go without letting him in on a few secrets. She hoped that seducing him a little bit would be enough to get him to agree to a trade before she was forced to spill everything.

Be confident in your ability to do this like Aquila, and let him see you be sweet like Columba. Use both.

He entered her bedroom with long joggers and no shirt. Hermione had already dimmed the room, though she kept a few lamps on that he had commented always made her skin glow. The things it did to *his* skin made her a bit lightheaded. He was always pale, but it threw the planes of his body into sharp relief. He was fit of course — daily training did wonders for his abdomen especially — but it was a lean kind of athleticism that reminded her of a predator. His frame was large, his shoulders broad, but he wasn't bulky. And as always, the black tattoo on his arm did something to her that it really shouldn't have.

She shuddered and then blushed. Perhaps she didn't need Poppy's help with that after all.

Draco, of course, caught her reaction and started to smirk before she let the gray and green blanket fall away and began to approach him.

The smirk turned into a wide-eyed stare as he saw what she was wearing. Hermione swallowed hard and drew on Aquila to let him look. He couldn't see everything yet. Just hints. But it was enough to turn his eyes black as he watched.

Be Columba now.

"Draco," she said, as she picked up the hem of the nightgown and began to twist it a little anxiously. Truly, she *was* a bit nervous about all of this. He always saw through her so clearly, and she couldn't bugger up this chance to save somebody else.

His attention moved away from what she was wearing as he frowned at her behavior. "What is it, little dove?"

"Draco, I want to tell you something before you go to Nott Castle... some information. But I'm not supposed to. It's been worrying me for days."

His eyes sharpened, and she bit her lip a little.

"Let's go to bed and talk about it, alright?"

She nodded, as he reached for her hand and led her over. He didn't climb under the covers, but leaned back against the headboard. He maneuvered her so she was in his lap, facing him.

Bugger.

She was hoping he wouldn't have a clear look at her face. She thought this would be easier if she couldn't see his piercing gaze that would surely command her to tell him without any trade at all.

“Tell me everything Hermione,” he said.

“I can’t!” she exclaimed. “That’s the problem! I want to — I *really* want to — but it was Harry’s mission before he died. Harry, Ron, and I were sworn to absolute secrecy. The rest of the Order doesn’t even know what we were doing.”

This clearly piqued his interest, and he studied her intently.

“You said you *can’t* tell me. Does that mean you’ve made an Unbreakable Vow?”

Hermione blinked in surprise. “Of course not. I’ve never promised anything through an Unbreakable Vow. I’m not *you*.”

He quirked his lips in amusement.

“Alright, that’s very good news. And I’m quite glad to hear that actually, I’d prefer you never *ever* make a Vow like that to anyone. But that means that you *can* tell me. You just don’t want to.”

“I just—”

She was getting agitated and wasn’t trying to hide it. She should have known he would do this — turn it back on her — but she wanted that trade first. She also wanted it to be his idea. He was obviously saving that leverage for something else. She suspected he had agreed to remove Arthur from his list so readily because he had mentally assigned two lives to receiving her Aquila symbol, and she had been too foolish to ask for it upfront. She didn’t want to make a mistake like that again.

“I can’t believe you don’t already know!” she finally confessed. This wasn’t exactly on topic, but it was the truth. “You searched me right after I was caught while I was unconscious. I know you did because I had a splitting headache when I woke up. I was *sure* you must have found it, but eventually I realized you hadn’t, and now I almost wish you did so I wouldn’t have to break my word to *tell* you...”

She trailed off in frustration.

“Hermione,” he said with a touch of regret. “I’m sorry I was too rough with you the first time I searched you. I certainly didn’t intend to give you a headache. I just had so much I had to arrange and very little time to do it, so I gave myself less than thirty minutes with you to find everything I needed to know. I had fed a little intelligence to the Order before the battle so they would be inclined to trust me, but I finally had an opportunity to lock down a full pardon and had to take it before the Dark Lord requested to see you and Ginny. I also had to alert those who would follow the Dark Lord if he won to give him more followers at the same time. I literally did not sleep that night, and there was no time for me to search you thoroughly before you woke up, so I had to prioritize.”

Hermione found herself deeply curious, despite herself.

“What could have been more important than learning about my mission?”

He gave her a fond smile.

“Come now, my darling, you surely know me well enough to guess.”

Hermione found herself staring around the room that was exactly to her tastes.

“It was all this, wasn’t it?” she said slowly. “You learned about the things I liked.”

He gave her an approving smile. “That was certainly part of it. I had been preparing before I caught you, but I hardly ever saw you outside of Hogwarts. Even with the house elves to help me, there was so much I didn’t know. I wanted to make sure I had every single thing you needed to be comfortable and secure so our little nest would be perfect. And I also needed to see how you felt about me. I needed to know just how much ground I had to make up.”

Hermione could scarcely believe it, but then again, it was so like him.

“And what did you learn?”

“You thought I was a prat, and I irritated you, but you weren’t afraid of me. It was such a relief, and I hoped the things I would have to do to get you out wouldn’t change that. In fact, you almost felt sorry for me.”

“I did,” she confessed. “You looked so terrified that day at the Manor and again in the Room of Requirement with the fiendfyre. I thought you were in over your head.”

“I wasn’t in over my head at all. I was only afraid for you.”

She absorbed this for a moment. “So what did You-Know-Who tell you about me? I’m certain he knows something about my mission.”

Draco frowned. “He just said that Dumbledore was working on something and may have given Potter a task before he died. He didn’t think you or Weasley knew what it was, but he wanted confirmation of that. He believed you two were just following him blindly. That’s how many of his own followers behave so he expected it of Dumbledore and Potter too. I know that might have been true for Weasley, but you would never have done that.”

“And you still weren’t curious enough to look?” asked Hermione in disbelief.

Draco shrugged. “There were a small number of people in the Order who thought you three had a special mission. The Weasleys did and Remus Lupin did too. But most of them believed you three just went into hiding together to keep the others safe since Potter was such a target. I’ll confess I was in that group because Potter was terrible at occlumency, so I didn’t think he would have been given any special intelligence. Besides, it would have been entirely in character for Potter to leave to draw attention toward him and away from the others. I heard a rumor that you three broke into Gringotts before the Battle of Hogwarts, but I wasn’t in the room when the Dark Lord questioned the goblins about it, so I wasn’t sure if it was true. And if it *was* true, I just assumed you three needed gold. It wasn’t like Potter could

just walk into his vault. I thought the Dark Lord was just being paranoid when he asked me to search you, and I had to prioritize with the very limited time I had.”

Hermione slumped a little. As she got to know Draco and began to trust him she really *did* wish he had just found out what she was up to so she wouldn’t have to break her promise. But then again, now that she knew he was truly ignorant about it, she had some leverage. She just had to play her cards correctly.

“It’s very frustrating, Draco,” she said again. “I just don’t know.”

“You know you can tell me anything, Hermione. I’m an exceptional occlumens, and I’m loyal to *you* above all others. If this would help you in some way I need to know about it.”

Give him doe eyes.

She turned the full power of her pleading gaze on him, not bothering to conceal how conflicted she was.

“I know all that! And that’s the only reason why I would even consider it, but Draco... I *promised*. I promised Dumbledore and my dead best friends that I wouldn’t tell *anybody* else. Not the Order, not anyone.”

Say it. Offer it. Let me have a life for telling you this.

Because she *had* to tell him. She had gone in circles about it, but finally concluded that she really had no choice. He was much better positioned than she was to gather the intelligence she needed, but he would never do it without the whole truth.

“So it’s important...” he said slowly, as though he was weighing something.

“Extremely,” she assured him. “It’s... well, it’s one of the Order’s biggest secrets in a way.”

“And Dumbledore told you three and nobody else? When none of you were occlumens?”

She could hear the skepticism in his voice.

“Yes,” she said. “Believe me, I wondered about that too, but eventually... I figured out why,” she added a bit bitterly.

“And you *want* to tell me but feel like you can’t...” he said to himself. “And this is coming up now because...?”

“Because you’re about to spend three days at Nott Castle,” she said honestly. “I need... *we need*... information. It’s a perfect chance to keep your eyes and ears open if you know what you’re trying to discover. But I just...” she made a frustrated noise. “I promised! Why didn’t Dumbledore tell *you*? I loved Harry and Ron, but I did so much of it on my own. Harry had some unique skills that were helpful too, but Ron just...” She trailed off, feeling guilty for expressing those thoughts that had plagued her for months in the tent. She sighed. “Let’s just say I think it would have been much easier if *you* were the third person who knew about it or perhaps Snape. We really needed a Death Eater to help us with it.”

She raised her eyes to find him studying her. She hoped he could see how important this was.

“Alright...” he said slowly. “You want to tell me, but you will feel guilty about it.”

She nodded earnestly. “Terribly.”

“Then let me take that guilt away from you, sweet girl. If you tell me, I’ll take an Order member off my list. You know that’s a good trade, and you will be saving one of their lives by telling me about it.”

She exhaled with relief, but tried not to let him see that he had played right into her hands. She made a show of weighing his offer.

“I suppose... if you did that...”

He stroked her face a little. “Tell me, Hermione.”

She exhaled. “Alright. In exchange for Snape.”

She felt the temperature drop in the room.

“Why?” he asked harshly.

She gave him a disapproving look. “Because out of all the others, the Order needs him the most. *And* he’s your godfather.”

“He was interested in –”

“Annabelle, whom he now knows does not exist,” Hermione finished for him, barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “Please, Draco. I don’t want you to kill your own godfather.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, but he finally gave a curt nod. “Fine. Then tell me.”

She took a deep breath. “What do you know about horcruxes?”

His eyes narrowed. “They’re dark. Very dark. I read about them in one of those books you were carrying around, but...”

His eyes started to widen, and Hermione nodded.

“Yes. He made several.”

“Don’t tell me...”

“That’s what Harry, Ron, and I were doing all last year. Hunting and destroying horcruxes.”

“And you managed it?”

“We found a few, yes, including inside of Gringotts. We didn’t need gold, we needed the horcrux that was inside of Bellatrix’s vault. We actually pulled it off, but the goblins nearly

caught us on the way out, and it alerted him to what we were doing. That's why I'm sure he knew about the mission when he asked you to search me. It's just very lucky he underestimated my roll in the whole thing and outsourced the task to you instead of searching me himself. We found most of the horcruxes, but there is at least one left."

"The snake," surmised Draco. "That's why you want to kill the snake."

"Yes. Since you've read about them, you know he can't die until they are all gone."

Draco sucked a breath through his teeth.

"That's incredibly dangerous."

"I know it is, and there aren't many things that can kill a horcrux. Luckily Nagini and You-Know-Who are both living beings so *Avada Kedavra* will work. If the horcrux is an inanimate object it takes basilisk venom or fiendfyre."

His eyes were boring into hers. "That's what you three were doing in the Room of Requirement."

She nodded. "It was another bit of luck that the horcrux we found in the room was destroyed by Crabbe's fiendfyre. It was terrifying, but... it worked out."

Draco looked away and furrowed his brow. "So you need me to get intelligence on the snake."

"Yes, and also..." she trailed off, hesitating again.

"Also what?"

"We need to ensure he hasn't made any more, either intentionally or unintentionally."

He raised one eyebrow. "How does one make an *unintentional* horcrux?"

"I think it can happen when one splits their soul too many times. You know that *Avada* cracks it, and you must know that you can remove a part of it completely during the aftereffects. That's how a horcrux is made. If you aren't making horcruxes then your soul heals eventually... it's just in a different shape than it once was. But if you make horcruxes then you literally take a piece of the soul out. It can never fully heal once you do that. And he didn't just make one, Draco. He made six that he knew of."

Draco went pale. "You're implying there were others he didn't know about."

"At least one," said Hermione quietly. "Harry was a horcrux."

Draco physically jolted at this.

"I know," she said, her eyes filling with tears again as she thought about it. "Harry didn't realize it, but I did. I... kept the secret from him for months. He had to die eventually. I always knew that. But he was supposed to be last."

“The Dark Lord didn’t know?”

“I doubt it. Would he have killed Harry if he did?”

“Fair point,” said Draco. “He probably would have tried to turn Potter into his second-in-command.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “So he couldn’t have known about it. And it’s possible he *hasn’t* made any more. I’m not sure how many times you can split your soul before it becomes too unstable. We have some evidence that he always planned to make six because he thought a seven-part soul was strongest. He thought he made six and kept the seventh inside of his body. In reality he made at least seven, so his soul was split into eight. I have no idea if he could keep going with it. And perhaps he only made one unintentional horcrux because it happened the night he disappeared the first time when his spell backfired. That may have fractured his soul in a different way and caused it to spin off and latch onto Harry. I don’t know, it’s all very murky of course. But we know the snake is one, and he’s aware that at least a few others were destroyed. If he *could* replace them, it wouldn’t surprise me if he had tried. This time though, I don’t think he will hide them. He will keep them close by, possibly on his person. He entrusted horcruxes to your father and Bellatrix and hid several others in remote locations that were all discovered and stolen. He won’t make that mistake again.”

Draco leaned back and considered her. “That’s why Dumbledore gave the task to you three, isn’t it? Because Potter was one.”

Hermione nodded and looked down. “I think so, yes. He knew Harry would probably die in the attempt, but he had to. And as long as he was alive he might as well be the one picking them off one by one because the mission was incredibly dangerous. Ron and I were there to help him with his task and to continue on with it if he died too early.”

Hermione felt a shudder of anger pass through Draco.

“I know,” she said. “I have found it very hard to forgive Dumbledore for it.”

Draco sighed. “Alright. I’ll do what I can at Nott Castle to find the snake and see if I can discover whether he has any others. Is there an identification spell?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, there’s a chapter about it in *Secrets of the Darkest Arts*.”

“I’ll study it before I leave in the morning,” he said.

“And there’s something else,” Hermione added.

Draco looked slightly overwhelmed. “There’s more?”

Hermione nodded. “Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. You know the one that You-Know-Who was given right after Harry died? We need it back.”

“And why is that?” asked Draco cautiously.

“Because... oh bugger, you’re going to think I’m mad... and honestly, it *is* mad, and it’s probably not true but...”

He sighed. “Hermione, just tell me.”

She exhaled. “Well let’s just say that it’s *possible* it is a Deathly Hallow. As in the original Invisibility Cloak that was written about in the *Tale of the Three Brothers*. It had been in Harry’s family for centuries, and those who believe the story think that it was the Peverell brothers who created the Hallows. Harry was descended from them. We are also fairly certain that You-Know-Who has the Elder Wand, which is supposedly the unbeatable wand from the story, and at some point Harry believed he had the Resurrection Stone too. He thought it was the stone in a ring that was a former horcrux Dumbledore managed to destroy before he died. Dumbledore left Harry a snitch in his will, and Harry thought the ring with the Resurrection Stone was inside of it, but he could never figure out how to open the snitch to be sure... so he just carried it around in his moleskin pouch. He was wearing it when he died. I have no idea where it could be or if it even survived the battle because you said Harry’s body was burned. But if You-Know-Who has two out of the three Deathly Hallows that’s *very* bad news. If he ever figures out what they might be, then he might find the Stone too and then he could be...”

“Immortal a second way,” said Draco, who was very pale now.

“Yes,” said Hermione, “in theory. At the very least he would be even harder to kill. But I want to be clear that the Deathly Hallows are much woolier than the horcruxes. We are certain about the horcruxes and really don’t have much evidence for the Hallows at all, except for some cryptic gifts from Dumbledore and legends. I just think that it would be best if You-Know-Who does *not* learn what those artifacts might be, so we should steal the Cloak if possible. If it *is* a Hallow, then we can’t risk him uniting them... and if it’s not, then it’s still dead useful, no pun intended.”

Draco exhaled and closed his eyes as he leaned back. “Alright. No promises, but I’ll see what I can do. Is there anything else? Any other ways the Dark Lord might be immortal that you haven’t told me about?”

“Erm, no. Horcruxes and Hallows. That’s all that I’m aware of.”

Draco opened his eyes and surveyed her face. She was feeling inexplicably nervous.

“Well, at least now I understand you a little better...”

“Oh?” she asked in confusion.

“Yes, I’ve been wondering for weeks why you felt the need to kill that bloody snake.”

Hermione smiled a little. “Well now you know.”

“Now I know... Merlin.”

He ran a hand along her hips. “We should tell the others.”

Hermione sighed. "You're probably right. Ginny and Luna know the snake has to die, but they don't know why."

"Well Theo and Blaise need to know why, since they will be at Nott Castle with me. I can't be everywhere at once, and when you include the grounds the estate is huge. I'll need them to help search."

"No, you're right. Fine. You can tell them about it the next time you see them."

He nodded as his hands skimmed her stomach. "I'm not going to see you for three nights..." he murmured.

Hermione shook her head.

"And this one is very pretty," he added, tugging on the hem of her nightgown.

Hermione bit her lip.

Be like Aquila. You can do this.

"Well I've been wondering something..."

"Oh?"

"Have you decided whether to take off the left side first or the right?"

Draco stilled as his eyes dropped to her neckline.

"Am I finally going to see them?" he asked. He sounded a bit breathless.

"You've seen them before," Hermione pointed out. "That day with Cormac."

He put a finger to her lips.

"I didn't," he said.

Hermione gave him a bewildered look.

He pressed his finger harder. "I didn't, my darling. The only thing I could focus on was how hurt you were and how much I wanted him to hurt too. I don't remember what they look like, nor do Theo and Blaise. We were all very distracted by what had just happened to you."

Hermione became inexplicably nervous. Of course she was pleased that none of the wizards had really *looked* at her like that. But that also meant nobody had ever *really* seen them and...

"Anxious?" he asked, lowering his hand from her lips and tracing the edge of her neckline.

Hermione nodded and bit her lip.

"Give me that fear, Hermione. Nobody but me will ever see them again."

Hermione allowed her eyes to flutter closed as she felt him reach up and nudge both straps off at once. Cold air hit her chest, and her heart started to race as she heard him inhale.

“Gods...” he muttered, and then she felt one thumb graze a nipple.

She was totally exposed. She was bare. Just like that day when she had no choice. This was a lot. This was...

“Draco?” she asked softly, an edge of panic in her voice.

He immediately reached for her and pulled her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her.

“Shhh you’re alright. Let’s lie on the bed, and then we’ll try again.”

She swallowed and nodded, and he rolled her over so she was on her back, and he was hovering over her. This felt better. She was nestled into the quilt and pillows and *him* like this. It wasn’t like being in the open air with nothing to protect her. She started to breathe again.

“There,” he said, leaning down and giving her a kiss. “You’re doing such a good job. Now reach up and hold onto your pillow for me. Ground yourself with it.”

How did he always know what she needed? She had no idea, but she did as he said, and it worked. She was connected to something like this, and her heart slowed.

He leaned back to look at her chest, and this time she felt a bit more anchored while he did it.

“You’re perfect,” he declared. “Lovely.”

Again she felt his hand start to brush her breasts the way she liked for just a moment, before moving further down to the nightgown that was crumpled beneath them.

“Stay just the way you are. Tell me if you need me to stop,” he said.

He gripped the fabric and tugged it down over her hips until she was nude except for her knickers.

Hermione’s eyes had been squeezed shut, but she opened them to find him sitting back on his knees and staring. To her surprise, he wasn’t looking at her knickers or even her breasts. He was zeroed in on her stomach.

He reached forward and touched the long purple mark that started above her navel and wrapped around her side. It was thin and smooth, but Hermione knew it stood out against her skin.

“What is this?” he whispered. His anger was palpable and thick.

“Dolohov,” said Hermione.

His eyes flicked to hers. "He was always going to die. But this means it will be slow."

Hermione shuddered a little, but now his eyes were looking at the rest of her.

"You are stunning," he said simply. "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He bent forward and cupped a breast. It felt heavy and Hermione's hips wriggled a bit.

"Are you getting excited?" he asked.

She licked her lips and nodded.

He smirked. "Good. With clothing gone there is more we can do."

He settled himself on top of her and buried his face into her neck.

"I want you to stay just like this," he murmured. "Don't do a single thing except hold onto your pillow okay? Tug on it if you need to. You're going to come for me just the way you are, and it's going to be so pretty."

"Okay," she breathed.

His mouth trailed hot down her neck, and Hermione sank into the pillow to allow herself to feel it. She knew she liked this, but he had never made it lower than her collarbone before. Tonight though, he didn't stop, and before she knew it he was pressing kisses around her breasts. The sensation was different than his hands, and Hermione arched into him as her fingers gripped her pillow.

She felt his hand creeping down her stomach at the same time, and he started playing with the hem of her knickers just as his mouth gently closed over one nipple.

Hermione gasped and then groaned as Draco's hands slipped past her knickers and one finger slid smoothly inside of her.

"Draco..." she panted, and she clutched the pillow, squeezing it hard as that familiar pressure began to build.

"I'm obsessed," he muttered. "So fucking obsessed with you..."

She knew he was, and it was the only thing that made her brave enough to let him see her like this. But now that he had she couldn't believe she had waited this long. His mouth and tongue were doing sinful things as he licked and sucked, and his fingers started pressing into her harder.

It didn't trigger her like this. It felt good.

She was moving her hips against his hands, trying so hard to just get it *out*.

"Just like that..." he said. "Fuck my fingers. Gods you're so fucking wet. I can't wait until you let me eat you out."

Hermione's eyes flew open in shock.

"Not tonight, but soon. Soon you'll let me lick that delicious cunt won't you?"

Hermione was shaking as her eyes fell closed again. She had no answers for him, but as always his words seemed to make her lightheaded. She was getting closer as his strokes became harder and her hips rolled. And then he was touching that place she loved so much — the one that made her feel nothing but sensation as it pulsed through her.

"Come for me, my beautiful girl," he said.

She cried out and broke gently this time, suspended between the emotions she was feeling. That she had gotten this far with him at all was extraordinary after everything she had been through. And he was so patient and gentle, but only with her. It might have been the thing she loved most about him — his attention to her needs and comfort whenever she was vulnerable like this. She found herself becoming oddly emotional.

"Perfect," he sighed with satisfaction. "Just perfect. Now open up for me."

Hermione's mouth fell open as if on command, and he placed his fingers gently inside. She blinked in surprise to taste herself as she closed her lips around his fingers. It reminded her of the sea — a bit musky and salty. His eyes darkened while he watched.

"See how good it tastes? And soon you'll let me take off those knickers and bury my face in it won't you?"

Hermione found herself nodding, still caught in that haze as she came down from her own pleasure.

He removed his fingers and kissed her. "Good girl."

Hermione sighed and looked at him lazily.

"Draco... when do you want *me* to... you know. With you."

He stilled and looked at her carefully.

"You want to touch me?"

She blushed a little. "You're very patient. I just want you to feel good too."

He smiled contentedly. "Gods you're sweet. I don't mind being patient, not at all. And I do feel good when I make *you* feel good. But if you want to touch me too, of course I'll allow it."

Hermione was nervous now, suddenly wondering if she was getting ahead of herself.

"Maybe you can show me?" she said hopefully. "So I know..."

He smirked and rolled off of her, climbing to his feet.

“Stay just like that,” he said. “Let me look at you.”

Hermione tried to find her confidence as she allowed herself to stay mostly nude under his gaze. It was fixed on her. She watched him swiftly push his trousers and pants down, revealing a part of the male anatomy she had only seen once before, when Cormac had hurt her. Her eyes were huge as she took him in. It seemed to jut aggressively from a thatch of hair. The fact that it could just *stand on its own* was utterly baffling to her. And as she watched, Draco dropped one hand to it with an ease that told her he had done this many times before.

She tore her eyes away and found him watching her, to gauge her reaction and to continue looking at her body as he started to move his hand up and down slowly.

“This is what I imagine whenever I do this...” he said, as he looked at each part of her. “Your tits, your stomach, your arse bent over in front of me, your sweet cunt either open for me or hidden away in tiny knickers, getting soaked through... gorgeous curls and that fucking hair ribbon. Gods, I stared at your ribbons for years in school. They were so ridiculous, so pretty. None of the other girls wore them like you did. I always wanted to play with them. They would taunt me, being just out of reach, and I used to get off whenever I imagined feeling them. That’s when I knew it was over for me. The thought of touching a fucking ribbon got me hard every single time.”

Hermione felt another shudder of want course through her as he told her these things. Unconsciously she seemed to sink down into the bed a bit more.

“Good girl. You’re doing so well. Just relax and let me look at you for now. You can always let me look at you...”

She relaxed a bit more, trying her best to become comfortable with the staring.

He’s always stared at you, Hermione. Always.

“Tell me if I need to stop,” he added, as he started to walk toward her very slowly. His hand continued to move on himself, up and down.

She had been relaxing as he said such lovely things to her, but as he approached her personal space, she felt a spike of anxiety. It was ridiculous, she knew that, but his cock seemed so large, and it reminded her of that purple thing from Cormac’s pants and...

“Stop,” she said in a slightly strangled voice, but he already had. Of course he had. He always seemed to know as soon as they pushed too much.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he said, his eyes laced with concern as he stroked.

Hermione swallowed hard and licked her lips.

“It’s... too big,” she said haltingly, looking at it warily.

He huffed a small laugh. “The things you do to my ego. But no, Hermione, it’s not too big.”

“There’s no way that...” she closed her eyes and trailed off, feeling ill now.

“Hey, talk to me. Do you want me to cover up?”

“No,” she said quickly. “No that’s not it, it’s just...”

“It’s what?”

“Cormac’s didn’t fit. And he tried over and over, and it really hurt.”

Draco dropped his hand and turned back to retrieve his underwear.

“You don’t have to!” she insisted.

He just shot her a stern look. “Just for a bit while we talk about this. Can I come closer now?”

She could still see his pants tented, but it wasn’t as intimidating like this. She nodded, and Draco came to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Hermione, the reason it didn’t fit was because Nita’s spell blocked it. That’s the only reason. If she hadn’t protected you, he would have breached you. I’m certain he would have fit.”

“My head kept hitting the wall though, each time he tried.”

Hermione knew Draco was right of course. She wasn’t making any sense at all, but she couldn’t seem to help herself. It was hard to articulate *why* she felt sick at the thought of any man’s cock — even Draco’s — getting too close.

Draco looked to be in pain as he reached for her cheek. “Hermione, if we ever get that far, it will be in a bed that’s soft and comfortable, and I will go slow and make sure you’re prepared first. Your body is perfectly capable of pushing a baby out through that channel. That means it can also stretch enough to fit a cock without any problem, I promise you that. It may hurt a little the very first time since you’re a virgin, but it won’t be because things don’t fit properly or because I’m taking you against a rough dungeon wall and letting you get injured while I do it. I would never do that to you.”

Hermione paused and tried to calm her fears before she blurted out anything else that was so senseless and ridiculous. She knew she was being irrational, and everything she was saying was coming from her trauma. But she still had to talk herself down, just like Draco did.

I’m safe with him. He will never hurt me. Be like Aquila and don’t be afraid.

“Alright. I know you’re right, of course you are,” she said.

“Good. Now give me your hand. I want you to learn that cocks aren’t scary at all. In fact, mine is probably going to embarrass me as soon as you touch it. But please... tell me to stop if you need to.”

He gripped her hand and brought it to his abdomen. She couldn't help but enjoy the feeling of his skin under her hand as he guided her into his underwear. He went very slow and didn't take his underwear off, but when she didn't tell him to stop he moved her hand toward that large thing and then told her to grip.

"Oh *fuck*," he gasped the minute she wrapped her hand around him. His eyes squeezed tight and he seemed to be grinding his teeth.

Her eyes widened in surprise that it was this easy as he showed her how to pump up and down.

It was firm, but the skin was shockingly soft, and he actually whimpered and his eyes stayed closed as she continued to pump. Something wet seemed to be leaking from the top.

"What's that?" she asked as she dipped her thumb into it.

"It's... *fuck me*... It's precum... spread it around the tip and..."

She swirled it with her thumb, and he gave a strangled cry.

"Gods Hermione, I'm gonna... you need to move your hand if you don't want to feel... I can't stop, I..."

Hermione held her breath, and he jerked beneath her. Something hot and wet spread across her hand as he groaned.

"Vanish it," he gasped, and Hermione did so as she slowly released him and removed her hand. He was staring at her like he had never seen her before.

"Come here," he said, rolling on top of her and kissing her. "That was... *goddammit*."

Hermione wasn't sure what to think. "Was it okay then?"

He pulled back and looked at her like she was dense.

"Hermione, I have been wanking to thoughts of you nearly every single day for years. Getting to do it when I could actually see you instead of just imagining you and then feeling your hands at the end? Yes. It was very very good. I came way too quickly."

Hermione blushed, but she was pleased.

"Surely you must know what you do to me by now," he added.

"Sometimes, but it still surprises me."

"It shouldn't," he insisted. "You are my dream girl, and I mean that literally. All of it is good. *Too* good. I'm still shocked you are actually here, and it's not all just happening in my head."

She relaxed at this and smiled a little. "Alright, but I still want to practice."

He huffed a laugh as he pulled the quilt back and covered them both with it.

“Sleep just like this, and then we can do some more practice in the morning before I have to leave.”

It was odd, sleeping almost in the nude but surprisingly nice once she was snuggled into Draco and the quilt. His hand settled firmly against her ribcage, just under one breast, and he pulled her to him.

Columba and Aquila both seemed to smile down at her as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 24: Gardens

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief description of torture (not depicted)

The next morning, Hermione woke up still mostly nude, with Draco cupping one breast and pressing his erection into her bum.

"Draco?" she asked blearily.

She cracked an eye open to find the room still quite dark and the sky streaked with pink as the sun was just coming up. It was obviously very early in the morning.

"Shhh," he said. "I know I should let you sleep, but I couldn't resist you like this. I have to leave soon. The Dark Lord wants me there for breakfast, and I needed to get my fill of you first. You can nap as much as you want once I'm gone, sweet girl."

Hermione let her eyes flutter closed again and just sighed into him, not at all inclined to protest. It was lovely, really, being tucked under the covers with him, as his skilled hands danced across her body. He was right that she could nap later on if she needed it. He made a sound of approval as he felt her relax into his touch, and it wasn't long before he was moving on top of her and pressing his lips against her breasts.

She could barely see him, for he had pulled the quilt up along with him and made a dark cocoon around them both. But his silver eyes glinted just enough that when he glanced up at her she could see them staring at her intently before his mouth lowered again, and he gave one nipple a nice long lick that made her arch.

"You're so lovely," he sighed as his hand began to creep down between her thighs.

"Draco..." she groaned, as he continued his attentions.

"Hmmm?" he asked, clearly very distracted by the things he was doing to her.

"Am I your boon now?"

He paused what he was doing, and he raised his head to peer at her. The quilt slid off of his head just enough for her to see a small crease of concern between his eyes.

"Why would you ask me that, my darling?"

"I was just wondering," she said.

Truthfully, it *had* been something that continued to weigh on her now and then. She loved the way he made her feel, but she was still his prisoner, only let out to fly when he permitted it. Her lack of freedom to come and go as she pleased still grated on her now and then. She knew they were in a war, and she thought she could live with his rules until Voldemort was gone. Much of it was for her safety, as well as the safety of him and her closest friends. But she still wanted reassurance that he didn't view her the way the others viewed their boons while she cooperated with him on this.

He reached up and stroked her face.

"My boon is Amalie Beumont. She is a fabrication we have to maintain when I bring you out around the others, that's all. But *you*, Hermione Granger, are mine."

"So you're my boyfriend, then?" she asked shyly.

His eyes gleamed, and he broke into a broad smile.

"You want me to be your boyfriend?" he teased.

"Well I've never had one, not *really*, so I'm not certain how we establish that, or..."

She trailed off and felt her face turn crimson, though she hoped that he couldn't tell in the low light.

"You can call me your boyfriend, your lover, your wizard, your provider, anything you want."

Hermione exhaled, some of her anxiety about her captivity receding. "Alright."

Hermione stared at him, and he had an odd expression on his face. His silver eyes had almost turned black as he looked back down at her breasts and rubbed a thumb across them.

"You like it when I show you what to do in bed. You want me to teach you, to lead you."

He bent down and tugged on a nipple with his lips, as if to prove a point, and Hermione's breath stuttered as her eyes rolled back.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Good. And that means that you can call me whatever you want. I'll answer to it as long as I can keep doing this," he added, and once again she felt his hand creeping back down between her legs.

"Then tell me," she breathed. "Tell me what I am to *you*, Draco."

She heard his breath catch, and then to her shock he cupped her firmly between the legs with one hand and closed his other hand gently around her throat. It was so surprising her eyes flew open as she gasped.

"You're my whole world and my everything, Hermione. And now we're both going to come."

The hand on her sex impatiently shoved her knickers aside so he could press down on her bud, more urgent and firmer than usual. The hand around her throat migrated into her hair until he was gripping it, tugging on it, just a touch harder than necessary. Hermione cried out and began to writhe as he moved from her clit to her cunt and sank a finger into her, crooking it up. He began to pump and brought her right to the edge of it before stilling and pulling back, and she looked at him in dismay as he halted everything he was doing.

"Say you're mine," he demanded.

"I'm yours," she agreed, and he began to move his fingers again, as his leaned down to lick her breasts and blow on them with cool air. The cold made her skin pebble and her nipples tighten, and she was just at the edge again when he stopped a second time.

"Draco!" she protested.

"I'm not done yet," he said. "Tell me you will always follow my rules in bed. You'll let me touch you when and how I want. You'll trust me to be careful and always make it perfect for you. And you won't do anything to yourself without my permission."

"Yes...." she said, so desperate for the release he was denying her that she would agree to almost anything. Besides, she already trusted him to do all of those things. He was so attentive and cautious with her. She knew she could turn this over to him, and he wouldn't damage her.

He flicked her clit, and it made her spasm.

"Draco, *please*..."

"Better," he grunted. "I like to hear you beg."

He resumed what he was doing and brought her close for a third time. Hermione was on the precipice of something she had never experienced before. She was certain that her previous orgasms would pale in comparison to what he was about to give her. Just a little more and...

He pulled back again, and she cried out in frustration.

"Please, *please* Draco... let me... I need..."

She was almost incoherent, as she opened her eyes to find him sitting up and straddling her, while he stared down at her again. He licked his lips as his gaze flicked between her breasts and her mouth. His underwear was tented. She felt his hardness pressing gently against her, and she knew what this was doing to him. Sure enough, he gripped her hand and guided it toward his erection, slipping it in the band of his underwear.

"Show me what a good girl you are first," he said. "Show me what you've learned, little dove."

She was so sexually frustrated that the fear she had felt the night before didn't hit her in the same way. Besides, he wasn't undressing. She couldn't *see* his cock, not really. She was stroking it, just like she had the previous night, and before long he was doubling over and whispering a string of curses as he tried desperately to hold back. He palmed her breasts, rolling her nipples in his fingers.

"I want to spaff all over them," he suddenly said.

Hermione opened her mouth in surprise, but before she could say anything else, he moved her hand out of the way and took over pumping himself. Just the very tip emerged from his underwear as he grunted, and that same hot and sticky stuff soon painted her breasts.

She was breathing hard, eyes wide as she stared up at him, and he looked down at her, his own eyes still dark.

"You've never been prettier," he said thoughtfully, as he dipped a finger into it and smeared it around her to cover both nipples before looking her in the eye. "You're topless for me, a sweet ribbon fluttering in your hair, wearing the symbol of my ancestor around your neck and my cum on your tits. This is how I've always imagined you — claimed by me and all mine."

Hermione was breathless as she listened to him. He was right, she realized. She *was* all his like this. How had she gotten here? She scarcely knew. But now that she was presented to him like this she realized she didn't want to be anywhere else.

"Open up, and then you'll get your reward."

"Alright," she said, barely conscious of what she was saying this time. She had never imagined something like this before, not once. The moment her jaw dropped, Draco's irises practically disappeared as he raised his soiled fingers to her lips.

He traced them, and his breathing went shallow as he watched her intently.

"This is a hundred times better than that fucking cherry lipstick. My cum glistening on your lips. I've thought about it dozens of times. Fuck me, I am never going to forget this."

She let him do it, her own need building again as he collected more before placing it on her tongue.

"Suck," he demanded, and Hermione closed her mouth around his fingers. It tasted mild, though the texture was a little strange. But it wasn't *bad*, and now she understood the whispers from other girls about swallowing. It might not be *pleasant*, but it wasn't terrible either.

Draco wasn't even blinking as he watched, and when he finally removed his fingers he allowed that same hand to drift back down between her legs.

"Your reward now, yes? For being my perfect girl."

Hermione felt herself warming at the praise. She always felt a bit wrong-footed about sexual things, but this had been good. She had obviously done exactly what he wanted. She felt

proud of herself for managing this without any panic. Draco was pleased, and now she knew he would be generous to her.

"*Please Draco*," she said, "I want it..." and sure enough Draco groaned as he picked up his pace.

He was affected by it, and heaven help her but she was too. He did not hold back from her this time, and it built quickly until she was groaning for it, wriggling, getting ever closer.

"I want to give you everything, Hermione. Say you'll let me do it. You'll accept it. And then you'll stay here with me and be mine."

She scarcely heard the words he was saying to her now, but she cried out her agreement just as she broke.

"*Fuck...*" he whispered with that same reverence that reminded her of the first time she orgasmed for him. "More, my darling..."

And sure enough, he didn't stop and then *it* didn't stop, and Hermione continued to float as wave after wave washed over her. It was like nothing she had ever experienced before.

By the time it was done, she was trembling and boneless, and Draco slid down next to her, licking his fingers clean. She felt his hardness press into her again. Evidently he was ready for another round. But to her surprise and slight relief he didn't press her for it. Instead he nestled into her and laid his head on her pillow, breathing in the scent of them together.

"You're exceptional," he said. "An absolute dream come true."

She turned her head and looked at him hazily, feeling a little shy again. His spend was still on her chest, and it was starting to dry.

"So you're my boyfriend, then?"

He smiled broadly. "Obviously I'm your boyfriend."

He raised his head to look at her chest one last time and seemed to shudder.

"And I'll admit, being your boyfriend has some *fantastic* perks," he added.

Hermione gave a small laugh. "It's sticky."

"It's perfect," he retorted. "I want you to stay just like this until after I leave. My last image as I walk away is going to be you topless and coated."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his dramatics. "It's only three days, Draco."

He turned serious. "I know that. But it's three days too long. I don't want to go."

Hermione softened and reached up to give him a kiss. "Fine. Then I can be sticky for a little longer."

He relaxed into a smile. "Good. Now stay right there for a minute. I need to get something."

Hermione watched curiously as he rolled out of bed and disappeared into his room, returning moments later with a medium-sized flat box. He sat on the edge of the bed as he handed it to her, and Hermione pulled the sheet over her as she sat up. Draco, of course, nudged it back down so he could look.

Hermione flushed a little, but she let him do it. He had seen her now. It still felt a bit exposed like this, but it wasn't as jarring as the night before. Besides, she really *was* sticky. Getting more of it on the sheets was not at all appealing, and Hermione made a mental note to ask Poppy to change them for her today.

"I was going to wait and give this to you once your Aquila transformation was complete, but I don't want you to be without them while I'm gone. It's coming along well enough that I know you'll be able to do it soon."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at him, wondering what this could be.

"Don't tell me it's another necklace," she said, touching her Columba pendant a bit possessively. She wasn't keen on taking it off, even if it was for another gift he was giving her. She wore it around the clock now, both for the protection it gave her and the meaning behind it.

He smiled knowingly and nodded toward the box. "It's not a necklace. But you should see for yourself."

Hermione slowly unwrapped the package and found a wooden box, with the Malfoy family crest on it. She looked at him questioningly, but he gestured for her to continue, and she slowly raised the lid to find a pair of matching daggers, beautifully wrought with gold inlaid in the hilt in a design that looked almost like folded wings. The design was old, but the blades were pristine.

She looked at him with wide eyes, but he just smiled. "I thought it was appropriate for Aquila. They were made for an Aquila, after all... another one of my ancestors who lived up to her name, though this one happened to be a Malfoy and not a Black. Her name actually referenced the standard for the Roman legions, not the constellation, though of course they were both eagles. Family legend has it that she maimed and murdered several people with these."

Hermione hesitated a little at this, but then reached out to touch them, and they seemed to glow just a bit. She blinked in surprise.

"They're enchanted and goblin made," he explained. "They've been passed down for centuries, but they are women's blades, and nobody has used them in at least a hundred years. Now that you've touched them they will be keyed to your magic for life. Nobody will be able to take them from you while they are on your person unless you hand them over willingly. And the size should be perfect – you are rather petite. They will perform better for you than the ones you've been practicing with."

She could scarcely believe it. Only Draco Malfoy would give his girlfriend antique fighting knives as a gift. Then again, something about them called to her. They were stunning in their craftsmanship, like small works of art. And he was right that they would be the perfect size for her and incredibly useful since they were goblin made. Hermione had studied up on goblin blades and armor after Harry inherited the Sword of Gryffindor from Dumbledore. She knew they were very valuable and rather rare. They never went dull or tarnished. The Sword of Gryffindor was the only one she had ever seen in person, until now.

She grasped one of the daggers and pulled it out of the case, noting the size and balance and weight. She palmed it, trying a few grips with it, and then looked up to find him watching her with satisfaction.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I love them," she said. "You're absolutely right that they are fitting for Aquila."

He grinned broadly and leaned down to kiss her. "Good. I must say, giving them to you like this... well, I'm pretty sure I would come all over you again if you put that knife to my throat right now."

Hermione huffed a small laugh. "I think I have enough on me, thanks."

"Shame," he said, as he reached for the knife she was holding, and Hermione handed it to him. She felt the magic thrum, as though testing her willingness to part with it, before it released into Draco's hand. He palmed the knife, then gently pushed her back against the headboard before he trailed the flat edge of it down her body once more.

"This, right here, is a truly spectacular vision," he murmured, as he moved the sheet and quilt off of her so he could see everything clearly.

"Show me how wet you are," he said, as the blade moved down her stomach, and he nudged the edge of her knickers with the point.

Hermione took a deep breath, focused on her confidence from Aquila, and then drew her knees up and allowed them to fall open in front of him. She felt impossibly wet all over, as he slid the flat side of the knife gently over her mound.

"Someday I want to cut your clothes off," he murmured thoughtfully. "My knives have already marked you, haven't they? You're branded. You're mine. I'm the only one who gets to touch you like this. And the day I finally cut off your knickers to reveal that hot little cunt it's going to make you drenched for me, isn't it? You know I'll never hurt you. Not even a scratch. But you're a Gryffindor. You're Aquila. You enjoy the risk of being under my knife."

"Draco..." she groaned. He was getting her going again, and she scarcely understood *why* this turned her on so much. It should frighten her, but he had trained this fear out of her. Feeling a dagger against her skin was no longer terrifying, not when Draco was the one holding it.

"Look at that..." he tsked. "My greedy girl. Your knickers are getting wet again, my darling."

"Please Draco..." she sighed.

Draco gave a dark chuckle and then pressed the flat edge firmly against her cunt. She struggled to control her breathing, as she began to tremble just a bit. Draco, however, seemed to sense she wasn't trembling with fear. It was need.

"Soak it all up," he said, as he used the small dagger against the fabric to carefully rub the tiniest of circles into her wetness. When he finally pulled the knife away, Hermione opened her eyes to find him staring between her legs, his head cocked as though studying his handiwork.

"This is so beautiful," he said with a contented sigh. "Pretty satin knickers with that adorable little bow on top. Light pink, to match the ribbon in your hair of course. Poppy gives you matching underthings whenever possible. I'm sure you've noticed. She always makes sure your bows match your outfits. And then she makes sure your bra and knickers match your bows whenever your ribbon color cooperates. She informs me every time she does it. That always gives me a hint about what you're wearing underneath."

Hermione never bothered with this herself, but she *had* noticed this happened rather frequently whenever Poppy laid out clothes for her. Just like her ribbons, she had a seemingly endless supply of knickers and bras, all delicate and very feminine and in every shade the rainbow, though the colors were all quite pale. Poppy matched everything more often than not, and the rare times she couldn't manage it Hermione always wore the pastel version of her ribbon color. It was true she had a few pieces of black and navy lingerie, but it was held separately. She had never worn any of it, and she only opened that drawer to look at it again as she considered the best way to seduce Draco the night before. Eventually she dismissed the lingerie because she felt it would make her intentions too obvious. But she had spent real time examining the pieces and noted that even at his most debauched, Draco seemed to have a strong preference for whites and light pinks and baby blues. The black, navy, and emerald green options were scant by comparison, and the red she had seen on her first day at the Manor was missing entirely.

After everything she had learned about Draco Malfoy it no longer surprised her to learn that he had been intentional about matching her ribbons and her knickers from the beginning. She took a deep breath as she watched him study her between her legs, and she made herself let him look.

He seems to love it. He's not turned off by anything he sees. Be like Aquila and let him look, Hermione.

"That section of fabric between your legs is a completely different color now, isn't it, darling girl? You did such a good job soaking them through for me, and now it's a much darker pink than everything else. Imagine what it would be like if my cum was inside of you too. I think these knickers would hold it in pretty well, don't you? Or do you think it would spill out and run down those lovely thighs instead?"

"Oh God..." she groaned, and she unconsciously pressed her hips toward him, in a plea to do *something*.

But Draco just smirked and shook his head. "No can do, I'm afraid. I know your little cunt is swollen and aching, but unfortunately there's no time. I need to leave soon, and we must discuss the rules before I go."

"The rules?" she said in dismay. That string in her belly was as taught as it had ever been. She couldn't *believe* he was about to leave her hanging like this.

"The rules," he said firmly, as he placed the knife back on her nightstand. "I've kept the outer wards up around the wing, but I unwarded your door before you woke up this morning so that you can practice with your new knives in the training room and visit Ginny and Luna if you wish. But since I took down that layer of wards, I want you to wear the knives at all times while I'm gone, okay? Even while you are sleeping. Nothing should happen, but it will make me feel better."

Hermione struggled to focus on what he was saying. That feeling of wetness over her entire body was awfully distracting, and he was still holding her knees apart and openly admiring her while speaking. She needed friction, pressure, *something*.

"And the door to the patio..." she forced herself to say.

"It's locked and warded, but before you woke up I unwarded the small window in the training room so that you can sneak out and watch Mother's party. Transform there first, and please keep it closed and locked when you are inside the Manor. There's no reason anybody should discover it, but it's the weakest point."

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. It was a good plan, or at least she thought it would be a good plan if she could focus on it properly. The training room had a single window that was very narrow and several stories high. It would be nearly impossible for a person to slip through it, unless they were an animagus like Hermione.

"If anything feels off at the party, abandon it. I don't want you doing anything dangerous. And if anything happens and you need us, call Theo through your bond."

"You think it will work that far?" she asked breathlessly, as she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to force her frustration back down.

"I'll tell Theo to test it as soon as he gets there, but I don't see why not."

"Alright."

"And Poppy can get you anything else you need and—"

She opened her eyes again and saw that he looked slightly manic now. Something about it broke through her own haze, and she reached up to cover his mouth with her hand. "*Draco*. It will be fine. I've been living here for months and nobody has attempted to break in a single time. Ginny, Luna, and I will have three days to practice our targets and animagi forms, and I'll sneak away for a few hours for the garden party. That's it. Don't *worry*."

"I always worry," he said under her hand.

She pulled it away and leaned forward to kiss him before pressing her center toward him again in the hopes he would take the hint and cut off her knickers like he had suggested. God, but she was wonton like this.

"I know you do," she said against his lips. "But we'll be fine, and if the bond with Theo still works then I can summon him in a moment if there is an emergency."

Unfortunately he did not take her hint, and he kissed her back gently before cupping both cheeks in his hands. "Be sure that you do. Merlin, I hate this..."

He kissed her again until she was dizzy before breaking away.

"Wear the knives," he said sternly. "And if anybody gives you any trouble at the party, gut them. I don't care who it is. I need to go, but I'll see you in three days, my darling, and then we will pick up where we left off."

"Wait... *please*..." she said, one more time.

Draco, however, glanced down at her and then back up at her face. His expression had turned shrewd, almost calculating, before he moved so quickly that Hermione gasped in surprise. He was between her legs now, covering her center with his entire hand. His erection was pressing into her stomach, straining the fabric of his underwear. He was so hard that the large thing he was pressing into her abdomen was slightly painful as his face came within an inch of hers.

"You think this is easy for me?" he asked, as he massaged her knickers into her further, making her gasp. "You think I want to leave you, *ever*, especially when you're fucking panting for it?"

"Then why not—" she started, but he cut her off.

"Because now is not the time," he said. "I have to be there within the next ten minutes, and I'm not even dressed yet. But this is what you're going to do. You're going to take a little time and imagine all the things I want to do to you. You're going to think about my knife on your skin, shredding your underthings to make you naked for me until there is nothing left. You're going to imagine my face between your thighs and my tongue so far inside of you I'm gagging on your cunt. You're going to envision laying back and spreading your legs for me while I fuck you into the mattress. And finally, you're going to think about my cum running out of you, a fucking *millennia's* worth of Malfoy purity coating every intimate part, before I use my fingers to shove it back inside. You're going to think about all of it, and it's going to scare you just a little bit, but then you'll remember that I'm the one who gets to have your fear. That means you'll let me do it anyway, and once you trust me with it, you'll come so hard you'll see galaxies. Imagine all of it my little dove, and once you feel so wet you want to combust, you're going to take your knickers off and tell Poppy to leave them in my nightstand at Nott Castle so I can examine them as soon as I'm able to break away from the Dark Lord. But you will not touch yourself. That's my pleasure, and it has to wait until I return."

And with that missive Draco released her, ignoring Hermione's wide-eyed stare. He took one last look at her bare breasts and open legs before he shuddered and turned to stride into his room.

When his door shut, Hermione slumped against the headboard, still shaking as she imagined all the things he told her to think about. To her consternation, she did become even more sodden, and now she was *certain* the sheets would need to be changed before she slept in this bed again.

He was such an intense person, and every bit of it was focused on her when they were like this together. Hermione struggled to control her breathing, as she slowly came down from the peak of her frustration. She was still woefully unsatisfied, but that knot in her belly would loosen eventually. She thought she might have a bath after she called for Poppy to take her knickers to Draco.

She blushed at the thought, but she knew she would do it. Aquila gave her the confidence and Columba gave her the desire to please him. Somehow she just knew he would hold them up tonight and stare at them because he couldn't stare at her.

After several long minutes, she finally vanished the mess on her chest with a wave of her hand and then rolled out of bed to dress. She blushed as she hooked her fingers into the elastic of her ruined knickers and began to tug. She was just pulling them down when she thought she heard the roar of a fire that told her Draco had left the Manor, or at least his wing of it.

Something about it made her pause, knickers around her knees, as she considered this curious sound. Perhaps she found it so strange because she didn't know there was a second floo connection in their warded wing. She had never heard it activate in all the times Draco had visited Voldemort. He must have floo'd directly from his bedroom because he was running behind schedule or perhaps he feared waking the others in the Manor. And only then did she realize that she had *never* been curious about his bedroom in all the months she had lived there. She had never been inside of it. She had never looked through his window as a bird. She had never even thought to ask him about it.

She straightened up, and her knickers fell to the floor in a damp heap, but Hermione wasn't thinking about them at all anymore.

She was thinking about Draco's bedroom, until she wasn't. She couldn't seem to hold onto the thought. Her curiosity simply drained out her, like water from a sieve.

No, she wasn't curious about Draco's bedroom at all.

How very curious indeed.

Hermione's bond with Theo did work all the way to Nott Castle, though it felt a bit like talking to each other at opposite ends of a cavernous room. They had a short conversation where he confirmed that all three of them had arrived and were meeting Voldemort soon, and then Theo tried siphoning the anxiety that spiked in Hermione after he told her this. It helped calm her down, though she was still a bit on edge.

After Hermione's odd observation about Draco's bedroom, she called Poppy to deliver the promised knickers and then turned to study the door connecting their rooms. She tried to open it for the first time since she moved in, but it wouldn't budge. It had a small cat door that Crookshanks frequently used, but she was thwarted by it. Even when she transformed into Columba and tried to fly through the cat door it didn't work. He had added an antianimagi ward to it.

He was actively keeping her out.

His exterior door to the hallway was warded the same way. Each time she touched one of the doors she felt her interest wane when she really focused on it – and this told her that her natural curiosity was being magically depleted. It wasn't a Notice-Me-Not, precisely, because she could still *see* both doors. She knew where they were, and she could approach them and touch them and knock on them. In other words, she could summon Draco whenever he was on the other side of them. But the room behind those doors held no interest for her, and in that respect it had a similar effect as a Notice-Me-Not in that it was something her mind couldn't seem to actively *think* about without significant effort. She didn't recognize the charm that caused this, but she took to calling it an Ignore Me charm in her mind. That's precisely what she had been doing for months, after all.

When she slipped out to investigate the wing by herself for the first time, she discovered that his upper study was also locked and warded and had the same Ignore Me charm placed on it. But the training room was open, just as Draco had promised.

Theo and Blaise had left both of their rooms open too, though Hermione knew they slept with Luna and Ginny at night, so there was no reason for them to keep those spaces locked and hidden away anymore. Much like Draco's and Hermione's arrangement, each pair of bedrooms had a connecting door between them. All four of her friends' rooms were approximately the same size – well proportioned and large, but not enormous like Hermione's. And none of them had the added parlor space that Hermione enjoyed.

The other two couples had moved in together in a more permanent way than Hermione and Draco had thus far. Whereas Draco spent an ample amount of time in her room and slept there now, his clothes and other belongings still resided in that mysterious bedroom that Hermione had to force herself to be curious about. For the others, their moves had been complete with all belongings consolidated into a single space. The extra connecting bedroom then became free for whatever they wished.

Blaise and Ginny's extra room had been converted to a small parlor to mimic the space Hermione had. She noticed it was filled with things from the Burrow that the wizards had

collected, and it made Hermione almost nostalgic to see it. Theo's and Luna's spare room looked much like a study and had extra shelves added for a miniature library. The colors in all four rooms were precisely what Hermione would have expected when she first arrived: dark woods and light green wallpaper, along with silver fixtures and the occasional snake motif. The rooms contained some personal touches to be sure, but nothing to the extent of Hermione's room.

Her blue, white, and gold room was clearly an anomaly in several different ways.

She casually asked Ginny and Luna if they had ever been into Draco's bedroom, and both of them looked at her like she had three heads.

"No," said Ginny. "Why would I?"

Hermione shrugged. "I was just wondering. I thought Theo and Blaise had been in it before."

Ginny and Luna agreed that the other wizards *had* been in it before, and this raised even more questions for Hermione. While it was true that the wizards were his best friends, why hadn't she been invited in too?

She mulled this over – as much as the magic would allow her to at any rate – while the first day slipped away. Theo checked in on her a few more times and reported that Draco had managed a kill with one of his hawks that impressed Voldemort, and Blaise's horsemanship was admired.

All three of them had set the stage for the girls to arrive at a later hunt. Draco let it be known he was training a golden eagle and hoped to have her ready to hunt soon, which apparently made many of the other Death Eaters jealous. Theo mentioned he was training a new hunting dog, and Blaise announced he was breaking in a new horse that was an expert jumper. Ginny blanched a bit when she heard this news ("*Why the hell is he saying I'm a good jumper when I haven't even finished the transformation yet?*"). Voldemort seemed gratified that they were excited to return with their new animals for a later weekend, and not for the first time Hermione considered just how absurd this was. It was especially true when her initial suspicions that he would host hunts during the day and revels at night proved correct, as Theo reached out to her that evening.

There's a revel tonight. There will probably be a couple challenges that will end in boons being redistributed, and we've heard a few prisoners will be given away for pleasure before they are tortured and killed at the end of the night. I suppose the prostitutes will be there too. Tell Luna and Ginny that none of us are interested, and we just plan to gamble instead.

All three girls grimaced a bit when Hermione conveyed his message, but they trusted their wizards to behave themselves. Sure enough, Theo chimed in again late that night with an update.

Cassius Warrington made the huge mistake of challenging Draco for you, and Draco nearly killed him and then took one of his hands for it in retaliation. I don't know what the fuck he was thinking, but you don't have anything to worry about on that front ever again. Blaise

and I also engaged in a little prisoner torture to reinforce the message not to fuck with us either. Please let Luna and Ginny know so they aren't worried. The only other notable thing that happened was Adrian Pucey lost his boon to Marcus Flint. I doubt Pansy knows about it because she made him give up his last one. Draco wants me to tell you he misses you and wishes you were here.

That's very violent, Theo.

It had to be violent. It kept you safe.

I suppose you're right. I'll admit I'm relieved he won.

There was never any question about that. Warrington must have forgotten why Draco rose as high as he did. He and the others won't forget again.

So we're all safe now?

Yes, all three of you are perfectly safe. Is everything alright there?

Yes. You can tell Draco I practiced with my new knives today, and I absolutely love them. My aim has never been better. I'm settled in for bed now and still wearing them like he asked. Please thank him for winning the challenge today. I don't want to be given to anybody else.

A few seconds later Hermione felt her palms tingle, and she smiled to herself. Draco had performed the tracking spell on her a few times that day, no doubt to make sure she was still alive and well within the wards of Malfoy Manor. This time, though, she knew Theo had just given him her message, and he was simply telling her goodnight.

Hermione pushed the thought of Warrington's missing hand out of her mind and tried to wonder about Draco's bedroom before she fell asleep, but the thought left her head the moment it hit the pillow.

Draco had been in a state of sweet agony since seeing Hermione's tits for the first time — he checked his watch — exactly thirty-eight hours ago. They were lovelier than he had ever imagined, her nipples a shade of pink just a touch darker than her lips. In fact, that precise shade of pink was so utterly perfect that he had instructed Poppy to replace Hermione's nail polish with something that matched so that every time he saw her hands going forward he would think of her nipples too.

Poppy was a valuable servant and was used to odd requests like this by now. She did not question her master's instructions of course. She also saw Hermione naked often enough that she assured Draco that she could find something suitable, and Miss Hermione's nails would be polished to Master's precise specifications by the time he returned from Nott Castle.

Draco reflexively touched the knickers in his pocket, his fingers quickly finding the gusset where her arousal had dried in a thick coat. The moment he arrived in his room the previous day he found them in the nightstand, still very damp due to the quantity she had produced. He studied every inch of them, and then came for the third time in two hours.

Because yes, obviously he had wanked himself to completion the moment he left her aching for release the day before. She was so close to exploding for him that ten minutes would have been plenty of time to get them both off before getting dressed, but Draco wanted her needy and thinking of him so he hadn't obliged. He, of course, required that glorious wank in order to focus around the Dark Lord, but she had no such obligations so he decided she could sit in it while Draco handled matters at Nott Manor. He set a personal record when he came in one minute and twenty-seven seconds as he recalled his knife on her cunt and his cum on her chest. He even had time for a few gulps of tea before he had to leave.

By the time he was done with the Dark Lord and found her knickers in his nightstand, he was perfectly ready for round three.

That one also took very little time as he remembered all the things he had done to her. At first he couldn't fucking believe she had gone along with it, but then he remembered she was absolutely perfect so of *course* she had gone along with it once she realized it was a fantasy of his. She would do nearly anything for him, hadn't she proven that already? She would kill for him, push the limits of her sexuality for him, and always forgive him...

Draco's stomach soured, and he forced that unwelcome thought away.

No. Stop it. Everything will be fine.

The problem, of course, was that every day they got closer together, and Draco both loved it and dreaded it in equal measure. He couldn't keep his secrets from her much longer. The guilt was starting to eat him alive, because something told him she wouldn't be pleased when she learned about everything he had done for her. But all of it was good, wasn't it? Every single thing he had done would give her protection and security. The Order had proven themselves to be utter shit when it came to taking care of Hermione, and Draco would never trust them to do it again. It was his responsibility, his *privilege* to fill that role for her, even if she wasn't aware of most of it.

She had said she would accept the things he could give her. It was true, he had been edging her at the time, but she still said it, didn't she? Then again, maybe she didn't know *what* she was saying. Draco himself had almost blurted out all of his secrets while staring at his cum on her tits.

Fucking hell.

He grew harder as he remembered. She let him claim her in nearly every way a man could claim a woman, and Draco was certain it was only a matter of time now before she gave him her virginity too. Gods, but she was the most fuckable thing he had ever seen. He made a mental note to have a quick wank before he finally fucked her or else he would risk blowing his load the moment he felt her tight passage close around him.

And she was so tight... so *deliciously* tight. Thank Merlin she loved clitoral stimulation, because Draco typically got her off that way, with just gentle strokes inside of her to gauge how wet she was. Sure, he would always press on her G-spot a little bit. He had found it, and she really liked it. But he made a point not to stretch her too much whenever he touched it. She didn't need it to get off, and he just knew she would have the tightest little cunt he had ever plunged if he was careful with her until it was finally time.

He really needed to tell her everything before he finally fucked her, though. It was rather important if he was going to get her cooperation with the full scope of his plan.

His guilt spiked again, and he began to pace, rubbing on her knickers a bit harder to make himself calm down. He had been doing this ever since he left her early the previous morning: oscillating between a painful erection as he remembered that image of her nested in their bed, topless, needy, and dripping and crippling anxiety as he thought about her reaction when he finally confessed everything.

But it will be fine. Nothing about it is bad or harmful or even that objectionable. It will just surprise her, that's all. She will accept it. She will understand why I did it without telling her about it first. And she will be ready to know soon. I'm her boyfriend, now.

Truthfully, Draco considered himself to be far more than a boyfriend, but he celebrated the milestone anyway because it was something she had named all on her own. Hermione needed to take things slow, he had known that from the very beginning. The fact that she had suggested naming the thing happening between them had given him an enormous boost of confidence. It meant she was emotionally invested in him now. Everything was going beautifully.

But boyfriends and girlfriends could break up. That was why Draco needed even more from her. He wanted some sign that she viewed him as a permanent fixture in her life before he told her everything.

Soon. It will be soon. We just have to get through the weekend first with no disasters.

The potential for disaster, unfortunately, felt heightened this weekend. Perhaps that was why he was so on edge.

It had nothing to do with Warrington or other, routine Death Eater business. No, Draco had handled Warrington with an efficiency and brutality that seemed to stun the others. Draco knew to expect challenges now and then. The lower ranked Death Eaters were always vying for scraps, and Draco and friends were young and ranked ahead of most of the others. Then again, the other Death Eaters knew that Draco was very possessive over his boon, and he was surprised that Warrington was stupid enough to challenge Draco for her. Draco's only explanation for it was that Warrington must have been so driven by jealousy and a desire to warm his limp prick that he forgot what Draco was capable of.

Draco reminded him and everyone else who watched what happened to Death Eaters who threatened to take his Hermione away from him. Draco took a hand and then castrated him for daring to try. Theo assured him he did not mention that last bit to Hermione, of course. His darling girl was too sweet to worry herself with details like that.

But Warrington would be fine. Draco gave him the courtesy of not using a cursed knife, so his body parts could be magically grown back. The Dark Lord preferred nothing permanent happening during the challenges.

The thing making Draco on edge was being away from her. He didn't like any distance between them, especially not when she was about to undertake her first mission as an animagus. He certainly didn't want her fluttering around the fucking gardens all alone, which would surely be ripe with gossip. He wasn't exactly sure how it would fuck him over, but something told him that the garden party was a terrible idea. He had been resistant to it, but he couldn't tell Hermione the reasons he didn't want her to be there. He had backed himself into a corner with it and really had no choice but to let her attend.

And not only that, but now Draco had to look for that fucking snake and the invisibility cloak. Merlin knew what the Dark Lord would do if he got even the slightest hint of what Draco and the others were up to. Every time Draco thought about it he was torn between rage that Hermione had been given a suicide mission by Dumbledore and deep satisfaction that he had played her perfectly the night before because it meant he finally got to see her tits.

His darling girl was fairly manipulative when she wanted something, he had always known that. Draco had watched her lie and manipulate others for years at school, and he admired her skills. But Draco had studied Hermione intently since they were eleven years old, and that meant she was hopeless when it came to manipulating *him*.

Of course he let her believe she was doing it anyway because he thought it was the cutest thing he had ever seen when she turned her big hazel eyes on him and pretended to bite her lip. He immediately knew she was trying to seduce him to coax another name off his list.

Draco didn't really care about her mission, other than the fact that she was clearly determined to continue on with it, even if she had to do it alone. That would not be happening under Draco's watch, so he was glad he knew about it now. But the only reason he gave up Snape was because he had a small surplus of names, and he sensed she would reward him for it by finally letting him in a bit more.

It was true he hadn't banked on having to *kill* the fucking snake and steal from the Dark Lord as part of it, but he supposed he should have expected something like that. Hermione was the most unique and impressive witch he had ever met. It shouldn't have surprised him that she wouldn't give up her tits for something as mundane as Snape's life. No, he had to promise that he would hunt down the horcruxes and Hallows too before her nightgown came off.

It was certainly not *ideal*, but it did make her very cooperative. Draco decided that the opportunity to nut all over her tits made their deal worth it, even if he was somewhat reluctant to fulfill his end of the bargain.

Draco and the others would have to look for both the snake and cloak now, and there was no question that it was risky. They absolutely couldn't get caught or all three of them would die very painful deaths, and then the girls would be at risk of discovery.

At least Theo and Blaise had the same reaction that Draco did when he told them about it: utter horror and then resignation as they realized their witches would fucking *insist* that they help with this or else close their legs in retaliation. It wasn't that Draco wanted the Dark Lord

to be alive, but Draco was perfectly comfortable playing both sides so he was in no rush to hasten his demise. With the Dark Lord in power, Draco had a blanket license to torture whenever he needed to let off some steam, and Hermione was forced to be in hiding under Draco's protection. He quite liked both of those things, and once the Dark Lord died Draco knew the torture would have to end, and he worried that Hermione's stay with him would end too.

Especially if Pansy or Mother fucks me over at the garden party, and I'm forced to tell Hermione everything before I'm ready.

His stomach started churning again, and he began to pace faster than ever, rubbing her knickers for reassurance.

"Stop that, you're driving me mad," muttered Theo. He was perched on a nearby bed, flipping through *The Daily Prophet*. Draco knew that Theo was dragging his feet about the search for Nagini just as much as Draco was. They had put it off for the past hour or more.

Draco glared at his best mate before glancing down at the threadbare rug and sighing. Perhaps Theo was right: too much more of this, and he might wear a hole through it.

The rooms at Nott Castle were sparse and poorly furnished, but he and his friends knew which ones to select. They were smaller than most, but very private. The room they were in had been Draco's usual room while Tiberius was alive. Theo had always been stationed in one of the larger chambers while he was the heir, but he moved into a smaller room on the first floor once the castle was turned over to the Dark Lord. Blaise's usual room was immediately next door to Theo's. But all three had a tendency to dwell in Draco's room when they were here together. It was an end chamber and was afforded more privacy that way.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," muttered Draco.

"What was he supposed to do?" asked Blaise, who was lounging on a chair in the corner. Blaise was also not eager to begin the search for Nagini and had opted to light a cigar instead. He was blowing smoke rings as he considered the problem before them. "The entire reason you made Hermione learn to be a garden bird was to get another spy. You told her it was for garden parties. Theo simply pointed out that you can't turn around and *ban* her from garden parties now that her transformation is complete. She would want to know why."

"But she shouldn't go to this one!" insisted Draco, throwing his hands in the air. "Everyone will be there! *Everyone*."

"They all go to *all* of them mate, you know that," pointed out Theo. "If you didn't want Hermione to be there, you should have stuck with a single animagus form."

"You know why I needed her to learn two," he pointed out.

Theo rolled his eyes. "You could have just *asked* her to slice her palm open a second time. There was no need to do it as part of an animagus ritual."

Draco glared at him. "You know I hated that part. Besides, having a spy really *is* helpful. It's just..." he trailed off as he continued to pace and gripped his hair in his hands.

"It's just that you're afraid she will overhear something you don't want her to know."

"*Obviously*," said Draco, spinning around and glaring at him again. "I am so close to being able to tell her everything. She's into me now, I know she is. She even asked me to be her boyfriend yesterday! I just want to do it on my own time, that's all."

Theo sighed, and Blaise gave him a speculative look.

"What?" demanded Draco.

"I know you two have been plotting something," said Blaise, gesturing between them. "I don't want to know what it is, but I can guess. And if it's what I think it is, then you need to tell her soon, mate."

A muscle in Draco's jaw twitched. It was true that he and Theo had not let Blaise in on the things Draco had been arranging for Hermione, but his friend was no fool. He was familiar enough with ancient magic that Draco knew he would probably guess. Mercifully, Blaise was naturally circumspect and wasn't the type to push for things that weren't his business. Nor was he particularly bothered by secrets being kept from him. Draco knew it was because Blaise was intelligent and observant enough to usually figure things out on his own without having to be told.

"I *will*."

"I mean very soon," prompted Blaise. "Preferably after the garden party tomorrow when you get home."

Draco paused his pacing. "Why?" he asked suspiciously, as his stomach clenched again, and he fisted the knickers in his pocket.

It's too early for her to know.

Blaise shrugged. "I'm going to tie with Ginny if the Dark Lord will allow it. I plan to ask him before we leave tomorrow. You know I've been softening him up."

This news made Draco and Theo both stop what they were doing and look at Blaise with amazement.

"You're really going to..." started Draco.

"Yes," said Blaise. "If he will agree. She's Sacred Twenty-Eight, and he believes she's turned. I've risen high enough to ask, and Tracy Davis started making very obvious hints at the last fête. You know her father is rather high up. I want to head it off before the Dark Lord gets any bright ideas about matching us."

"You think Ginny will agree?" asked Theo curiously.

A flash of anxiety crossed Blaise's face, but he nodded. "I think so. She told me she loves me. And you know we don't have to do the rest of it right away. We can wait a few years."

They fell silent, and Draco gave himself the luxury of feeling desperately jealous for just a brief moment. Blaise and even Theo were in a less precarious position than Draco was. Neither of them had family members who objected to their witch. Both of their witches were in love with them. Draco wanted that too, more than anything, but it hadn't been enough time.

She will fall in love with me soon. She has to. And Mother's opinions don't matter.

"Why does Draco need to tell Hermione then? Won't the Dark Lord be distracted by you and Ginny?" asked Theo.

Draco was pulled out of his ruminations by this question.

Blaise gave them both a piercing look.

"Yes, for *now*. But who do you think he will focus on once mine is done? I assume you will need time to bring Hermione on board once you tell her."

"Fuck you're right," groaned Theo, and Draco felt another lurch of nerves before he forced himself to breathe and think about it rationally.

"Look," he said, "let's see how the Dark Lord reacts to Blaise. And if I absolutely have to tell Hermione when we get back I will find a way to do it. But if it's not critical... well I'd really prefer to wait until she's in love with me. I think she will be there soon, and that should help smooth things over if she's displeased."

Both of his friends gave him sympathetic looks.

"Fair enough," agreed Theo. "I'll tell her to stay away from the younger ones at the garden party tomorrow."

"And there's no guarantee they will be gossiping anyway," said Blaise, in an effort to make Draco feel better.

At this Draco just snorted. "Are you kidding me? Pansy is going to be there. Of *course* they will be gossiping."

"We will keep her focused on the older witches," insisted Theo. "It will be fine."

"Merlin I hope so," muttered Draco, but somehow he just knew it *wasn't* going to be fine.

He muttered the silent tracking spell and closed his eyes to find her. Her precise location crystallized in his mind's eye, and he knew she was in her room at the Manor.

He breathed a sigh of relief, though he didn't know why. The party wasn't until the next day. He had nothing to worry about until then.

It will be fine. It's all going to be fine. Theo will keep her away from the younger ones, and we might get real intelligence we need from the older witches.

Even if she didn't stay with the older witches there was no reason to think the younger ones would be talking about him or the others. It wasn't like Draco and his friends were the center of the universe. Pansy was engaged, after all. Surely she would be talking about wedding plans and guest lists and other nonsense like that.

It will be fine. It will be fine. It will be fine.

Draco really wished he could believe it.

He gripped the knickers harder than ever and started to pace again.

The next day passed much like the first, though Theo reported that the three wizards had broken away for a time to search for Nagini. They had not found her, but Theo said the property was so extensive they had not searched the whole thing just yet, and they would try to leave the group the following day to continue looking as well.

He did report that Voldemort had worn the same buckle on his cloak two days in a row, despite the fact that the cloak itself was different each day. It was wrought in gold and shaped into a serpent. They had not found a way to cast the detection spell on it without him noticing it, but Theo said that if he wore it for the third day in a row they would suspect he had created at least one more horcrux. To their knowledge it was the only thing that had remained the same from one day to the next.

The invisibility cloak was nowhere to be found, but curiously Blaise had overheard Voldemort complaining about his wand to Bellatrix. He seemed to feel it was still no better than his original yew and phoenix feather wand, and in fact he had put it away in some undisclosed location and had taken to using his old wand again. This was a fascinating tidbit that sent Hermione's mind into a bit of a spiral, because she had thought that Snape was the Elder Wand's master after killing Dumbledore. Voldemort had tried to kill Snape in the Shrieking Shack, and that should have made the wand's power transfer to him, or so she thought. Then again, now that Harry was dead, Voldemort didn't seem to find the wand as critical as it had once been. It was surely the reason Voldemort didn't try to kill Snape a *second* time after the Battle of Hogwarts concluded. It *had* served its purpose in killing Harry, even if its powers didn't live up to the legend.

Once again Draco tracked Hermione a few times to make sure she was alright and then said goodnight with one lingering tingle to her palms. It didn't hurt, and it seemed to warm her from the inside.

The last day without Draco was Narcissa's garden party, and Hermione transformed early in the morning to flit around and watch the elves set everything up. She staked out several perches that were discreet – trees that had not yet lost their leaves and even a few bushes and shrubs with crevices where she would go unnoticed. Her hearing and eyesight were both better as Columba than as Hermione, so she didn't have to be terribly close to eavesdrop. The gardens were charmed to be warm, so guests could enjoy all of the autumn colors without any of the chill, and Hermione was delighted to discover a couple of new bird feeders filled with seeds and dried berries that she was almost certain Draco had left out for her.

Draco seemed to be on edge because he located her more often that day. Oddly enough, she could still feel it as Columba, though it was the pattern on her chest that tingled, and it wasn't as strong when she was in that form. She didn't know if this was because Columba only had one marking while Hermione had two, or if it had something to do with feeling the spell through feathers. Either way, it was fainter, though he did it so frequently she finally reached out to Theo in exasperation.

Tell Draco to bugger off please. I'm just doing some reconnaissance in the gardens before everyone gets here. I'm trying to find the best perches near the tables.

Sorry, but he's worried and in a foul mood. Please let him track you or the Dark Lord might notice he's off his game today.

Hermione mentally huffed, but Theo's warning about Voldemort struck true, and she ceased objecting. Hermione would not do anything to risk him.

By the time the party began he was being persistent, and Theo alerted Hermione to let her know that he and Draco were looking for the snake together so that she could give them real time updates.

Theo, that's ridiculous.

Please, Hermione, he's driving me mad. Can you just play along for my sanity?

Hermione mentally sighed and flittered to a nearby tree while she watched Narcissa greet her guests. She called out names as she heard Narcissa say them.

There's a Grace, Violet, Imelda, Anne, Liz, both Greengrass sisters, Pansy, Millicent, Cassandra, Tracy Davis, Pamela...

On and on she recited names until she finally asked, *Does Narcissa know I'm here? She's calling every single person by their first name.*

No, she doesn't know you're an animagus, said Theo. She just believes in a receiving line.

Of course she does.

Once the last guest arrived – which happened to be Nita – Theo gave her Draco's orders.

Don't worry about the younger ones. They won't have any good gossip, and Pansy reports anything they say back to Draco. Stick to Violet Parkinson and Anne Rosier. They've both been cold toward Narcissa recently, and they haven't told her anything in ages.

I don't know, Theo, the ones our age look like they're trying to break away from the others to talk about something.

Ignore them, please. They aren't the priority. We will hear about it from Pansy.

Hermione had to admit she was suspicious, and she kept one eye on Astoria in particular as she flitted toward Violet and Anne.

"...boons. I can't abide it. I know the Dark Lord intends to use them as nothing more than breeders eventually, but the men's heads are turning. I don't like it, Violet."

"I told Frederick that if he brought his home I would curse his line to be girls forever. He will never sire a boy who could claim the estate, not from me, not from *anybody*," said a surprisingly young woman who looked very much like Pansy Parkinson. Hermione wondered just how young she had been when Pansy was born.

Surely no older than seventeen or eighteen. She doesn't even look forty yet.

"At least Pansy has made her position clear with Marcus," Violet added. "He actually gave his boon up for her."

Anne nodded approvingly, and Hermione mentally snorted.

"When will the Dark Lord demand children?" asked Anne. "Have you heard? Because Evan's boon is just a child herself. It's positively degrading..."

"Hopefully no time soon. Many of them aren't even purebloods."

"Yes, but a few *are*. Evan seems to think that some of the younger Death Eaters plan to ask the Dark Lord for permission to tie and then *marry* their boons. They claim to have turned them. Can you imagine?"

Hermione ruffled her feathers in some discomfort at this.

"Surely he won't agree," said Violet, who was frowning harder than ever.

"It's like anything else, Violet," said Anne knowingly. "It all depends on the favor they are currying with him."

"Well at least Pansy is properly engaged," said Violet with some relief. "Marcus is behaving himself, and Frederick and I are hopeful that this one will be a boy. This pregnancy has been different from Pansy and her sisters."

She patted her abdomen, which Hermione only now saw was just a bit swollen, and Anne gave her an approving nod, while Hermione mentally rolled her eyes.

“At least my son recently wed,” added Anne with some relief. “The Rosiers won’t have to suffer the indignity of a whore becoming his *wife*.”

The two women saw Narcissa approaching, and Hermione sank back into the leaves as she reached out to Theo.

Violet and Anne seem to think the boons are going to be used as breeders and that some of the younger Death Eaters want to marry their boons. You don’t happen to know anything about that do you?

She could practically feel Theo grimacing in her head.

We are aware of it and are handling it.

Who is getting married, Theo?

Blaise, if he’s lucky enough for both the Dark Lord and Ginny to agree.

Hermione blinked her little bird eyes in surprise and ruffled her feathers again.

Not you or Draco?

I told you we’re handling it.

I don’t know about this, Theo.

Look, don’t worry about it. We already know that news so keep listening or move on.

I really think I should go listen to Pansy and Daphne. They look like somebody died.

Don’t. It’s not worth your time.

Violet and Anne apparently weren’t worth my time either based on what you’re saying.

Please, Hermione, just stay away from them. It’s the older witches who have the gossip we can’t get from someone else.

Hermione shoved him out of her head at this, as a thought crossed her mind.

Were Theo and Draco trying to keep her away from the younger witches for some reason? Was *that* why Draco was apparently so on edge he was actively monitoring her conversation with Theo?

She felt Theo knocking on her connection, and she opened it tentatively.

Don’t shut me out.

I was flying, Theo, you’re distracting me when I’m in the air.

Who are you near now?

Liz and Mildred. They are the oldest, just like you wanted.

In reality, Hermione was fluttering toward the witches her age.

Good. What are they talking about?

Right now? Remedies for rheumatoid arthritis. I'll let you know if it turns interesting.

He fell silent as Hermione focused on the small group of younger Slytherin girls. They were standing in a circle, all in dress robes of various autumn colors, set apart from the older women.

“...sure you still want him?” said Pansy skeptically. “He’s changed.”

“Has he really?” asked Daphne wryly. “He’s never been a warm person, not even in bed — and let’s not forget he’s shagged several of us. We all tried to make him care, and it never worked. He’s always been a cold bastard.”

“The past doesn’t matter,” insisted Astoria. “He’s the best for me, and Narcissa is in favor. He will come around or we will force the issue.”

Draco. They were talking about Draco. Draco, who had evidently shagged multiple girls who were at the party.

Hermione knew his past shouldn't matter, but she still felt ill when she considered it. She hated the thought of him with other girls, and it made her feel more self-conscious than ever. Before that moment she had felt proud of herself for their last encounter together. It had been exciting, enjoyable, and she didn't panic a single time, not even when he touched her *down there* with her knife. But she was still so inexperienced. What if she wasn't as good at sexual things as the other girls were?

But Daphne said he's always been cold to them. He hasn't been cold to me since I arrived at the Manor. Surely he wasn't pretending.

That seed of doubt was planted though, and Hermione's stomach twisted in knots as she began to worry.

“And how will you force the issue?” demanded Pansy. “Because I’m pretty sure he killed Lucius so he wouldn’t have to go through with it, Tori.”

Hermione went cold, and this news was shocking enough to put aside her sudden fear that Draco would compare her to the other girls and find her lacking.

No. Surely not.

“He didn’t kill Lucius, Pans,” said Astoria, rolling her eyes. “A member of the resistance did it.”

“Did they? Because it seems awfully convenient that Lucius and Tiberius just so happened to die standing right next to each other and Draco and Theo just so happened to be the Death

Eaters who found them.”

Oh my God.

Hermione had never liked Pansy, but she knew that Pansy had always been close to Draco. They still visited each other on occasion. If Pansy thought Draco had killed Lucius, then Hermione was inclined to believe her. Hermione had no love for Lucius Malfoy, but then again... what kind of person could murder one of their parents?

People like Voldemort.

Voldemort had murdered his father. Had Draco done the same thing? Had *Theo*?

Hermione’s mind was spinning, and she barely registered Theo knocking on their bond.

What’s going on now, Sis?

Hermione scrambled to think of something to say.

Remedies for stomach troubles, she invented wildly.

Maybe you should go somewhere else.

It’s only been a few minutes, be patient.

He fell silent again, and she refocused on the girls.

“...don’t believe it. I know he has a capacity for violence, but he would *never* have done something like that.”

Pansy seemed skeptical. “I know him the best out of all of us, and the fact that he killed Hermione Granger means he’s turned dangerous. I never would have dreamed he would actually go through with it, but the fact that he did means that he truly cares for nobody but himself.”

Astoria huffed. “She was a mudblood.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “It doesn't matter that she was a mudblood, he was obsessed with her for years. I *know* I’m not the only person who noticed.”

Daphne, Milicent, and Tracy were all giving Astoria slightly sympathetic looks that told Hermione they had all noticed too, and this might not have been the first time they had talked about it. It was a strange feeling to know they had all observed this when Hermione herself had been ignorant, but it did make her feel a bit more confident in their relationship. Perhaps Draco really *wasn’t* thinking of the other girls when he was in bed with Hermione.

“Well it doesn’t matter, does it?” asked Astoria a little bitterly. “Because she’s dead.”

“But that’s my point,” insisted Pansy. “If he killed her, he might kill you too, Tori, especially if you think you’re going to get him to give up his boon.”

“Narcissa assures me he will once the engagement is official.”

It sounded as though Draco wasn't engaged yet, but he was well on his way. And he hadn't told Hermione about it. Of course not, he knew she would halt whatever was growing between them if she knew. He even said he was her boyfriend only a couple days ago, but was he really? Or was he just playing along to get the things he wanted from her?

Hermione felt sick. So sick. She didn't want to hear anymore, but she couldn't stop herself.

“Marcus thinks he's keeping her in the Manor, Tori. He has seen them out together and says that Draco's infatuated with her,” said Pansy almost gently. “And unlike Granger, she's apparently a pureblood from the continent so he makes no effort to hide how much he wants her. He controls everything now that Lucius is dead. Narcissa is not going to be able to stop him from having her.”

“She *will*,” and Astoria actually stomped her foot at this.

Pansy gave her a politely skeptical look. “If you say so. But I don't know how you think you're going to get him to agree to an engagement in the first place. According to Marcus, Draco made it clear he has no interest.”

Hermione's heart lifted ever so slightly to hear this.

Astoria scowled. “Narcissa and I have a plan. I'm not at liberty to disclose it, but—”

“Ladies,” said the sharp voice of Narcissa, and Hermione gave a little hop of surprise. “You should mingle.”

She gave a stern look toward Astoria in particular, and all the girls murmured apologies and began to disperse.

Hermione, what's going on? came Theo's voice through the bond.

I'm moving on. They are talking about hip replacements.

Which group are you visiting next?

You tell me. All the Slytherins our age have split and are mingling with the older guests. I assume you and Draco want me to stay away from Pansy, Daphne, and Astoria right?

Hermione...

Please, Theo. Don't. You weren't subtle at all. I'm blocking you now. I'll see you both tomorrow, and we can debrief all the fascinating things I've just heard.

She pushed him out, and a moment later Hermione felt the tingling on her chest that told her Draco was checking her location. She scowled to herself, but she didn't think he would leave Voldemort, at least not yet. He would never be able to explain his presence with the party ongoing.

She watched as all but Daphne and Astoria moved off, and then Daphne gripped her sister's arm and pulled hard.

"Ouch! Bugger," said Astoria, as her robes got caught on a nearby bramble. It tore, and Astoria turned to look at Daphne furiously.

"What is your problem!"

"Sorry, but we need to talk, Tori! What if Pansy is right?"

Astoria huffed and disentangled her robes before letting Daphne pull her to a secluded area near the garden wall.

Hermione fluttered as close as she dared and saw Astoria cross her arms and look at Daphne mulishly.

"Talk then," she demanded.

Daphne looked pale and a bit stressed. "It's just... he's *dangerous* Tori! And if you force the issue, I'm afraid he would actually hurt you!"

"He won't," said Astoria, rolling her eyes. "He's warmer with me than the others. He's usually kind and charming. Narcissa is in favor. Even the *Dark Lord* is in favor. Draco would never dare cross him, you know that."

He's warm around Astoria too. I saw it for myself, didn't I?

She tried to push the unwelcome thoughts away. Surely he didn't treat Astoria the same way as Hermione. He lavished praise and attention on Hermione at every opportunity. He might also be charming around Astoria in public, but it didn't mean anything. He was in Hermione's bed every night, and he seemed determined to keep her all for himself. Surely, *surely* Astoria was just being hopelessly optimistic.

But Astoria's not a boon, and I am. And he's always kept secrets from me. He's never told me the whole truth.

"I think you're playing with fire, Tori."

Astoria threw her hands in the air. "I have to! You know I have to!"

"You don't," insisted Daphne. "You could just—"

"Just what? Became a *squib*?" she hissed.

Hermione blinked her beady eyes, and once again her surprise helped quiet her own mind for a moment. She focused all of her attention on Astoria.

"Shhh!" said Daphne. "You can't talk about that here!"

“And why not? The new wand doesn’t work well for me, we both know it! It doesn’t matter how powerful it supposedly is, I can hardly make sparks! The blood curse is taking everything from me, Daph! Every day my power gets a little weaker! We won’t be able to hide it for much longer, and I can have Draco in a matter of *weeks*. Once we’re engaged, I’ll be safe and nobody will notice that I never do magic!”

Hermione was both spellbound and horrified.

“But he still has to *marry you* too,” insisted Daphne. “Getting engaged isn’t everything!”

“Perhaps not, but Narcissa is not going to let him break the engagement when she performs the spell. He won’t have to marry me any time soon, but he won’t be able to marry anybody else either! You know we don’t need him to agree to it! We can do it behind his back!

Narcissa isn’t going to tell him about it until it’s time.”

Hermione felt Theo knocking frantically on their bond, but she didn’t answer. She could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

There truly *was* a plot to trap Draco into marriage, despite his young age and the fact that he was now the head of his own household. This was far more serious than another witch angling for her boyfriend, and Hermione forced her feelings about everything else she had heard that afternoon aside. She couldn’t doubt him now, not when Astoria and Narcissa were planning on using him like this. Hermione couldn’t understand how they intended to do it, but it was obvious to her that Draco didn’t know about it. She would have to trust that the things he said to her directly were true, even if there were secrets he had kept from her.

He said that I’m his whole world and his everything. That means Astoria is nothing. That’s why she’s plotting behind his back. It’s the only way she could have him.

Hermione couldn’t let him just fall into whatever trap Astoria was setting.

Hermione felt almost lightheaded as Theo was knocking harder than ever and the mark on Hermione’s chest began to tingle.

She nearly opened the connection to tell Theo what she had just learned, when something truly shocking made every other thought leave her mind.

Astoria Greengrass had just pulled out her new wand to show Daphne just how weak her magic had become. She was attempting to repair the small rip in her dress, and sure enough the wand wasn’t cooperating.

But it wasn’t her failure to perform magic that caught Hermione’s attention. No, after the thing she had just overheard Hermione would have expected a spell like this to fail.

The thing she was struggling to comprehend was the wand that Astoria was holding. It was ten and three-quarters inches long. It was made out of a light blonde wood and appeared to be carved. Hermione was certain the core was made out of dragon heartstring, even though she hadn’t seen it since that day she was caught by the Snatchers many months ago.

Astoria Greengrass was holding Hermione's wand.

Chapter 25: Madness

Chapter Notes

TW: Stalking and other adjacent creepiness. 🤪

Hermione couldn't tear her eyes off of the wand in Astoria's hand as a thousand questions hit her all at once. How had she gotten it? Who had given it to her? How long had she had it? Was Narcissa aware? Was *Draco*?

The last possibility threatened to break Hermione's heart because losing her wand all those months ago had been like losing a limb. She had adapted, of course. She carried Bellatrix's wand until the Battle of Hogwarts and had been largely without a wand ever since. It had not stopped her from doing magic. But wandless magic would never be a perfect substitute for somebody like Hermione who had trained with a wand from the day she first bought it at Ollivander's. Draco had refused to acquire one for her, and Hermione was sure it was because he was afraid she could break his wards if she wielded one. Hermione had been resentful of it whenever she allowed herself to think about it, but like most things when it came to Draco she had eventually repressed it and let it slide.

Hermione knew that this time it was different.

Instinctively she felt that failing to acquire a new wand for her and allowing her *actual* wand to be used by somebody else were two entirely different things. The first was irritating. The second, intolerable. The fact that it was the witch who was trying to steal Draco all for herself rubbed salt into a suddenly gaping wound.

Surely he didn't know. He couldn't have known. She wouldn't put it past him to keep her wand under lock and key himself, but surely he would not allow *Astoria Greengrass* to carry it.

She briefly considered the possibility that Draco didn't know which wand was Hermione's, before she immediately dismissed it. He had made note of nearly everything about her, even meaningless things like how she took her tea. He certainly would have recognized her wand. The vinewood was incredibly distinctive and rare.

No. He couldn't have known about it. He *couldn't*.

As she stared at it, one of Hermione's earlier plans to use a garden party to acquire a wand came roaring back to the forefront of her mind, with a very specific modification: she would not be getting just any old wand. She would get *her* wand. And even though it would be two

on one, they were in a secluded part of the gardens. Daphne and Astoria were fussing over Astoria's robes. They were distracted, and Astoria was practically a muggle.

She could do this.

Adrenaline began to flood her small body as she fluttered down to the ground as quietly as she could. She settled behind the tree she had just been using to eavesdrop and focused on turning back into herself.

Hermione was grateful she had worn the same clothes she always donned for training today: a long-sleeved athletic shirt and yoga pants. She would be able to move quickly, while Daphne and Astoria would not.

Hermione closed her eyes and exhaled, shoving Theo's incessant attempts at connecting with her and her tingling palms as deep into her mind as she could. She had to be silent. She had to be calm. She had to focus.

She had to get her fucking wand back.

She sprang out from behind the tree and waved her hand to cast *silencio* in the little clearing where they were standing just as Daphne and Astoria looked up in confusion.

Their stunned disbelief to see Hermione alive gave her all the time she needed.

She wandlessly disarmed Astoria, and as the wand came flying toward her she immediately turned and sent a wandless *impedimenta* to Daphne, who had now recovered from her shock and was scrambling for her own wand. Hermione's spell connected, and Daphne's hand slowed long enough for Hermione's wand to finally reach her again. The moment her hand closed around it, a familiar, *enormous* rush of magic rolled through her, and both girls looked at her in terror as sparks practically poured out of the tip.

Astoria turned to run, and Hermione quickly and easily stunned her before turning toward Daphne, who had finally gotten to her wand and was slowly raising it to Hermione, her movements jerky as she fought Hermione's previous spell. With wild eyes she started to say, "*Avada—*"

"I don't think so," spat Hermione, as she dodged the poorly aimed spell, while casting her own stunner back at Daphne at the same time.

The spell connected so hard Daphne was lifted into the air and fell back against the nearby brick wall before slumping. Hermione stood over them, breathing hard as she stared down at the two unconscious girls.

"Right," she muttered to herself. "Next thing then."

She had to work quickly before anybody came to investigate. She pointed her wand at Astoria first, very tempted to wipe every single memory of Draco that she had, but she really couldn't take the time.

“*Obliviate*,” she whispered, and she wiped just the last few seconds of her attack, replacing it with a memory of the two girls stumbling and falling into the wall.

Hermione turned to Daphne next and did the same thing, before picking up a nearby stick and looking at it intently. She broke it to be approximately the same length as her wand and concentrated hard, casting several transfiguration spells to transform it into something that *looked* like her wand, though of course it would be useless. It would turn back into a stick tomorrow, but by then Hermione’s wand would be long gone, and Astoria would never get it back. Astoria’s magic was so poor Hermione doubted she would even notice before it turned back into a stick.

Satisfied that her duplicate was good enough, Hermione tucked it into Astoria’s pocket and then gripped her own wand hard as she canceled the silencing charm. Then she closed her eyes and transformed back into Columba, fluttering to a nearby branch to watch.

Only now did she realize that some of the adrenaline she had just been feeling must have leached to Theo, because she felt him pounding harder than ever on their bond. Hermione mentally prepared herself as she opened to him.

What? she demanded, as a flood of his own panicked emotions nearly made her fall off her perch.

What the fuck, Hermione? What have you been doing? I could practically feel your heart racing all the way over here, but —

It was nothing! Just had to make a quick escape, that’s all.

Escape? Escape from what? You’re at a bloody garden party!

An owl, she invented wildly. She absolutely would not be telling either one of them she had her wand back, not until she was certain that Draco had been unaware of who had it. *I nearly collided with one. It just really startled me, that’s all, and I lost control of Columba’s flight instinct for a moment. It’s fine.*

You’re a terrible liar. Something happened, and you’re not telling us what it is.

Hermione felt inordinately angry all of a sudden.

Well pardon me if I prefer to keep some things to myself! After all, Draco has been pretty quiet about the fact that he somehow managed to shag most of the witches under the age of twenty-five who are here! And if you want to talk about terrible liars, telling me that the witches our age have nothing interesting to say is one of the least believable things you could have possibly come up with!

Hermione...

Theo sounded tense, but Hermione wasn’t having it.

Shut it, Theo, I’m obviously fine. Nobody knows I’m here, and nothing has gone wrong except for learning a lot of things about your best friend that I wish I didn’t know.

She shoved him out hard, until the following tingle in her chest made her open the connection again.

And tell Draco to stop casting that ridiculous tracking spell! I'm in the gardens, just like I've been the last fifteen times he has cast it!

She closed the connection again, and the tingling finally stopped.

Hermione was stewing as she sat in the trees and watched. Draco was evidently on the brink of becoming engaged, whether he wanted to be or not. Astoria Greengrass had a blood curse that was draining her magic. She planned to trap Draco into an engagement within the next few weeks to hide it. She had been using Hermione's wand to try to enhance what little magic she had left. And Draco was a slag.

The wheres and whats and whens of it sent her thoughts spinning and made her temper volatile as she waited for somebody to finally arrive and discover the girls.

It took nearly fifteen minutes before somebody did arrive, and Hermione was mentally grumbling about the fact that she wasn't prophetic. It would have been plenty of time to do a more thorough obliviation on Astoria to remove any memory of Draco at all. As it was, when Pansy Parkinson turned the corner and let out a cry of alarm, several others came rushing over and stared at the two girls in confusion.

"What on earth?" asked Narcissa, as she pushed forward to the front. Hermione backed away slowly into the foliage so that nobody would notice her.

"Someone attacked them, Narcissa!" cried Pansy. "They've both been stunned!"

She dropped to her knees and revived them both. They sat up blinking, looking at each other and the small circle of witches around them in confusion.

"What happened?" asked Daphne.

Pansy looked at her blankly. "You don't remember?"

Daphne looked dazed and shook her head. "No. I think we fell into the wall, but it's hazy..."

"Must have struck their heads, poor things," tutted a witch whom Hermione couldn't clearly see from her hiding place.

"Yes, of course," said Narcissa firmly. "No doubt they fell and hit their heads against that wall. We must be getting you both back to the Manor."

"But I really think somebody—" started Pansy.

"And I do *not*," said Narcissa sternly. "Our wards are impenetrable. They clearly just fell and hit their heads."

Hermione caught a flash of Pansy's face, and she looked deeply skeptical about this, but evidently she wasn't willing to openly question Narcissa. She fell silent, and Hermione saw

several uneasy looks on the faces of the others as Narcissa sent them ahead of her.

“I must speak to one of the elves about moving the party indoors so that dear Daphne and Astoria can still participate while they are resting. I’ll join you all in a moment.”

The group wandered off, leaving Narcissa alone and looking around the small clearing warily.

“You can come out now Miss Granger.”

Fear shot through Hermione, and she knew Theo sensed it because he started to knock on their bond again. She opened it for a mere moment.

It’s nothing. Stay out!

She shut it again and weighed her options. Should she reveal herself to Narcissa? Theo said she didn’t know that she was an animagus, and Hermione had no intention of showing her unless absolutely necessary. But perhaps...

Narcissa was peering behind a nearby tree, and Hermione used her moment of distraction to flutter to the ground and then transform back into her human form. She quickly stepped out from behind the tree she had been using, and the sound of her footsteps made Narcissa whip around.

The two witches said nothing for a moment as they stared at each other cautiously. Finally, Narcissa spoke.

“I’m shocked that Draco allowed you out.”

“He’s allowed me out before,” retorted Hermione.

Narcissa grimaced. “Yes. As his *boon*.”

Hermione felt her cheeks turn a bit pink, but she refused to let Narcissa shame her.

“I am his boon, that’s true. And not that it’s any of your business, but our relationship is complex and has not advanced to the physical activities that I’m sure you’re envisioning. In fact, it’s your son who is the promiscuous one. He’s no virgin, but I still am.”

Narcissa’s nostrils flared a little at this, and she seemed to be struggling to compose herself. Hermione raised one eyebrow.

“Very well. I would like to know what, precisely, you think you are doing here.”

“I’m sure you can guess,” said Hermione, trying her best to channel her inner Aquila and mimic every bit of arrogance she knew Draco possessed, despite the fact that she was angry with him.

“Spying,” said Narcissa.

“Ten points for Slytherin,” said Hermione sarcastically.

“And for what purpose? Draco knows that I report everything to him.”

“Do you? Because somehow I doubt he’s aware that you and Astoria are planning on trapping him into an engagement.”

Now it was Narcissa’s turn to raise an eyebrow as she cocked her head to study Hermione.

“Well you did a rather good job for a single garden party, I’ll grant you that. No doubt you have heard rumors about Astoria and Draco. Did you knock the Greengrass girls out so you could search their minds and learn the truth?”

That is precisely what Draco would have done.

“Something like that,” said Hermione evasively.

Narcissa turned a bit pensive. “I think you will find, my dear, that Draco is aware that I intend for him to marry Astoria.”

Hermione did everything she could to make sure her expression did not change, but internally her stomach was sinking.

“Oh?”

“Yes. He will become engaged on Samhain— or I suppose you call it Halloween, having been raised by muggles. The contract Lucius signed with Astoria’s father will allow me to step in at that point and... handle things for him.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“No, I’m sure you don’t,” she said a bit carelessly. “You’re a mudblood. I know my son has always been fascinated by you, and of course I adore your brother. But you were not raised in our world, my dear. It is not your fault, of course — we could only take one child that night, and it had to be the boy. But it does mean that you are woefully ignorant of our ways and would never be able to comprehend the intricacies of a pureblood engagement.”

The reminder that Narcissa Malfoy had been one of the people who had stolen Theo from her at birth made Hermione’s temper flare. Her magic crackled, and some wind blew through the clearing. Narcissa’s eyes narrowed again, though she straightened up as though steeling herself.

“Try me,” said Hermione.

Narcissa shrugged. “Perhaps it’s for the best. Very well then. As I said, Lucius executed a contract with Reginald Greengrass ensuring that House Malfoy would unite with House Greengrass. Draco was given a year to perform, and after that point *any* member of House Malfoy could stand in his place to tie him. Lucius had made it very clear to Draco that he would be engaged to Astoria one way or the other, so he might as well get on with it. But for some reason Draco dragged his feet, and then of course Lucius rather mysteriously turned up

dead during the Battle of Hogwarts. No doubt Draco believed I would be unwilling to stand in his place due to my fondness for him, but I'm afraid he's been naive. I *will* stand in his place when the year expires. As I said, we will be doing it on Samhain. The tie will be strengthened due to the ancient magic that will surround us that night."

The pit in Hermione's stomach was growing larger.

"But why?" she whispered.

"Because Astoria is a suitable match. She will balance him well."

"Astoria is losing her magic!" Hermione insisted. "She's practically a squib!"

A flash of humor crossed Narcissa's face at this. "It's rather amusing that somebody of muggle birth would find that state to be so offensive. I thought you were the champion of muggles, were you not? Perhaps the war changed you, my dear. In any event, it does not matter. You are correct that Astoria is practically a squib. That is the reason she is perfect."

Hermione was staring at Narcissa in disbelief.

"I don't understand," she confessed.

Now Narcissa was looking at her with some sympathy. "My dear, Miss Granger, I do not wish to cause you distress. I am aware that my son cares about you, as does my godson of course. Several members of my family have done unforgivable things to you, and I am deeply sorry for what you have suffered at the hands of the Malfoys and Blacks. But I'm afraid I must hurt you one more time. You see, Draco has inherited the Black family madness. It is distinctive, and his version of it is particularly violent. It affects our minds, our temperments. It makes us unstable. And while it has been painful to watch my only child's madness grip him over these last few years, it has convinced me that there is only one course of action. The Black family magic must be diluted in the next generation. Astoria Greengrass is a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. My grandchildren will not lose their places in society with her as their mother. But she is, as you said, practically a squib. My sincere hope is that her children — my grandchildren — will not be powerful enough for the Black madness to find them as it has found Draco."

Hermione knew she was staring, but what else could she do? She had a thousand questions, and she hardly knew where to start.

"What madness?" was the thing she finally settled on. But deep down Hermione already knew the answer.

"Come, my dear, you're meant to be intelligent. Draco is obsessive, violent, dangerous. He is also very, *very* powerful. He gets his temper from his father, who was also a violent man. He gets his proclivity for blood magic and other dark magic from me. I have always had a bit of a flare for it. He gets his bloodlust from my sister Bellatrix, who is also mad if you haven't noticed. But his obsession... that is entirely his own. As I said, his is a version of the Black madness that is terrifying in its singular focus, and it has the potential to destroy him and those around him if it goes unchecked."

“Me,” whispered Hermione, and Narcissa nodded solemnly.

“Yes, you. His obsession is you. It always has been in a way, but it grew into something malignant that seemed to take on a life of its own after he was marked by the Dark Lord. I do not know if the Dark Mark hastened his madness or if it was simply a coincidence. But he has become erratic when he perceives any threat to you, regardless of how minor. He risked his life, my life, and those of his best friends to smuggle you away from the execution. And now my sources are telling me that he becomes unstable whenever another man so much as *looks* at you. He is precisely like his namesake: a dragon who guards its hoard, and that hoard is just you. Why do you think I have allowed you to stay in my home, next door to him? It is not because you’re his boon, and Draco controls the Manor. If I wanted to take you away and hide you some place my son would never find you, I could easily do it—”

Hermione’s palms tingled as if on cue, and she clenched a fist so Narcissa wouldn’t see the marks. Narcissa might claim that Draco was obsessed, but she obviously didn’t know just how far Draco had gone so that he could *always* find her.

“—but I have never objected to your living in the Manor,” she continued. “That is because you *must* be near him or he will spin entirely out of control.”

Hermione knew that Narcissa was telling her the truth, and suddenly she felt foolish for worrying about the other girls at all, though it still made her angry and surprisingly jealous to think about Draco sleeping around with them. Hadn’t Draco himself admitted his obsession?

Hadn’t he gone to extraordinary lengths to keep her with him? But she was struggling to accept his obsession the way Narcissa framed it because *Hermione’s* Draco was so kind and caring toward her. Yes, he could be very violent, but it was always directed toward other people. And the worst of it only came out when there was some threat to Hermione, like Cassius Warrington’s challenge a couple days earlier.

Hermione felt ill as she realized that she had just proven Narcissa’s point.

“If he needs me so much, then why not let him have me?” she asked. “Why bother with Astoria when you know he will resist?”

Narcissa gave her a pitying look.

“My dear, he already has you. You are the person who makes him as happy as he could possibly be, and as his mother I would never try to take that happiness away. I’ve told Astoria he would give you up once they are engaged, but she’s a foolish little girl who believes in romance and fairytales. She will never have his heart, because it belongs entirely to you. But he will marry her because he will have no choice, and he will keep you as his boon because *you* will have no choice. He will rarely let you out of his sight and will continue to give you a life of utter luxury while he comes to your bed at night. You will be revered and adored and will want for nothing. But you will not reproduce with him. It does not matter what the Dark Lord is planning for the boons in that respect, we simply cannot allow it. I love my child more than anything on this earth, and that means I love him enough to stop his madness from perpetuating into another generation. He is the head of two ancient Houses, and he *must* have an heir eventually, but he could damage the bloodlines of both if

his wife is powerful in her own right. I truly fear what sort of child he would produce with someone as powerful as you, and for that reason I cannot permit it.”

Hermione felt as though her heart might be breaking right there in the clearing. That future Narcissa described was so close to her present... but Hermione didn't want it if Astoria was in the picture too. If Hermione was to be with Draco, she wanted him in every way, not only as his boon.

But Narcissa's point about children was unsettling. Hermione did not really believe that having children with Astoria would affect an inherited trait like this so-called Black family madness. That was not at all how genetics worked. But she had to concede that if she and Draco ever had a child they would likely be very powerful. And if the family madness reached a child with that much power, it could be catastrophic if it went unchecked.

She didn't know what to do so she went with the only thing she had left.

“Draco will kill Astoria before marrying her,” said Hermione simply.

Narcissa pursed her lips. “Oh I think not. Deep down he knows where this is headed, even if he does not like it. Marriages of convenience are exceptionally common in our circles, and he has been raised to expect an arrangement like this his entire life. Wizards in these sorts of marriages often turn to lovers for emotional fulfillment if they are lucky and whores for sexual release if they are not. Draco knows he is one of the lucky ones because the woman who fulfills him emotionally is already his. He found her at a very young age, and she will soothe the pains of marriage and duty for him. It is the way of our world, my dear. Besides, despite his madness he is still brilliant and careful when he needs to be. The Dark Lord approved the match with Astoria while Lucius was still alive, and his word is law. Draco would be asking for punishment or death for himself and for you if he questioned the Dark Lord's judgment on that point or performed a tie behind his back. Some of the other Death Eaters are trying to convince the Dark Lord to let them tie with a boon, but it is already too late for Draco, and he knows it.”

Another chill passed through Hermione as she recalled the rumors that Violet and Anne were discussing earlier that day.

Some of the younger Death Eaters want to marry their boons.

Draco might be on the list of Death Eaters who *wished* for it, but he would never be allowed to do it. And if she offered to tie with Draco behind Voldemort's back, he would discover it at some point. That would draw unwanted attention upon Hermione at best and be a death sentence for her at worst.

No, Draco would never risk it.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to breathe so she wouldn't panic.

When she opened them again, Narcissa was looking at her intently.

“And what happens when your Dark Lord learns that Astoria is practically a squib?”

Narcissa raised one eyebrow. “Why would he ever learn about that? The amount of magic the wives and daughters are expected to do on a daily basis is virtually nonexistent. We live in large homes with numerous servants who cater to our needs. Those of us who use magic regularly do it more for fun or as a sort of hobby than out of any great necessity. And as for the Dark Lord, the wives and daughters are hardly in close proximity to him outside of the rare social function or when we are being tortured to make our husbands and sons bend to his will. The Dark Lord will never have any reason to see her do magic, nor will anybody else for that matter.”

“Does she know that *you* are aware of her magic?”

Narcissa gave her a small smile. “Of course not. It would do her no favors if she was aware that I know. She might grow sloppy and show her hand at one of my little parties if she thought I was there to cover for her. As long as she believes she is hiding the truth from me, her acting is quite good.”

Hermione stared at Draco’s mother. She was so shrewd, so calculating. She reminded Hermione so much of Draco himself – rationalizing his view of the world without any hesitation or compunction.

“If she never told you, then how did you find out?”

Narcissa gave Hermione a slow smile. “Oh my dear. Who do you think cast the spell that gave her that curse in the first place? The funny thing is, my great great grandmother also used it on a Greengrass several generations ago. I rather expect they believe it’s tied to their bloodline and are not aware that the only people who can remove it are members of my House. If they ever *do* realize it was a cast curse and not a blood curse, it will still be too late for Astoria. Her magic is nearly gone as it is, and within a few days there will be nothing left. There is no helping her now.”

As Hermione took in Narcissa’s composed figure she was struck with a sudden, terrifying realization: if Draco was mad, then Narcissa certainly was too.

Hermione scarcely knew how she safely extricated herself from Narcissa. All she knew was that as soon as she realized just how dangerous Narcissa was, Hermione knew she had to say *anything* to get out of there in one piece and with no violence. If push came to shove, Hermione truly did not know which one of them Draco would side with. She hoped it would be her, but she didn’t want to be in a position to find out if she was right. He had once told her that he nearly killed his father when he saw Lucius strike Narcissa. Draco didn’t speak of his mother very much, but when he did it was usually with fondness.

Narcissa seemed to have the same reservations about Hermione. Draco’s capacity for violence hung between them, and neither of them were sure who he would choose.

Hermione had the wildest thought that it was a bit like the muggle Cold War, and Draco was the nuclear bomb that could go off if either side made a wrong move.

Perhaps that was why Narcissa let her go without a memory charm and merely issued a stern warning that Hermione was not to interfere or else she might find her magic being drained too.

“I certainly don’t wish to do that to you, my dear. You are practical and level-headed, and I believe you can understand why things must be the way they are. You should allow yourself to be happy with Draco and let Astoria bear the burdens of the bloodline. As long as you can accept that, we will have no quarrel. But if you choose to interfere, then I will have no choice but to take your magic too. That spell is quite obscure, and I believe much damage could be done before Draco figures out how to reverse it.... Assuming he would even wish to do so. You would be much easier to control as a squib, you know.”

Hermione quickly agreed to stay silent about their conversation, knowing she would probably break that promise the moment she saw Draco again. But she would say anything she had to in order to get out of that clearing with her memories and magic still intact and no spells cast against Draco’s mother.

Hermione felt an overwhelming sense of relief when Narcissa finally headed back to join the rest of her guests, along with a lurch at Theo’s persistent knocking on their bond. She had been so horror struck by all the things Narcissa said to her that she had barely noticed her brother growing frantic as he continued to reach out to her.

She finally opened the bond just a little bit.

Hermione, what the fuck? I’ve been able to feel your anxiety even through the block! Draco is about ten seconds away from floo’ing home to find you!

She forced herself to breathe.

It’s nothing. I just... got caught by Narcissa. That’s what was giving me anxiety. It’s alright though. None of the other guests saw, it just really caught me off guard. And we had a long talk.

Wait, did she see Columba?

No! No, it was just a lucky guess. I think she sensed I was there, and we were alone. She called out to me, and I transformed behind a tree. She didn’t see me do it.

What did you talk about?

I’m sure you can guess.

There was a long silence.

It’s complicated, Hermione.

But you knew.

Yes, but I swear Draco and I are working on it. He has no intention of ending up with Astoria.

Look, I'm trying to process a lot of things right now. I'm fine, nobody is in danger, and I'm about to go back to my room. But please give me some space until I see you both tonight alright? I scarcely know what to think about it.

I'll tell him, but please give him a chance to explain his side. Me as well, for that matter.

We'll see. I need to go. Please tell Draco to lay off on the tracking too. It's very distracting, and I need to think.

Okay, please let me know when you're back in your room, and then we'll leave you alone. We should be home around dinner time.

Thank you.

Ten minutes later, Hermione had flown back to the Manor and was locking the window behind her. Soon after that she entered her room, told Theo she was back and felt that telltale tingle on her palms, which was Draco confirming that she was telling them the truth. Theo — and supposedly Draco — had both agreed to give her space until that evening, and after fifteen minutes with no more contact from Theo and no tingling palms Hermione believed they were keeping their word. It was the longest she had gone that day without either one of them checking on her.

Hermione knew she had an enormous amount of information she needed to think about. And she *would* think about it eventually, but it was only early afternoon, and she had hours yet before Draco and Theo would be returning. As for Ginny and Luna, they weren't planning on seeing Hermione until dinner either. None of them had been sure how long the garden party would last, so she would not be missed until then.

Knowing that her time was precious, Hermione decided she would think once she had all the information. But there were *still* things she didn't know. So instead of thinking about it, she pulled out her wand and slipped out of her room and approached the door to Draco's upper study.

The thing she was about to do was a violation of privacy, she knew that. But Draco had hidden so many things from her and misled her at every turn. She believed he cared about her, but she needed to wrap her arms around all the secrets he was hiding. She wanted to be able to confront him with all of it when she saw him that evening, because she was sure that he was in the process of picking and choosing exactly which pieces of it he wanted her to know. There was only one way she might find out the whole truth before she had to rely on his word for it.

She had to break Draco's wards and learn what else he was hiding from her.

Hermione knew Draco was adept at wards, but she was no slouch either. She had made an intense and furious study of them before going on the run with Harry and Ron, knowing she would be the one responsible for keeping them safe. She had learned how to erect them, but also how to dismantle them in case any breaking and entering was required for their mission. She had packed an entire miniature library on wards in her beaded bag, and she was sure Draco knew about it because he had emptied that bag at some point. That was why she had never been given a wand of course. Most wards required a wand, and he knew her well enough to surely guess that she had memorized every single spell in those books.

Hermione took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders back as she studied the door in front of her. The Ignore Me charm was affecting her, and she couldn't seem to think much about the study itself, but she didn't have to. As long as she focused on the door and only the door, her attention held. All she had to do was get through it, and then she thought the Ignore Me charm would probably break as well. That was how Notice-Me-Nots worked, after all.

The larger wards that protected the entire wing were obviously blood wards, and Hermione felt them shudder every time she passed through them. The wards on the individual rooms, however, were not that complex because Draco brought them down and raised them again rather often. He was very subtle when he did it, but Hermione had caught a few wand movements that gave her a starting place. She ran through her mental book of warding until she finally hit one that was rather obscure. The whole thing gleamed and then collapsed.

"Aha!" she exclaimed.

She opened the door to the study, and smiled with satisfaction when the Ignore Me charm broke too, just as she suspected it would. Now that her curiosity wasn't being magically drained, she found herself suddenly flooded with it, and she hurried to the desk first to begin the search. It was surprisingly bare, with only a few pieces of parchment relating to the Malfoy business holdings that were not of interest to her. Then she began to scan the shelves, making notes of the titles of books. As she had seen the last time she was here, many of them were dark. But the hour she spent skimming the titles did not turn up any of the missing books from her beaded bag. She knew Draco had taken *Secrets of the Darkest Arts* with him to Nott Castle, but there was no reason for him to have the others.

Frowning a little she backed out of the study, locked it, and rewarded it before heading back to her room. Her curiosity about the study diminished the moment she left the room.

Interesting.

But the study did not have the things she needed. She suspected Draco had warded it to keep the books of dark magic away from her, though whether it was because he didn't want her having access to that magic or because he was worried she would judge him for it, she couldn't be certain. He really needn't have bothered either way. Hermione had read dozens of books on dark magic in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts, and there was little that could shock her anymore.

Once back in her room she debated with herself for a moment before straightening up and casting the same spell at the connecting door to Draco's bedroom. This too made the door

glow, and a simple unlocking charm was then all she needed for the door to open with a *snick*.

She entered the room and just like the study, the Ignore Me charm seemed to break.

She looked around curiously as she saw something that looked much like the other bedrooms on this floor, but with more furniture and personal items. His bed was a dark mahogany with a pale green quilt on it. His broom was nestled in a mount on the wall, just below a shadow box that held all of his quidditch jerseys from Hogwarts. He had a bar cart with a few glasses and choice bottles of liquor. He had a small sitting area with a fireplace too, though it wasn't a true parlor like Hermione's, and the whole space smelled like that cedar and spice scent she so loved.

He even had Crookshanks, who was curled up on his bed, watching her explore the room lazily.

"Traitor," she muttered, as she moved past him. She found it quite irritating that Crookshanks had not been warded out when she had been.

She poked her head into the loo and saw that there was no tub, but that the shower was even larger than hers. He had an irritatingly small number of products on the counter, and most of the drawers were empty. Evidently he did not require much. She left the bathroom and scanned his bookshelves, finding nothing of real interest, and then she opened his nightstand drawer which was completely empty. This struck her as a bit odd.

She made quick work of his dresser and a large wardrobe and again found nothing of note, and Hermione was starting to feel like this whole search had been pointless when she moved to the closet.

It was locked, and Hermione frowned. She raised her wand and tried to open it, but then realized it must be warded too. She tried to break the ward with the same spell she had used on the other two doors, but it was different than the others. She started testing it.

Not a blood ward, then. But it's not immediately obvious either.

It took her another twenty minutes of attempts before she hit gold, and the ward glowed and then disappeared.

She took a deep breath and opened it, not exactly sure what she expected to find. At first it appeared to be more like a small storeroom than a closet. There were a couple pieces of furniture and some boxes, with piles of books and papers on the floor. There were certainly no clothes or shoes or other personal items that were immediately obvious. A work table was shoved against one wall, and a bureau with a dozen small drawers was against another. In one corner she saw the first thing that made her pause: several broomsticks.

She approached them, and sure enough she recognized them. There was Harry's Firebolt and Ron's Cleansweep Eleven. She even saw the old, very dilapidated broomstick that Harry and Ron had stolen from the Burrow's shed for *her*. They had absolutely insisted upon it when Hermione was packing before Bill and Fleur's wedding, even though Hermione argued that it

was pointless because she would never fly it. But they put their feet down, so Hermione had packed it in her beaded bag anyway.

After giving the brooms one last glance she approached the table first and furrowed her brow when she saw the things on top of it. There was a stone basin that appeared to be empty, and Hermione's eyes widened when she realized it was a pensieve. Immediately next to it was a thick book that looked to be a photo album. Her breath caught as she opened it.

It was filled with photographs of *her*. Many she didn't recognize, though a few she did. They were all wizarding pictures, almost all from Hogwarts. As she flipped the pages she saw the Gryffindor common room over and over again, along with the library. She was often staring off into space, lost in thought as she sucked on a sugar quill or just curled up to read, entirely oblivious that somebody was taking her picture. The ones where she was posed and smiling at the camera had most of the people surrounding her cut out so she was the only one left. As she looked more carefully she realized there were only a couple of photos from her first year. There were dozens starting in second year.

Her brain was struggling to process it. Who had taken all of these? When? How?

The answer came to her in a flash as she remembered that single wizarding photograph with her parents that she had discovered on her first day at the Manor: *Colin*.

Colin Creevey must have taken these. He was a year younger than her of course, and his camera was such a fixture in the Gryffindor common room that Hermione had totally ignored it. He had photographed her for years, and Draco had taken copies of everything.

She closed the photo album hesitantly and then turned to the low bureau, which she began to search cautiously. In one drawer she found copies of her course schedules for Hogwarts, all in Draco's hand. She flipped through them incredulously and saw that in third year he became slightly obsessed as he tried to figure out how she was in two classes at once. He made extensive notes about places he had seen her and the time, and on the last page he finally wrote "*time-turner?*"

Another drawer contained old S.P.E.W. buttons.

Another was old sugar quills that were half gone and disintegrating.

Still another contained a journal where he had been jotting notes about her for years.

31 Oct 1991 — Weasley made Granger cry, and then she was attacked by a troll. I still don't understand how she's so good at magic.

8 Nov 1991 — Why is Granger suddenly friends with Potter and Weasley? Doesn't she understand how idiotic they are? I hate them so much.

5 April 1992 — I tried to get Potter and Weasley expelled for smuggling that dragon out of Hogwarts. How was I to know that Granger would be there instead of Weasley? Now I have

a detention with her. Severus has pulled me aside and asked if I would be able to cope with spending an entire evening in her company. I don't get it. Does he think I'm some kind of baby?

6 June 1992 — Granger's in the hospital wing. I heard she drank poison, but who gave it to her?

3 Aug 1992 — I saw Granger at Flourish and Blotts with her parents, and I'm confused. I thought muggles were supposed to be dirty, but they looked just like us. Maybe they are squibs? They almost have to be because muggles can't see Diagon Alley can they? And speaking of lookalikes, have I written about how she looks exactly like Theo? I swear they are twins or long-lost cousins or something. I have a theory that she's a pureblood who was hidden with squibs during the first war. That would explain why she's so powerful.

10 Sept 1992 — I called her a mudblood. It just slipped out, because she accused me of buying my way onto the Slytherin quidditch team. I didn't take it back because I wanted to see her reaction. She looked more confused than anything. Maybe she really IS the daughter of squibs? Or a pureblood relative of Theo's?

31 Oct 1992 — The Chamber of Secrets is open. Is it Father?

25 Dec 1992 — I told Crabbe and Goyle I hoped Granger died. I didn't mean it, they were just being weird about the Chamber of Secrets. I told Theo about it later, and he says I'm an arse.

14 Feb 1993 — Granger gave a Valentine to Lockhart. For somebody so smart she really can be stupid sometimes. Doesn't she see that he's a fraud?

5 May 1993 — Granger's petrified, so that proves she's a mudblood. I keep thinking Father is behind this, but I don't know how. I don't know what I would do if it was him. The only saving grace is that she didn't actually die, thank Merlin. I know what I've said about her to others, but I don't mean it. It's just that I'm not allowed to like her, and if I can't like her then I don't want anybody else to like her either.

8 Jul 1993 — I keep having nightmares of Granger petrified in the hospital wing. I visited her one night and spent a long time looking at her. I realized she was pretty, and then I touched one of her curls, and it was so soft. Now all I can see is Granger in that hospital bed. Theo says I have a crush, but I don't know. Then again, what if he's right? What can I do? I'm not allowed to want her like that. It's completely forbidden. The only thing that distracts me from those memories of her is hunting with Father. Every time I kill an animal I imagine it's a basilisk. It helps.

19 Sept 1993 — I think it's Granger's birthday because she's been eating chocolate cake all day. I know I said she's pretty, but she's actually really pretty. She's definitely the prettiest girl in our year and maybe even the entire school, despite the frizzy hair and uneven teeth. If her frizz tamed and her teeth shrank just a little she would be more than pretty and absolutely beautiful. I keep imagining it, and I am so incredibly fucked. Is it a crush? I don't know, but I am starting to realize I want her even though I'm not supposed to.

20 Dec 1993 — Theo and I spent some time with Nita and Blaise at their house. Sometimes I can't believe how often Father lets me see them since he hates creatures and half-breeds, but he says I need to be desensitized to Veela magic because it makes me vulnerable if I'm not. He seems oddly wary of Nita, and he tolerates Blaise even though he's a half-breed. Blaise's father was a pureblood, so maybe that's why. I wonder if Father would still let me see them if he knew that Nita found the magical porn Theo somehow acquired. She let us keep it and told us that it was healthy to be interested in sex at our age. It's mostly squibs and mudbloods. No pureblood would ever pose for those kinds of pictures. Bloody hell. Do all naked mudbloods look like that?

25 Jan 1994 — Granger's in a fight with Potter and Weasley and finally alone. I'm going to send her sugar quills anonymously because I know they're her favorite. I found a new spot in the library where I can watch her, and I'm starting to make friends with that mad cat of hers.

8 Mar 1994 — I don't understand Granger's schedule at all. She seems so wrapped up in Buckbeak's case. I'm tempted to call it off because I can tell it's exhausting her, but it's also keeping her so busy she still hasn't made up with Potter and Weasley. That makes me want to keep the case alive. I really don't care if the beast dies, and she's never been alone for this long. It's wonderful, and she's even been nice to me the few times she's noticed me.

31 Mar 1994 — Granger touched me for the first time ever. I mean, okay, she actually slapped me, but it was fucking incredible. I lost control and came in my pants about three seconds after she did it, but I'm pretty sure nobody noticed. The Hogwarts robes are a blessing.

20 June 1994 — Apparently Granger was attacked by dementors on the school grounds last night. I mean, what the actual fuck? Oh, but never fear because Potter was there to save the day. Again. Salazar help me, I hate that specky git.

15 Aug 1994 — I saw Granger at the World Cup with Potter and Weasley. She's done something to her hair, and now her curls aren't frizzy anymore. Mother called them "ringlets." It was fascinating, and I stared at them the whole match. Was it a potion? A shampoo? She still smelled like orange blossom when she passed me, so I'm thinking potion. Father obviously noticed and made me promise to stay away from her or else he would send his friends after her. I told him I don't care about her because she's a mudblood, but I don't think he believed me. I still found her in the forest and got her to actually fucking run and hide for once in her life, but I could tell she didn't want to do it. It might have been the first time Weasley and I have ever agreed on anything. It was more obvious than ever that she and Potter were raised by muggles, because no pureblood would be stupid enough to fuck around with Death Eaters, not even Weasley. Merlin, I wish she was a pureblood. If she was, then she would be mine already.

19 September 1994 — I swear to fucking Merlin Granger grew tits over the summer. She was wearing robes and pajamas at the World Cup so I didn't notice them then, but today? Today she came down to breakfast in a brand new muggle T-shirt and tight jeans, and all of a sudden my jaw is on the damn floor. I keep wondering if her tits look like the ones in Theo's magazines. I bet they do. They are absolutely killing me, along with those fucking hair ribbons she insists on wearing every single day. Happy birthday sweet girl. I would like to

personally thank whoever gave you that T-shirt for your birthday. Or maybe curse them. Because my brain cannot stop imagining it, and I will never be allowed to have it.

25 Oct 1994 — Why? Just why? Why did that spell have to hit Granger instead of Weasley? Why did it make her teeth grow so much she had to have them shrunk? Why did she KEEP SHRINKING THEM and fix what was literally her only physical flaw? She's so incredibly beautiful now. I'm dying inside.

15 Nov 1994 — Krum is stalking Granger, and she's completely oblivious. I need to threaten him or blackmail him so he leaves her alone. That fucking wannabe child molester better not lay a finger on her.

25 Dec 1994 — I saw Granger at the Yule Ball, and I think I'm obsessed. I heard her telling one of the Patil twins that periwinkle is one of her favorite colors. She loves periwinkle and light blue, and now I love those colors too. I bet she would look amazing in light blue or maybe even light pink or white. The periwinkle made her skin fucking glow. I have to find a way to get rid of Krum, because he obviously wants her, and I can't allow it. What if he gets to see her knickers before I do? Because I HAVE to see them someday. It's going to kill me if some other bloke gets there first. Maybe I can even convince Father to tolerate her like he tolerates Blaise when I point out how powerful she is. Fuck me... I need to find a way to make Krum bugger off. Maybe I'll start a rumor that she's with Potter. That Bulgarian idiot would probably believe it, even though anybody with a brain can see she only thinks of him as a friend. It's the Weasel I have to keep an eye on, but he's so stupid he doesn't know his own feelings so I think she's safe from him for at least another year or two as well. Speaking of the Weasel, he made her cry again, so I'll have to make sure to run into him in the hallway soon. But fuck, I can hardly even think about other blokes right now because she was so pretty.

And on and on.

She felt ill as she returned it gingerly and then opened another drawer to find old hair ribbons and elastic ties and even the clips she had worn to the Yule Ball. They were all small things that had gone missing as those kinds of things often did.

But they weren't missing. He had taken them. It was an entire collection of accessories that he had found or stolen from her at Hogwarts, which he had safely tucked away like a magpie.

She wondered if Crookshanks had really helped him do it.

The last couple of drawers were filled with tiny glass vials, all of which had a silvery substance in them. Her heart began to pound as she pulled one out and saw a label on it.

Alone in the library — 27 April 1995

She put it back down with a shaky hand and pulled one out that was near the front.

First orgasm — 20 Sept 1998

She blinked in disbelief and then pulled out the one that was the closest to her. It was from two days ago.

Topless with a soaked cunt — 2 October 1998

She swallowed hard and put it back in the drawer before shoving it closed with a snap and glancing back at the pensieve uncomfortably.

Was this why he had been running late and floo'd from his room? Because he had taken the time to preserve the memory of her that morning?

She felt ill, and she almost opened the dresser to dispose of those intimate memories of her, but she knew they were just copies. He could make new ones easily enough. She tried to force it out of her mind.

Her palms were sweating and her heart picked up speed further as she turned and saw something covered with a sheet on the floor that was pushed into one corner. She lifted the sheet gingerly and then clapped her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out when she saw what it was.

It couldn't be. There was no way it was here. She had left it at her parents' house more than a year ago when she obliterated them.

But she knew her eyes weren't deceiving her when she saw her old dollhouse. And as she crouched down and looked at it closely for the first time since she was a young girl she realized her very first impression of her room at Malfoy Manor had been correct: Draco had indeed duplicated the master bedroom of her dollhouse. The wallpaper in her room was similar to the small patterned print she had installed on the little house's walls. The bed had the same white quilt. The attached bath had a tiny clawfoot tub just like the one in her loo. There was even a miniature escritoire and dressing table in the next room over that she had completely forgotten about.

Oh God.

Hermione felt panic start to creep up, but she swallowed it back. She had to understand this. She had to finish searching this place, and there were a couple of cardboard boxes and piles of papers and books in stacks under that table that she had not looked through yet.

The boxes she opened to find things of hers that she had packed while on the run that Draco had not returned to her. She found her muggle medicine and extra muggle money and her bank card that she knew was useless because she had withdrawn everything in her account. She found the large folded tent that Bill had loaned to them after leaving Shell Cottage all those months ago, and even some spare potions and dittany.

A very familiar piece of old, blank parchment was folded in one corner of the box, and Hermione felt a rush of sadness as the loss of Harry hit her yet again. It was the Marauder's Map, which Harry had shoved back into Hermione's hand for safe-keeping, just before they

parted ways for the last time.

The fact that it was blank gave Hermione a jolt of fierce pleasure that Draco had not learned its secrets, and she was forced to admit that she was surprised he hadn't thrown it away.

Then again, it was obvious he had never thrown anything away.

She lifted the Map and underneath it hit the jackpot.

She finally found her beaded bag.

She grabbed the bag and shoved everything from the two boxes back inside of it, including the Map, which she handled with care. Would she ever need it again? It was possible, and it belonged to her now or perhaps Teddy Lupin if he was still alive.

Then she turned to the piles of books and papers under the table.

The books she skimmed quickly. She had finally found *her* books. Nearly all of her books were here.

She also saw quite a few books she didn't recognize on blood magic, along with something that looked like a grimoire, and she packed those too. Next were stacks of newspaper articles from the past few years all about her, and Hermione also shoved those inside the bag even though she had read most of them by now.

She didn't know *why* she was packing these things, other than some compulsive need to do it. Perhaps it was because of the very unsettling conversation with Narcissa or maybe it was because she was only now comprehending just *how* obsessed Draco had always been, and it scared her.

This place was practically a shrine, and she wanted to dismantle it.

Then she turned to the stack of papers, and now she felt very faint as she started to look through it.

There were copies of her and Theo's muggle birth records, along the death record that was filed for her brother whom her parents had named William Patrick Granger. She found a deed to her parents' former home that Hermione had sold to a nice older man... but then two weeks later the man who had purchased the house had turned around and sold it to someone by the name of William Theodore Granger. Hermione was struck with a sudden memory.

"...I have a house just outside of London where my mother used to live. That is still mine if I ever care to move out..."

Theo hadn't been talking about a house that used to be owned by the mother who raised him. No, he had been talking about *her* house. Their *biological mother's* house.

Hermione was overwhelmed.

She pulled it together long enough to look at the dates for the sale and realized Theo had owned this house for nearly eighteen months. So he must have known that she had sent their parents into hiding, but did he know where? Had he always been aware that she obliviated them too?

She started flipping through more papers and went cold as she saw a note written in her mother's handwriting with their flight number to Australia and *Monica and Wendell Wilkins*. After that there were records from Australia and the small flat they rented in Brisbane as retirees who were downsizing. She was getting near the end of the first stack as she discovered a purchase transcript showing that William Theodore Granger had bought their building a couple months ago.

Theo was her parents' landlord.

She was trembling as she flipped a few more pages to get to the end and found records of their bank accounts. They had recently begun receiving regular infusions of cash via wire transfer from some unknown source.

But Hermione knew who had been sending them money. It was Theo. It just had to be. Hadn't he even told her he learned about muggle banking? This must have been why.

And then the next stack was more about *her*. She found an envelope containing the key to her Gringotts vault that Draco had intercepted all those months ago, but had never given to her. She had never even asked for it because she thought a trip to Gringotts was too dangerous, but now she was kicking herself for it. There were monthly statements of the account that Draco must have intercepted too. Her eyes widened at the most recent total, which was over twenty million galleons. She knew Harry had money. She knew that *she* now had money because Harry died. But she had no idea it was this much. It was enough money to leave and never return.

Draco clearly didn't want her to know just how wealthy she was.

Then there were papers for Amalie Beumont: she was born in a magical hospital in France to an older pureblood couple, right around the same time Hermione was born too. She had attended Beauxbatons and was the same age as her. It was precisely what Theo had told her that day of her execution. There was an obituary for both of Amalie's parents and notes about her life jotted down in Theo's hand, including the fact that she was an orphan and had no money or other close family.

Oh God, Amalie Beumont had been a living person.

Where was the real Amalie? Had she just been paid to disappear? Or was she imprisoned? Obliviated? Dead?

Hermione was breathing hard as she set those things aside and then frowned as she looked at the last few pieces of parchment in the pile. The first appeared to be a recent letter about Grimmauld Place from Draco's solicitor informing him that it appeared a new blood claim had been made on the property, and they were offering to investigate to uncover who it might

be. Draco had written back informing his solicitor that he was already aware of it and would handle it personally. He instructed them to take no further action.

The last piece of paper was titled *Dowry Agreement*, and Hermione immediately felt her heart seize. She didn't read anything more, but quickly flipped to the very end to see signature blocks for both Theo and Draco. To her enormous relief it was unsigned. She crumpled it and tossed it into the corner of the closet. She didn't even want to know what *that* was about, though she was afraid that she could hazard a guess.

Hermione was shaking now. She found herself truly beginning to panic as she started to throw the last of her possessions and the papers into the beaded bag and then shoved the whole thing into her shirt as she grabbed her wand and stood.

She had to get out of here. She would take Crookshanks with her because she didn't trust Draco not to use him to lure her back. That meant she would have to fly on a *broom*.... Hermione gulped back the wave of nausea and tried to think of some other solution but could come up with nothing. Floo was out of the question because where would she go? And even though animagus could transform inanimate objects with them, she had no idea what it would do to a living creature.

But she could do it. She had flown on a broom before, even though she despised every single memory of it. She could manage it in an emergency though, and this certainly qualified.

Besides, I just have to get to the village. The antiapparition wards surely end there, and I know I can apparate with Crookshanks.

She had apparated with Crookshanks before. He hated the feeling and had a tendency to claw her whenever she did it, but again... it was an emergency.

Nodding to herself she turned back to the brooms and then grabbed Harry's Firebolt while shoving the other two brooms into her bag. Those brooms both belonged to various Weasleys and had no business being held at Malfoy Manor. Hermione knew she couldn't pause to fetch Ginny and Luna. There was not enough time, and they might fight her about leaving in the first place. But once she was settled she would find a way to contact the girls, and having brooms could help with a future escape if they ever wanted it.

With her wand and animagus form, there was very little Hermione *couldn't* do to break them out.

Her eyes fell back on her dollhouse, and her pulse picked up again. She had to leave. She had to leave *right now*. She had her tent and all of her supplies and books. She would grab a few changes of clothes from the bottom of her dresser and then break the wards on the patio door and fly out with Crookshanks. She should still have a few hours before Draco returned to find her missing. As soon as he arrived he would track her right away, but perhaps she could get behind wards he wouldn't be able to cross before that happened.

Her brain kicked into overdrive as it often did during very stressful situations, and she came up with a rough, if imperfect plan.

She reached back into her beaded bag and pulled out the Marauder's Map.

"*I solemnly swear I am up to no good,*" she whispered as she tapped her wand to it.

Immediately the ink began to spread on the parchment, and she breathed a sigh of relief that it had survived both the Battle of Hogwarts and Draco's possession of it. Her eyes skimmed the familiar pages as she flipped quickly toward the back. She wasn't looking at the castle right now, but the grounds. A wild, possibly *insane* idea had just struck her and... yes.

There.

It was Hagrid's old hut. She didn't know what happened to Hagrid after the Battle of Hogwarts. According to Draco, he had disappeared just like Charlie Weasley. Wherever he was, she was certain he wouldn't be hiding out in his old hut, and even when he worked at Hogwarts he rarely had visitors that weren't Hermione, Harry, Ron, or Ginny. The hut was on the very edge of the Hogwarts grounds, and while she wasn't certain if it was still standing after the Battle she thought odds were good that it had survived. Most of the fighting took place in the castle itself and the grounds immediately surrounding it.

Sure enough, the Map indicated that his hut was intact and appeared to be vacant. She allowed herself to stare at it for a full minute, and sure enough there was nobody within a hundred meters of it.

She nodded to herself and then whispered, "*Mischief managed,*" and the Map went blank, as she placed it back inside of her bag.

She had a plan.

She would fly with Crookshanks to the edge of the wards at the Manor and then apparate to the edge of a muggle village that she knew had woods near the perimeter. She and Harry had camped there before. She would disillusion herself and spend no more than thirty minutes stocking nonperishable food from the market in the village. She didn't have enough muggle money for it, but she could steal it. The old Hermione would never have done that, but the Hermione of today had very few qualms about theft.

Then she would use the Map to sneak onto the Hogwarts grounds and position herself within Hagrid's old hut before she *fideliused* herself into the tent.

The *fidelius* charm was a complex spell, but she knew one of her books described it, and she thought she could manage it. The larger the structure was, the more difficult it was to *fidelius*. That was why the Potters moved to a small cottage when they went into hiding. The Potter ancestral home had been on the edge of Godric's Hollow. It was one of those large, old homes that were common in wealthy pureblood families, but it was far too large to *fidelius*. James had grown up there, and Harry had actually been born there, though apparently the Death Eaters destroyed it during the first war after the Potters went into permanent hiding. Sirius had once told them all about it.

She knew Dumbledore had managed a *fidelius* on Grimmauld Place, which was the largest structure Hermione had ever heard of accepting the charm. It would take a wizard with

considerable power to do it and most wizards would find it impossible. Arthur Weasley had placed a *fidelius* on the Burrow, though Hermione strongly suspected the twins had helped with it because they were famously talented in charms. Bill and Fleur's cottage was also *fideliused*, though it was much smaller than the Burrow.

But Hermione didn't have to *fidelius* a house or even a cottage. It was just a tent. It was incredibly small. So small that she now wondered why she hadn't bothered to do it when she and the boys were on the run in the first place. Perhaps it would have stopped the Taboo and saved them that trip to Malfoy Manor....

And then we wouldn't have found Hufflepuff's cup, and Harry would probably still be alive, and I would never have known about Theo or Draco....

Dammit, she had to focus. There was no time to sort her feelings about any of it.

After she stole some food and got to Hagrid's old hut, she would give herself an hour to *fidelius* into the tent. Draco might be able to track her through a *fidelius* charm, but surely he wouldn't be able to *see* her or catch her if he hadn't been told the secret, and he wouldn't be able to do anything too violent or obvious to force her out if she was on Hogwarts' grounds. Hagrid's hut would give her tent some added privacy as well as some shelter from poor weather, and with the Map she would be able to see Draco coming long before he arrived.

If she couldn't manage the charm within an hour then she would apparate to Shell Cottage and hope and pray that Bill had not told Draco the secret for *that* building.

Other than the tent, Shell Cottage was the only place she had left to go. She didn't want to drag Bill Weasley into this if she didn't have to, but she thought he would help her if she had no other choice.

Decision made, Hermione tried to push down the emotions that were threatening to overwhelm her. She was scared, hurt, and oddly sad to be leaving. She sensed Theo perk up on the other end of their bond, and she forced it shut so her emotions wouldn't bleed over and make him suspicious.

It was only when she turned around to leave that she finally saw the wall next to the closet door. It had been behind her the entire time, but Hermione had not noticed because she was too preoccupied by everything else. She froze, and she didn't even register Theo banging on their bond as he sensed her panic start to well up so fast it bled through the block she had erected. Nor did she notice her palms that were tingling harder than ever.

Because there, on the back wall of Draco's large closet was the Black family tapestry that Hermione knew used to hang in Grimmauld Place. She had passed this tapestry a hundred times in the halls of Grimmauld Place and would know it anywhere. And as her eyes scanned the familiar names and burn marks, she noticed a single thread had been added, directly below Sirius Black's name. It denoted that he had sired a child she had never seen before in the dozens of times she had studied the tapestry since his death.

Columba Aquila Black

Chapter 26: Tapestry

Chapter Notes

TW: Panic attack

Hermione felt the walls of the room closing in on her as she stared at the name.

Columba Aquila Black

What was this? How had he done this? Because Hermione knew precisely *who* it was — it was her. But was it really? There had been no...

Her palms tingled again, and she swayed as she realized precisely how he had done it. She had been stupid — so very foolish — trusting that the marks on her palms were just a tracking spell and a bit of extra protective magic he would tell her about someday. Why had she let him do it? Because she had been distressed by an animal sacrifice the first time and hadn't asked the right questions? Because he dangled the life of an Order member before her the second time when she was a bit more aware?

She could not believe she had been that naive.

Her breathing picked up as the walls pressed in further, her heart rate accelerating until it leached over into the bond with Theo. He was pounding on it, trying to reach her to siphon, but Hermione wouldn't allow it. He must have known just how obsessed Draco was. Theo, it seemed, had his own obsessions when it came to their parents. She couldn't trust either one of them. Not her brother. Not the wizard who she thought she might...

A rough sob passed her lips as her heart cracked at a betrayal of this magnitude, and the panic attack began in earnest. She could barely breathe, barely *think* because this was so much bigger than she had ever imagined.

She found herself on her knees, tears streaming down her face, her wand and Harry's broom dangling uselessly in her hands.

It was only the roar of the floo in Draco's room that caused awareness to snap back, and she gasped and struggled to her feet just as a wild-eyed Draco and Theo turned the corner and found her still standing in the closet.

She raised her wand and began to cast a spell, but Draco's eyes sharpened as he recognized her wand, and he reacted faster than she did. He disarmed her before she could think of what else to do, and Hermione was left looking around frantically for any way out.

But there was none. She was in a closet with a single door, and the two wizards were blocking her only way out. She was no match when she was wandless against both of them.

The panic took her again, and she dropped to her knees with wet gasps.

Draco started to move forward, and just like that very first day at Malfoy Manor, Hermione scrambled back until she was huddled against the wall.

“Please...” he said roughly. “Please, Hermione, calm down and let us tell you...”

Hermione just shook her head hard, as Theo attempted to connect with her again. She shoved him away as the panic clawed up her, and then Draco’s voice got more desperate as her vision started to swim.

“Hermione, you need to breathe. I can tell you don’t want me to touch you, my darling, but I won’t have any choice if you don’t start breathing right now!”

Hermione didn’t know why she listened to him. She should never have listened to a word he said. But her mind was nearly gone and the panic attack was fully upon her, and Draco Malfoy would touch her if she couldn’t pull it together.

No.

No.

She took a great shuddering gasp. Then another.

“Slow... *slow*... Good... you’re doing so well. Keep giving me slow breaths.”

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and focused with everything she had on pushing the panic away.

They took your wand but they haven’t injured you. You will never get out of this closet if you can’t calm down.

Calm.

Calm.

Calm.

Still feeling very shaky, Hermione finally raised her head to stare at both of them. Draco looked wrecked as he stared back at her and the room that she had largely packed away. Theo was chewing on his lip nervously, just as Hermione always did when she was very anxious, looking back and forth between both of them.

“Hermione, I’ll give you back your wand if you can just hear me out, alright? Please, sweet girl, let me explain.”

She blinked in some surprise and then became wary again.

“You’re a liar.”

“I haven’t told you a single lie since you arrived at the Manor. Not a single one. I’ve allowed you to believe some things that weren’t true, and I’ve kept secrets from you. But you’ve *known* that there were things I haven’t told you. This is it. This is... this is the thing I should have told you about long ago. I just...”

He looked away and swiped a hand over his face before looking back at her.

“Look, I know you have no reason to trust me, I do. So that’s why I’m going to give you back your wand. I just... *please* let me explain. Let both of us explain everything.”

“And then when you’re done explaining?” she asked harshly. “Then what?”

“Then...” a slightly haunted look passed over Draco’s face. “Then what happens next is up to you. Whatever you want to do, I won’t stop you. I swear it.”

Hermione was silent for a long while as she stared at both of them. Theo was giving her pleading eyes, silently begging her to agree. Draco was holding up her wand in offering. Hermione considered it, but that wasn’t enough.

“I want you to leave your wands and knives on Draco’s bed and then unward the patio door in my room. When that is done come back here and give me my wand. Then I will listen.”

Draco’s jaw tightened, but he nodded once and motioned for Theo to go first. Theo returned a moment later and showed Hermione his empty knife holster and lack of wand, and then it was Draco’s turn. She heard him opening the door to her room and then several moments later he was back too, holding nothing but her wand. He walked forward and handed it to her.

She snatched it back, feeling a sense of relief as the magic connected again, and then stared at the hand he was holding down to help her off the floor.

“No,” she snapped. “Back away.”

A pained look crossed Draco’s face, but he withdrew his hand and did as she asked. She slowly climbed to her feet, swiping at the tears that were still tracked on her cheeks while keeping her eyes on both of them. She pointed her wand toward them and something of her feelings must have coursed through her magic, because some sparks emitted as she flicked it to indicate that they should start walking.

They both look resigned – Draco looked almost broken – as they turned and headed toward her sitting room, with Hermione following behind. She cast a fierce glance at Crookshanks as she passed, and he got to his feet and hopped lightly off the bed, following her too.

She gestured that they should sit on the sofa, and she checked to confirm that the patio door was indeed unlocked and unwarded in case she needed to make a fast escape, before turning her wand on both of them. Crookshanks wound between her legs.

“Talk,” she said curtly.

They exchanged glances and looked slightly confused for a moment.

“Erm,” said Theo hesitantly, “where would you like for us to start?”

Where to start?

She looked between them and decided she was angrier with Draco. He looked miserable as he waited for her to ask questions, and she decided to make him wait a bit longer.

“Our parents,” she said, looking at Theo. “How? Why?”

Theo looked at his feet. “I just... I wanted a family.”

Hermione hated how her heart cracked a little more at that.

“You have me, Theo.”

He looked back up at her desperately. “I know I do! Truly, I know it. But Mother died years ago, and Father... well I told you once we had a bad relationship. When I learned the truth about us I started to dig and pretty quickly found the records of our birth and my supposed death. They’re public records in the muggle world, you know, it wasn’t hard to discover them. And there was an address on the birth records, so I went to their house during Christmas break in sixth year. We were both already of age, remember, so I just apparated there and disillusioned myself. I watched you with our parents through the window on Christmas morning. You three looked so happy, and I just... I *wanted* that, Hermione.”

Her heart broke a little more as she asked, “So the house?”

“Right,” said Theo, swallowing. “So after Draco... did what he did in sixth year... the Dark Lord started to rise very quickly. I kept an eye on Mum and Dad’s house. I went and checked on them a few times. But then suddenly they weren’t there anymore, and the house appeared to be empty with a sold sign out front. You had disappeared too, so I was sure you had hidden them, but I didn’t know where. I didn’t want the house to disappear like they did so I falsified some papers and bought it from the man who purchased it.”

“How?”

“I might have imperiused him to get him to sell it to me,” he confessed. “I know!” he added, seeing her stern look. “Believe me, I know I shouldn’t have done that, but I couldn’t bear to let the house go. And then Draco and I volunteered to search it for *you*, even though we knew you weren’t there anymore. We put the others off the scent when we told them your parents no longer lived there and had disappeared.”

“And Australia?”

“That was recent,” he confessed. “I did it after you told me they were obliviated. I was just worried about them, Hermione. I realized they must have flown on one of those pane things —”

“Planes,” she corrected automatically.

“Right,” said Theo. “So I combed the house and eventually found a piece of paper in Mum’s nightstand with something that looked like a flight number written down on it. She had also written their new names. Finding them in Brisbane was pretty simple after that.”

“And you bought their building?” she pressed.

“Yes,” said Theo. “I registered it with the Australian Ministry of Magic, and it allowed me to perform magic on it to protect them. That’s the only reason, I swear. They’ve never even seen me. I was waiting until you could reverse their obliviation and I could meet them with you properly before I actually talked to them... But I wanted them to be safe while I waited. I promise you, that was all.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me?” she demanded.

Theo looked a bit lost. “I don’t know! I suppose I just... I have no *right* to them! They’re really your parents, not mine. I know that. But I wanted to know they were safe, and I didn’t want you to think I was taking them away from you or... Merlin, Hermione, I’m just an idiot, alright? I’m sorry.”

He hung his head, and Hermione looked down at him with very mixed feelings. She didn’t know what to think yet, so she turned to Draco, who seemed to go even paler than usual as she held up one of her palms.

“My marks,” said Hermione, holding up her palm with Columba on it. “Tell me what they do. *Everything*. And why.”

Draco’s eyes dropped to the floor, and he slumped a little.

“The first mark adopted you into House Black. It was the same spell my parents and Theo’s mother used on Theo when they adopted him into House Nott. The person being adopted does not have to be aware of it, nor does the sire. It simply has to be done by an existing member of that House. Theo’s adoption was performed by his mother. Your adoption was performed by me.”

Hermione blinked in surprise, and Draco’s silver eyes raised to watch her, clearly trying to gauge her reaction.

She said nothing, so he continued.

“The second mark was a blood claim on Grimmauld Place as a member of House Black. The property is yours now.”

She blinked harder and shut her eyes for a moment as she tried to compose herself. She couldn’t let her emotions get the better of her. She needed answers, and she had dozens of questions. She couldn’t allow herself to forget a single one.

“And the tracking?”

“It’s Black family magic,” he confessed. “My knife lets me track anybody who is cut with it a little bit, but if it’s a member of my family the tracking is stronger. We did it twice. I was

telling you the truth when I said it enhanced the magic. I can find your exact location even when you are within wards.”

“What about your mother and Bellatrix?” asked Hermione in alarm. “Can they track me?”

He shook his head hard. “No. Just me. Neither of them knows I adopted you, nor will they. And I’m the only one who has marked you like that. The knife Bella used on your neck when she tortured you was cursed, but it doesn’t carry the same tracking enchantments.”

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to decide what to ask next.

She started with, “Why adopt me?”

“Two reasons,” said Draco dully. “The first is that it would give you a position from which to claim Grimmauld Place. You had no other claim on it because Potter never left a will, and even his claim wasn’t very good since his blood connection to the Blacks was very distant. The second reason is that it made you a member of a Sacred-Twenty Eight family, one that is more powerful and ancient than the Greengrasses.”

Hermione felt a chill at this, and tried to think rationally.

One question at a time.

“Let’s start with the first reason. Why did I need to claim Grimmauld Place?”

He looked at her with such heartache that Hermione’s own heart lurched. But she swallowed hard and leveled him with a determined look. She absolutely could not let him affect her like this. The betrayal was too large.

“Do you remember what you said to me when you met Aquila for the first time?” he whispered. “That you wished to be free, and it was something I had never understood about you?”

She nodded.

“You were wrong,” he said simply. “I did know that about you. I knew how much you wanted to get out of the Manor, how much you craved your freedom. But I also knew how dangerous it was for you to do that. The Death Eaters would murder you. The Order would use you. But a house like Grimmauld Place is a sanctuary. It’s a perfect retreat for you that only *you* can control. The wards are old and ancient. They answer to nobody except for the true master. The master can let anyone in or keep anybody out if they understand how to manage the wards. They can even exclude members of their own family.”

He took another deep breath before continuing.

“Dumbledore put Grimmauld Place under a *fidelius* charm while Sirius Black owned it to give him some semblance of control over it. But Sirius Black was the master, and he could have controlled access entirely on his own without Dumbledore if he had wanted to. Then Sirius died and passed the house to Potter, but Potter was never the true master of it, not really. Potter’s claim on the house was lower than mine once I came of age, and the ancient

blood wards went dormant while the house was waiting for a Black to claim it through a blood ritual. I probably should have claimed it as soon as I turned seventeen, but I didn't bother because Dumbledore's *fidelius* was still in place, and I thought it was safe enough. But then you three pulled the Death Eaters through the *fidelius* last autumn, and it was no longer safe. Another wizard's *fidelius* could never keep the true master out, so I claimed Grimmauld Place from Potter right after that happened. Then I broke the *fidelius* and adjusted the wards for you three so that it would be truly secure again, but you never returned to find out."

He raised his palm to show her his own mark. "The spell is in a family grimoire. I was the master of Grimmauld Place for nearly a year until you claimed it from me a few weeks ago when you met Aquila."

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to wrap her mind around it. "So that's why you have a mark too — but only one."

"Correct," he said. "I didn't have to be adopted as a Black because I already was one. But I did have to claim Grimmauld away from Sirius Black's line."

"So my claim..." she started.

"Takes priority over mine," said Draco simply. "I adopted you as Sirius Black's daughter, and he was the last blood owner before me. Grimmauld Place has been returned to his line."

"Even though I'm not a boy?"

"Yes. I'm a Black through my mother, not my father. I'm still recognized as part of the family so I could perform the magic to adopt you and activate the wards at Grimmauld Place when I claimed it. But technically I'm one generation removed, and my mother and aunt both gave up the Black name when they married. You *are* a Black, and that gives you a higher priority than all of us. Grimmauld Place is yours, and I can no longer control the wards. If my claim on Grimmauld Place was higher than yours, then the ritual to take it from me wouldn't have worked."

"So Grimmauld Place is mine. That means I can keep everybody out. Including you."

He looked defeated as she made this connection, but he nodded. "Yes. You can keep out me and my mother and my aunt. It's the best protection I could possibly give you, little dove — an ancient house that's yours that only *you* can control."

Hermione was silent for a long while as she pondered this. He let her do it, and she could feel his eyes searching her face for something, *anything* that told him she would approve of this.

"Let's talk about the second reason then. Astoria."

"Astoria, right," he said, gulping a little. "So I'm not sure what my mother told you..."

“She said that Lucius put together a contract that gave you a year to become engaged to her and after that any member of House Malfoy can step into your place and tie you.”

“That’s true,” he admitted. “And I didn’t perform for obvious reasons. I don’t like Astoria.”

“You slept with her.”

“Once,” he admitted. “I’ve slept with a few people once,” he added. “But none of it has meant anything, I swear it.”

Hermione’s heart twinged at this, and some of the hurt must have shown on her face.

“Hermione, I mean it. I’ve had sex before because I never really believed I would be able to have you. My first time was with a prostitute Father arranged for me when I was fifteen, and I went along with it because I was trying to earn his approval, and I thought I would have to produce an heir someday with some witch who wasn’t you. Sex with other people has never been more than a diversion, at best. I never even bothered to kiss any of the others because I cared so little for them. Did you know that? You’re my first real kiss — my *only* kiss — because I was saving that for you. I swear I never wanted them, and the moment my plan actually worked and you came to live with me and... Gods, Hermione, I haven’t done *anything* like that with anybody else since the day I captured you. I promise, my darling, you’re it for me.”

Hermione blinked, totally unprepared to hear that Draco had managed to shag multiple people while never even giving them the courtesy of a kiss. For the briefest moment she felt herself softening, but then she forced it away. He had still kept so much from her, and she couldn’t let that make her bend.

Not yet.

“We’re not talking about your sexual conquests. We’re talking about Astoria.”

“Right,” he said, deflating again. “Well Father was going to stand in for me if I didn’t perform after a year.”

“So you killed him,” interrupted Hermione, “at Hogwarts.”

Draco jerked slightly and looked at her with some alarm. But then Theo jumped in.

“No, actually, I killed Lucius. Draco killed Tiberius. It kept both of us from being disinherited.”

Hermione blinked in surprise and turned back to Theo.

“You killed them because of the engagement contracts?”

“Only partially,” said Theo. “The bigger reason was because they found us with you at the Battle of Hogwarts. We were trying to evacuate you and Luna out of the battlefield and get you into the dungeons where it was at least relatively safe. Blaise had Ginny and slipped away in time, but they cornered us.”

“They demanded we turn you over, so we knew we had to kill them,” said Draco darkly. Hermione glanced at him warily, but he seemed to be lost in the memory. “It was something Theo and I had discussed at length months before the battle even began. We knew we wanted to extract you if we could manage it, but both of our fathers posed a serious problem. They controlled the wards and the elves in our homes and were loyal to the Dark Lord. We had all but decided to secure you at Grimmauld Place because it was mine. I prepared it for you and everything... but we knew there was still a risk one of them would learn about it if we kept you there. It would be much simpler if they were both out of the way, and we could keep you at the Manor instead, in my wing, until you adjusted. Once it was clear that you were at Hogwarts that night, we agreed to do everything we could to separate you from Potter and Weasley and finally get you to safety. We told each other we wouldn’t hesitate to kill our fathers if they gave us a single reason to do it. And like Theo said, I had to kill Tiberius and he had to kill Lucius or else we both would have been disinherited and our estates would have gone to distant relatives.”

Hermione’s heart started to race, and she forced herself to breathe. She saw Draco eyeing her cautiously.

“Right...” she said a bit faintly. “So you killed your fathers. But Astoria and Daphne were both still alive.”

“Correct,” said Draco. “Theo has nobody to stand in his place to enforce the contract, but I do. My mother... Well, I didn’t think she would do it at first. She knows I don’t care for Astoria. But she started pressing me to go ahead with the engagement, and I became worried that she might do it behind my back. The Dark Lord likes the match with the Greengrasses because they are purebloods and Sacred Twenty-Eight. I really don’t think Mother will step in anytime soon, but if she ever does then I need a superior match to present to the Dark Lord so that he stops her from doing it.”

“You need a Black.”

Draco nodded. “Yes. The contract with the Greengrasses can’t be broken unless one of us ties to somebody else. Until that happens, my mother can stand in for me to force the issue. I can’t perform a tie behind the Dark Lord’s back though, it’s far too risky. I need his approval first.”

“So you what... want to marry me?”

She didn’t know how she felt about this. A bit ill, a bit excited, very frustrated... it was just *so much*.

“I...” Draco seemed to choke up a little. “Eventually,” he said. “Someday. Yes, I... you’re the only one I could imagine and... I swear it wouldn’t be *now*. I know it’s too soon for something like that. But for purebloods the engagements are nearly as binding as the actual marriages, and I just hoped...”

He trailed off, and put his head in his hands. He was grasping his hair and taking his own deep breaths.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably and decided she could not sort her feelings about this now.

“Your mother told me that she will stand in for you and tie you to Astoria on Halloween — or Samhain.”

Draco’s head now shot up and looked at her with wide eyes.

“No, that’s too soon, that’s —”

“She said the year will be up, and Samhain will make the tie stronger. Astoria is in on it, and they don’t plan to tell you about it until it’s time.”

Draco went pale. “I just —”

“And she also said you can’t be with *me* like that because she thinks you have inherited the Black family madness, and I’m your obsession. She says we can’t reproduce because I’m too powerful. Our children would be mad too and would become dangerous. After she told me everything she swore me to secrecy and... tried to persuade me to keep my word.”

Hermione recited all of this almost automatically. She supposed it was some small comfort that Draco was obviously shocked by his mother’s plan. Even if he knew his mother’s wishes, he truly didn’t know that she was scheming to do it behind his back so soon. But with everything else she had learned about him today, it still wasn’t enough. She needed to make sure she understood everything, and then she had to get away and think.

“I’m not mad,” he insisted.

“Aren’t you?” she asked softly.

His face fell, and he was shaking his head hard.

“No, I swear it.”

“Draco, you stalked me for years.”

His jaw snapped shut, and he nodded once. His expression started to go flat, and she knew he was trying to occlude.

“You watched me obsessively. You made notes about everything I was doing. You searched my mind with legilimency to learn about the things I liked and how I felt about you.”

He nodded again.

“Amalie Beumont is a *real person*. Is she dead?”

“No! We just paid her to stay quiet,” said Theo, jumping in. “I found her, and she was happy to tell me everything about her if we paid her enough to set her up in some other country.”

It was a small thing, and Hermione sighed in relief, but she was still not done.

“Fine. But Draco stole my *dollhouse* and created a damn replica of it in my room!”

Draco’s occlumency fell.

“I just wanted you to like it!” he burst out. “I didn’t... I mean... the Hogwarts dorms are all the same, aren’t they? And the room I saw at your parents’ house after Theo bought it was plain and clearly hadn’t been lived in for a long time! I saw the dollhouse, and it was so detailed and intricate. I just thought it was the type of furniture you liked!”

“It’s still very creepy and twisted!”

He fell silent at this and looked down at his knees miserably.

“And you marked me and tracked me and fucking *adopted me* and then gave me a *sodding house* without asking me!”

He put his head in his hands and said nothing.

“And every time some other man looks at me, you become violent,” she finished. “You are... it’s not *healthy* Draco!”

He looked back up at her, and his eyes were pleading now. “Please Hermione! I know I’m... not right. But it’s just... I just...”

He looked overwhelmed and slightly crazed. He looked back at her desperately.

“It’s because I love you, alright? I’m in love with you!”

Hermione blinked. “You love me?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding miserable again. “I love you so much it hurts. And I know I’m bad for you, *truly*. My mother is not entirely wrong. The Blacks are all a little mental. I know I’m supposed to give a shit about what happens to other people, but with the exception of a few people like you and Theo, I just don’t care. I can torture, I can kill, and it makes me feel nothing. But *you*, sweet girl... you make me feel *everything*. All the feelings I was supposed to have my whole life — they hardly existed until I met you. And as soon as you started to smile at me and let me touch you and even kiss you... Gods it was like seeing in color! I’m sorry, Hermione. I should have told you about this ages ago, but I know I’m not a good person. And you are *so* good. You deserve someone better than me, but I just... I can’t let you belong to anybody else! Nobody will ever love you as much as I do!”

He fell silent, his gaze pleading again.

Hermione glanced at Theo, who was looking worried as he stared at Draco.

“You knew,” she said to Theo. “You knew he was obsessed.”

Theo swallowed and nodded. “Yes, but he means well. And you deserve every single thing he can give you. You deserve to have what *I* had growing up.”

Hermione frowned. "I had our parents."

"I know," said Theo sadly. "And I might not have had *that*. But I had a respected name in the magical world. I had wealth, status, a fucking *castle*. You deserve that too. Being the last named Black gives you all of it."

"I have wealth from Harry," she pointed out.

To her surprise, both Theo and Draco shook their heads at this.

Draco caught her look of confusion, and he sighed. "It's true Potter left you plenty of gold. But it's stuck in Gringotts, and the Dark Lord can never find out about it. We have never lied to you about that. Besides, Sirius had a lot more gold than Potter did."

"I thought Sirius's gold went to Harry!"

"No," said Draco. "Sirius certainly *intended* to leave everything to Potter. I knew about it because the Ministry alerted his closest blood relatives when it reviewed his will. But when I got your first statement of accounts after Potter died, the balance looked far too low to me. I made an inquiry at Gringotts and discovered that Sirius's vault was still intact. Sirius was in prison or on the run for most of Potter's life, so he never filled out a beneficiary form to make the transfer to Potter automatic. And Potter never took the will to Gringotts to claim it manually. I don't know why. Maybe Dumbledore never told him it was necessary or maybe Potter just didn't care. Either way, Sirius's vault was still just sitting there waiting for somebody to show proof of ownership of it. I realized I could claim it for you if I could prove you had a blood tie to the Blacks. Potter's old vault is now in Hermione Granger's name. Sirius's old vault is now in Columba Black's name. Hermione Granger is very wealthy, but Columba Black is an heiress. It's far more than what Astoria would bring to the table in a dowry."

"So this is all about getting Sirius's money then?" asked Hermione. She was surprised by how much the thought hurt.

Some of Draco's resignation disappeared, and a flash of anger crossed his face.

"Of *course* it's not about getting Sirius's money! I could have claimed that bloody vault for myself the day I learned it was still available, and Columba Black would have never gotten it back from the goblins! But I had to make you superior to Astoria in all respects: you're more powerful than her, you're from an older family than her, and you're far wealthier than her. All of these are things that would make the Dark Lord favor you over her if it ever came down to it. And if that's *still* not enough to convince him, then Theo can offer up a dowry for you to sweeten the pot. You're still biologically related to Theo, and the blood magic doesn't change that. He can stand in as your closest living male relative for magical marriage settlements, so he can transfer magical properties and gold to you or to anybody who ties with you."

Hermione swallowed hard as she remembered the dowry contract. She hadn't read enough of it to realize it was for Columba Black and not Hermione Granger. She shifted uncomfortably.

“I don’t need a dowry,” she mumbled.

Theo and Draco both shot her identically stubborn looks.

She glared back, and then they both seemed to wilt again.

“Look, forget the dowry for now,” said Theo quickly. “Nothing is signed. Besides, it’s not just about making you look better than Astoria.”

“Then what else is it?” prompted Hermione, feeling a bit fatigued by the information dump the wizards were giving her. She had *never* studied things like magical inheritance laws and pureblood engagement rules, though she supposed it wasn’t a surprise Draco and Theo knew all about them.

Draco bit his lip. “I wanted you to be protected and safe if something happened to me. We’re still in a war, and I’m still sent to fight now and then. I could be killed at any time — Theo and Blaise too — and I needed to know you would be okay if that happens. You are Hermione Granger *and* Columba Black. You are entitled to the contents of both vaults. But Hermione Granger cannot go into Gringotts while the Dark Lord is alive, and any attempt to get into a vault with her name on it would be reported to him. I had to find some other way to provide for you if I’m gone, and Columba Black *can* go to Gringotts. Columba Black has an ancient, warded home. She has enough money to support herself and her best friends for several lifetimes. She can also inherit from other purebloods like me and Theo, and she is one of the named beneficiaries on both of our vaults. Poppy was under orders to tell you everything and evacuate you, Ginny, and Luna to Grimmauld Place immediately if anything happened to me.”

Hermione was truly overwhelmed now. She turned back to Theo.

“So you supported this mad plan of his because you wanted us to be on more even footing. But why didn’t you *tell* me, Theo?”

A look of guilt crossed Theo’s face. “We just didn’t think you were ready to hear it.”

“You mean I wasn’t ready to learn that he was so obsessed he created an entire second identity for me.”

Draco’s face fell again, as Theo ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

“I suppose when you put it that way... *yes*... but you have to understand, Hermione, he’s not just obsessed with you. He *does* love you too. So do I. Neither of us would ever hurt you.”

After everything else she had heard today, Hermione couldn’t help herself. She finally snapped.

“THIS HURTS ME!” she shouted.

They both recoiled and stared at her with huge eyes.

“THIS IS THE THING THAT HURTS ME! YOU SAY YOU WOULD NEVER HURT ME! DRACO SAYS IT ALL THE DAMN TIME! BUT THIS HURTS ME SO MUCH! THE SECRETS AND THE DECEIT AND ALLOWING ME TO BELIEVE THINGS THAT ARE UNTRUE SIMPLY BECAUSE IT’S CONVENIENT FOR YOU! YOU TWO HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH THIS HURTS!”

They were both ashen now, and Draco was shaking his head slowly.

“No... no darling girl, please. We can’t... we didn’t want to...”

“DID IT EVER OCCUR TO YOU THAT MAYBE I DON’T WANT TO BE A PUREBLOOD? MAYBE I’VE BEEN CALLED MUDBLOOD TOO MANY TIMES? MAYBE TOO MANY OF MY FRIENDS HAVE DIED? MAYBE STATUS AND WEALTH DON’T MATTER TO ME? MAYBE I WOULD GIVE HARRY’S MONEY BACK IN A HEARTBEAT IF IT MEANT I COULD HAVE HIM BACK TOO? MAYBE I FEEL THE SAME WAY ABOUT SIRIUS OR EVEN THE TWO OF YOU IF YOU WERE KILLED? MAYBE SOME PART OF ME WAS HAPPIER AS A FUGITIVE IN A FUCKING *TENT* THAN BEING A BOON BECAUSE AT LEAST THE PEOPLE I LIVED WITH DIDN’T KEEP SECRETS, AND I WASN’T TRAPPED? BUT YOU NEVER KNEW THAT BECAUSE YOU NEVER BOTHERED TO INVOLVE ME! YOU NEVER EVEN THOUGHT TO ASK! YOU DID IT ALL BEHIND MY BACK! MAKING DECISIONS LIKE THAT HURTS ME DRACO! *YOU HURT ME!*”

Hermione was breathing hard by the end of it, but she was still shocked to see a tear fall down his face.

“No,” he whispered. “I never meant to hurt you. Please...”

“But you did,” she said, trying to control her anger enough so she could speak. “You hurt me every single time you deceived me. For all the things you’ve given me — money, property, protection, a respectable name in your world— somehow you failed to give me the one thing I wanted most of all.”

“What is it?” he asked desperately. “Whatever it is, you can have it! Anything, darling girl, anything at—”

He cut himself off as Hermione gave a bitter laugh.

“All I wanted from you was honesty. That’s what I asked for on my very first day here. I wouldn’t be furious with you right now, and I might have *considered* your other plans if you had just given me that.”

“I never lied to you,” he whispered. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Theo wince.

Hermione clenched her jaw, and forced herself not to start shouting again. He *still* didn’t get it.

“Lies of omission are still lies, Draco. They make me believe things that are untrue. And what made it even worse was that I let you do it because you chose very opportune times to

give me those shitty half-truths. You always waited until I was emotional, and then you manipulated me. You held people I care about hostage to get me to cooperate. You *knew* you were doing it, and even though you claim to love me you did it anyway. And I know I'm a fool for allowing it, but I can't let you do it anymore. Tell me: what are you going to do now that you know your mother is going to tie you on Samhain? Are you going to keep me here in my prison and tie me instead? Are you going to find some blood magic that lets you do it behind my back and tell me about it in a few years when I'm trying to marry somebody else? Are you going to keep me bound to you forever?"

He was shaking his head and more tears fell.

"No," he said hoarsely. "No, I can't, not even if I wanted to, I—"

"What do you mean you *can't*? Obviously it's possible to tie somebody against their will!"

Draco took a shuddering breath, and an odd look crossed his face. Hermione sensed he was weighing whether to tell her something or not.

"I swear to God Draco, if you don't spill right now I may not ever forgive you for this."

He swallowed hard and nodded. "Fine. You're right. Forced ties are very rare and are always done through an engagement contract negotiated by the head of a family line. For the Blacks, that's both of us. You are head of your line, and I am head of mine. We are both part of the Black family for the purposes of the blood magic I performed, but for marriage negotiations, one wizard can't force another into an engagement contract if their relationship is more distant than first cousins. The pureblood families are so interconnected that the law keeps it fairly narrow so distant relatives can't interfere with each other. First cousins also can't marry each other under wizarding law, so the rule avoids any conflicts of interest."

"So you can't tie me," she said, feeling very relieved. "We are second cousins, not first cousins. You could tie others in your line, but you can't tie anybody in my line because the relationship is too distant."

"That's right," said Draco. "To force a tie on you I would have had to adopt you as my cousin or sister — but then I wouldn't be allowed to marry you. As your second cousin, I can't force the tie, but I *can* marry you. Second cousins are allowed to marry each other under wizarding law."

"I know," murmured Hermione, as she remembered the Black family tapestry. Sirius's parents were actually second cousins. Walburga Black was born Walburga Black. Then she married her second cousin Orion Black. It was probably no wonder her portrait was so obsessed with the Black family.

Hermione glanced at Draco and saw a flash of guilt on his face.

"There's something you aren't telling me."

He hesitated.

"Draco..." she warned.

He closed his eyes as though steadying himself.

"Fine. I can't tie you myself, but your case is a bit unique since you have a biological tie to another House as well."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and then glanced at Theo.

"You mean Theo? Could he stand in for me? Since he's my older brother?"

Draco just looked down at his knees, and Theo jumped in.

"Yes, I could stand in for you, but I won't do that, Hermione. I told Draco from the very beginning that he would need your cooperation for that part of it, even if the Dark Lord approved. Draco has never really pushed back on that."

"But has he asked if you would do it?"

They both looked grim.

"Once," Theo acknowledged. "And I told him no. That was the end of it."

Hermione's stomach started to sink further, and both wizards gave her pleading looks.

"I mean it, Hermione," insisted Theo. "Look, if I wanted to force a tie for you, the easiest way to do it would be to say you're my father's bastard and then acknowledge you as my sister since I'm head of the Notts. We wouldn't even have to do a blood adoption to make the marriage settlements work because we're already related. I'm your brother, and that means I can acknowledge you and then marry you off to anybody I want, provided the match has the Dark Lord's blessing. As my sister you would even be a very good match for Draco because you would be part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. The only thing that's required to be included is a father who is a member too and a House that acknowledges you. That's it. Every family acknowledges bastards now and then when it's necessary to continue the bloodlines. It's obvious Draco wants you, so nobody would find it odd that I acknowledged my half-sister so my best mate could marry her. I'll not deny that I was very tempted to do it."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because I'm not going to just arrange a marriage for you behind your back! Besides, just because you would have been a good option for Draco doesn't mean the Dark Lord would ultimately select you. He's deeply interested in continuing certain bloodlines, the Malfoys and the Notts chief among them. Draco and I agreed that positioning you as a Black instead of a Nott would be more compelling. As a Nott you would be pretty equal to Astoria: you would be part of a Sacred Twenty-Eight House with an older male relative who is willing to fund a dowry for you, but that's all. As a Black, you are an heiress with a fortune entirely of your own. That makes you a much bigger prize."

Hermione bit her lip as she thought about this. "I thought independently wealthy witches intimidated him? He wants them controlled. That's why Nita turned over her properties to

Blaise.”

Both Theo and Draco assumed thoughtful looks at this.

“He’s wary of them,” acknowledged Draco. “But they also intrigue him. The pureblood families are so inbred with each other that it’s unusual for a woman to control her own fortune, especially after she’s married. Those who do are usually powerful and ruthless, like Bellatrix. There’s a reason she’s one of his favorites. Any type of power fascinates him, once he’s sure he can bend it to his will. The only wizards Bellatrix shows *any* deference to are the Dark Lord and to a much lesser extent her husband and me. That’s it. As long as she does that, then the Dark Lord believes she knows her place well enough and allows her to flex her wealth and power over all the others. In Nita’s case, she had no interest in currying favor with the Dark Lord, so she moved her properties to Blaise to stay unnoticed and on the fringes.”

“So you were trying to make me like Bellatrix,” she said, as a sick feeling coiled in her stomach. She could understand their point, but Bellatrix *terrified* her. She was about the very last person Hermione *ever* wished to emulate.

Theo and Draco exchanged awkward looks. “I suppose... in a manner of speaking... yes,” admitted Theo. “House Black has produced some formidable witches, including his very favorite. He would have drawn the parallels entirely on his own. It was a much stronger position than I could give you from House Nott, and being a Black doesn’t stop me from stepping in and providing settlements if we need it, since you *are* my sister. We would just have to find some way to explain it.”

Hermione closed her eyes to try to control her breathing. This was so much. *So much*. She could understand the brilliance of their plan now, but they had used her for it. They had arranged to turn her into an heiress, yes, but they had never even *asked*. Should she be grateful for the wealth and security they had given to her? Maybe, but it was largely done as a way to give *Draco* the things he wanted from her too. Yes, she would be cared for if he died, and her heart squeezed at that. But she knew that the estate planning aspects of it were really secondary to Draco’s personal marriage plans.

Marriage plans he had developed because he had an unhealthy fixation with her.

She shivered.

Unhealthy fixation or not, Hermione knew it was all an enormous plot to make her good enough for Draco Malfoy. Because it didn’t matter how creepy and dark his obsessions were, Hermione Granger was still a mudblood and would *never* be good enough for him. Amalie Beumont — another pureblood — wasn’t good enough either. Even as a Nott, Hermione might not be able to edge out Astoria Greengrass. No, it would take somebody like Columba Black to be the perfect match for the head of House Malfoy.

Even if their motive for it was to get Voldemort’s blessing, something about it was still deeply painful.

Draco obviously didn't understand that. Even Theo didn't understand that, despite the fact that *he* was muggleborn too. He hadn't been raised as one. He had never experienced that prejudice. He might acknowledge that it was there and be able to see her points in a purely academic way, but how could he understand pureblood prejudice without having *lived* it and fought against it day after day, year after year as Hermione had? It was impossible, and his own unconscious biases were breathtaking as he nodded along with Draco's plan to turn Hermione into a pureblood princess fit for their prince.

"I shouldn't have to be a pureblood to be worthy of you," she finally said.

It came as no great surprise to her that they both looked at her in confusion, and she just gave a bitter laugh.

"Of course," she said. "You don't even see it, do you? I'm supposed to be grateful for the protection and the name and the status. I'll not deny it will make being on my own much easier than it otherwise would be. But do you *really* think I'm incapable of helping myself if you two aren't here? Do you think a few Gringotts goblins would stop me from getting into the vault that is in Hermione Granger's name? Of course not. I've broken in before, and I could easily do it again. What this *really* is, is a way to make me good enough for Draco. I understand that You-Know-Who has to approve of the match for both of you. But you have gone so far down this path to turn me into some other person that I am starting to think you believe it too. Even my own brother agrees with it on some level, because he was never raised as a mudblood."

Both wizards looked stunned, but Hermione was on a roll now and couldn't seem to stop herself.

"Let me give you some insight into what being a mudblood is like. It's being told that you are *never* going to be good enough. You will never be powerful enough. You will certainly never be wealthy enough. You don't deserve to even be *alive*. It's knowing that the purebloods all hope that you'll be killed by Slytherin's monster because it would be better for mudbloods to all be dead than to dare threaten the pureblood way of life."

Draco blanched. Hermione shot him a knowing scowl, but she didn't stop.

"And because you're a mudblood, you're easy to manipulate. You don't know the purebloods' rules and their customs. You've never been invited to learn about them. Even when a pureblood is so obsessed with you he builds a fucking *shrine* to you in his closet, you are not good enough. Because that pureblood might be obsessed enough to stalk you, but he doesn't care enough to step away from blood purity or his lifestyle for you. But never fear! The pureblood has a fantastic solution. He'll turn the mudblood into a pureblood herself, and then she will be perfect for him! And because she's never learned about pureblood customs and she's too fucking *stupid* to see all the red flags, she'll never know what he's doing. If she ever finds out, she'll even be *grateful* because he's giving her all the things she should have wanted and never could have gotten on her own thanks to her inferior birth. Of *course* the mudblood would want to become one of the very people who told her she should die when she was a child and then *actually tried to murder her*. Why wouldn't she want to be part of such a vaunted group?"

She was breathing hard, and Draco was staring at her like he had never seen her properly. She didn't know if he was having a revelation or if it was just horror on his face. But she *still* wasn't done. Years of bitterness and anger were welling up now, and she couldn't seem to stop.

"There's one thing the pureblood forgot though... or maybe he just never knew about it because he's never been a mudblood himself. Even the mudblood's own muddy brother never considered it, because he's never lived the life she did. And the thing they *both* forgot is this: when you turn a mudblood into a pureblood you are telling that mudblood that she's *still* not good enough just the way she is. You are showing her that you are still prejudiced somewhere deep down, even if that prejudice is unconscious. You are reinforcing all the shitty things that have been said to her over and over again, because the pureblood could never conceive a world where being a mudblood might be a *good* thing. But I'd like to let you in on a little secret. There are times when being a mudblood is better. That's because being a mudblood means that you are not tied to *anybody's* rules. It means you have access to the *whole* world, not just the wizarding world. It means you're resourceful and able to help yourself because you've always been forced to do it. And most of all, it means you're *free to love whomever you want without having to turn them into a different person*. You purebloods have none of that freedom, and frankly, I pity you for it."

She fell silent, and both wizards stared at her with their mouths hanging open slightly.

"Hermione..." started Theo. He sounded devastated.

"What?" she asked, now feeling drained and exhausted.

"I just... we turned you into Columba because of the Dark Lord. That's all. If he wasn't alive, Draco would acknowledge you openly. So would I."

"Are you sure about that? I mean, have you really sat down and done some soul searching and concluded that the day he dies is the day you both acknowledge me as Hermione Granger? Because after everything I've learned today, I don't know if I believe that, Theo. I was Hermione for a long time at Hogwarts, and neither one of you ever *once* acknowledged me in a loving way — not as a romantic partner *or* as a sibling. I'll concede that you mostly ignored me until I was captured at Hogwarts, but Draco literally made the world believe I was *dead* before he found it in himself to be kind to me."

Draco was pale, and now his head was in his hands. "Please..." he ground out, but Hermione just shook her head hard. She needed time and space to think. Even *they* needed time and space to think about all the things she had said – to examine their own prejudices and to make sure that those prejudices weren't the true reason they had done this thing to her. And if they *had* been the reason, then she needed them to acknowledge it and apologize for it before she would forgive them and accept the persona of Columba Black. But there was still one last thing she had to say, and for once she knew she had every bit of leverage to demand it.

"Don't tie me behind my back, or I will never forgive either one of you. I have forgiven too much already, and everybody has a limit. This one is mine. If you take away my freedom to choose who I marry, I will have nothing to do with it either one of you, ever again. Do not test me."

“No,” said Draco, his voice rough. “No, we aren’t going to tie you. I wish—”

“You wish what?” she asked tightly.

“I wish you wanted it as much as I do. But... no. I’ll just... fuck, I said you could do whatever you wanted to do once we told you everything. And you do know everything now. So it’s your choice.”

Hermione stared between Draco and Theo and then took a step back. Draco let out a choked sob as she stepped back again, but she started to occlude too. She couldn’t let him affect her like this, not right now. Now that she knew everything and had said her piece, she needed to get away so she could think. And based on what she had learned that afternoon, she had a much safer place to think than a tent in the woods, though she had to admit she was sorely tempted by it. She didn’t particularly want anything that Draco had given to her.

Unfortunately, she was too sensible to turn down a warded property.

“I’m taking Crookshanks and going to Grimmauld Place,” she said. “I want you both to think about everything I said, and I do not want either one of you to contact me until I contact you first. No owls, no elves, no tapping on our bond, no tracking spell. I don’t want you to make plans without me anymore. I don’t want you to make decisions for me. I don’t want... well right now, I don’t want either one of you.”

Hermione’s own heart fractured at the devastated looks on their faces, and she wondered at the truthfulness of her own words, but she could scarcely breathe. Maybe she would want them again tomorrow or the next day or the week after. But right now, she really didn’t want to be around them. She needed space to finally confront all the things she had learned about them that day, and she would never have it here at Malfoy Manor. The only thing she wanted to do was leave.

“Tell Ginny and Luna I am safe and will be in touch if I ever find it in myself to forgive you.”

With that, she forced herself to ignore the devastated looks on their faces. She mentally checked herself to confirm that she had her beaded bag and her knives and her wand. She reached down and picked up Crookshanks and began to turn toward the door to Draco’s room.

But then she paused and looked back. “Is the floo in your room connected to Grimmauld Place? For Crookshanks. If not, I will need to fly.”

“Yes,” whispered Draco. He wasn’t looking at her. Tears were streaming down his cheeks silently. “Yes, it’s connected and much safer than flying.”

She nodded to herself and then remembered the last thing she needed to ask.

“And my wand... Did you know that Astoria was carrying my wand?”

He raised his eyes to look at hers now, and she saw the truth there. He didn’t even have to say it. The guilt on his face spoke for itself.

“How could you?” she whispered.

Then she choked back her own sob as she clutched Crookshanks close to her chest and strode through the connecting door to Draco’s room. She pinched some floo powder in her fingers and threw it into the fire.

“Number 12 Grimmauld Place!” she cried as she stepped in.

As she was spinning away, she heard a howl that sounded like a wounded animal coming from behind her. And all the cracks that had appeared in Hermione’s heart that day finally shattered until she was left with nothing but pieces.

Chapter 27: Alone

Hermione stepped out of the fire, dropped Crookshanks, and fell to her knees.

The sobs wracked her body, and she had the strangest wish to see Nita. She knew Nita would be able to put her back together, even though everything felt so broken.

She could feel Theo distantly through the bond. He wasn't trying to get her to open to him, but she could sense his pain and devastation too, and somehow that made everything worse.

She felt so angry, so hurt, so *confused*.

She scarcely knew which way was up as it all poured out of her. It felt like grieving all over again. It was as though the thing that had been growing stronger between her and Draco had been built entirely on a lie and had unexpectedly died.

And it *had* been built on a lie. Of course it had been.

But did that mean that it wasn't real?

She knew *his* feelings were real, but they were also very warped. And the deep, inherent prejudices in the things he had done to her resurrected old insecurities and bitterness she hadn't allowed herself to think about while she was under his care. She suspected he had become so obsessed in the first place because she was somebody he wanted but couldn't have thanks to those same prejudices. She had read all about it in his journal. His feelings had grown, despite numerous social barriers and attempts to push her away.

They were so strong he had gone a little bit mad with them — obsessive, controlling, and domineering to the point that he created an entire second life for her to match *his*. And yet, he was still so gentle and loving while he did it. His innate compulsion to always take care of her absolutely broke her heart.

She gave another sob as she remembered his consideration for her as he helped her reclaim her body. They hadn't made it the whole way, and Hermione would still have more to overcome on that front. But he had done more to heal her from Cormac than anyone. And now she felt broken all over again but for a very different reason.

Maybe that was why she had told him about Narcissa's plan to tie with Astoria. She could have kept that from him, and he might have even deserved it after the things he did to her, but she wanted him to know. She thought it might be because she still cared about him, *deeply*, and the notion of any person tying another against their will was anathema to her.

But then why didn't she tell him about the things Narcissa had done to Astoria? Why didn't she disclose Narcissa's threat?

Because he's unstable when he's upset. I'm afraid he might snap and kill his mother in the same way he arranged for Theo to kill his father.

Hermione was still grappling with the patricide pact that Draco and Theo had agreed to and then actually executed at Hogwarts.

Key word being 'execute.'

It hadn't even been heat of the moment. They agreed to do it if there was any reason at all, and neither one of them hesitated.

She shivered a little as she forced herself to confront it. She understood the reasons behind it now, and a large part of her was relieved Lucius and Tiberius were gone. But it was still chilling to learn just how far *both* of them would go to keep her with them, and Hermione knew at that moment that if he ever had to choose between his mother and Hermione, Draco would choose Hermione – no, *Columba Black* – every time. Theo would do the same thing, of course. She knew they both loved Narcissa in their own way, but she couldn't trust either one of them to think rationally when there was a threat to her.

Narcissa Malfoy was dangerous, but she had also made it clear that as long as Hermione stayed out of the way, they would have no conflict. And right now, Hermione was well out of the way and in a warded home that Narcissa could not hope to enter. There had been no need to set off the nuclear bomb that was an enraged Draco Malfoy by revealing just how mad his mother was too.

Not yet.

As the emotions rolled through her, she looked down at her wand and became angry again. Perhaps she should have given him a chance to explain *that*, but after everything else they had discussed she just didn't have it in her to listen to anything more.

Besides, she didn't need an explanation. She knew the moment she saw that shrine in his closet that he had been aware of it. She had lost her wand when she was taken to Malfoy Manor to be tortured. Of course Draco would have found a way to collect it. If he cared enough to keep her sodding hair elastics from six years ago, he absolutely would have kept her wand too. In fact, it probably had its own mini shrine within the bigger shrine. No doubt he had lovingly wrapped it up in one of her old hair ribbons and placed it on a cushion front and center in the middle of the table so he could kneel before it, while dreaming up all the ways he could turn her into *Columba Black*. The cushion was probably light blue with gold tassels to match her bedroom.

She snorted to herself as her imagination ran away for a moment.

Gold tasseled pillows or not, Hermione was fairly certain he knew about it before she even asked. That meant he had turned it over to Astoria at some point, either directly or through his mother.

She could hazard a guess about why he had done it too: it was dangerous to keep it in the room next door to hers once she moved in. Hermione Granger with her own wand was

formidable and would be almost impossible to contain. She was too powerful with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of magic, and a wand that did her bidding without any hesitation would be the only thing she needed to break free. Draco knew he had to get rid of it somehow, and letting Astoria have it meant that it would still stay close to him.

He should have put it in his Gringotts vault.

He should have, certainly. He should have put every single thing he collected of hers into his vault if he didn't want her to ever know about them. But Draco had the odd ability to be both hyper rational and incredibly dense at precisely the same time when it came to Hermione.

She sighed, allowing another small burst of anger to swell and then pop as she put her wand away. Getting over *that* betrayal would take some time.

When she had no tears left, she wiped her face roughly and lifted her head before looking around with confusion. The sitting room looked rather different from the last time she was here. Draco must have redecorated.

Gone was the green and brown, and it was replaced instead with light neutrals — creams and taupes and light grays that reminded her of Draco's eyes. The sofa was no longer moth eaten, but looked expensive and yet very comfortable in a cream velvet.

She climbed to her feet and took a shaky step forward as she made herself explore the house where she had last lived with Harry and Ron.

Every single room she investigated was different. The entire house was lighter, brighter, the furniture new and in the same style as those pieces in her bedroom at Malfoy Manor. Each room had at least one vase of fresh flowers, their soft fragrance wafting through the air. For some reason they were predominantly in shades of purple and lavender, though Hermione had to concede they provided a tasteful element of color to brighten the neutral furnishings. Hermione touched some of the petals and wondered if they had been under a stasis charm or if Kreacher was still alive to maintain them.

It didn't seem like something the old elf would have done.

Hermione moved into the hallway and noted that the portrait of Walburga Black was gone. The faintest traces of smoke seemed to linger around the area where she used to reside. It was clear the wall had been repaired and repainted, but she suspected Draco had actually burned it off to get around her permanent sticking charm.

Likewise, the severed elf heads were gone, as were most of the other scowling portraits. The paintings that were left were predominantly landscapes and still lifes. Hermione had only seen a couple of frames that looked as though they might contain portraits of people, but their residents were missing so she couldn't be certain. The Black family tapestry was obviously gone, and the library right next to it had been refreshed with new rugs and curtains. Hermione then headed to the kitchen, which was the only room that had not changed much since the last time she had been there. It was close to what she had come to think of as the "post-locket Kreacher" — that version of the old elf who actually liked the boys and tolerated Hermione and bothered to *clean*.

“Hello?” Hermione asked tentatively. So far she had seen nobody, not even a portrait. But the house was clearly well-cared for, and she couldn’t imagine Draco leaving it unattended.

Sure enough, a tiny elf appeared with a small *POP!*

“Mistress Columba!” she squeaked, bowing so low her nose brushed the floor.

Hermione felt some irritation stirring at this. “You can call me Hermione,” she said, a bit colder than she meant to.

The elf blushed, and her ears drooped.

“I is sorry, Mistress. ‘Tis what you are known by in this House. Posy will remember not to call you that.”

Hermione felt a rush of guilt. “It’s not a problem... Posy you say? Wait, are you... you’re not Poppy’s daughter are you?”

Posy lit at this and nodded eagerly. “Yes, Mistress! Master Draco is giving me a new assignment! Kreacher is fighting in the Battle of Hogwarts, and Master Draco is needing a new elf here.”

“So Kreacher didn’t...” Hermione trailed off delicately.

Posy’s face fell again. “No, Mistress. He is not making it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione, and she meant it. She hadn’t spared much thought for Kreacher, and now she regretted it.

“He was a brave elf,” said Posy. “But now Posy is here and is hoping to meet you! My mother is saying nice things about you, Mistress.”

Hermione was surprised to feel her face twist into a sad smile at this. “Thank you, Posy. I adore Poppy, I really do.”

“Posy could ask my mother to come visit?” she asked hopefully.

Hermione hesitated. “Maybe eventually, but I’m afraid Draco and I have rowed rather spectacularly. We aren’t speaking right now, and I don’t know that I want him to hear too many things about me just yet.”

Posy gave her a knowing look. “I is your elf, Mistress, tied to Grimmauld Place. My mother is Master Draco’s, tied to Malfoy Manor. I is understanding, Mistress.”

“I hate to ask you to keep things from your mother,” said Hermione a bit worriedly.

Posy just shrugged. “Tis the way of house elves, Mistress. When we is bound to separate houses we is having to keep secrets from each other. My mother will not be expecting to hear very much about you once Master Draco tells her you is not speaking right now. And I is not hearing much about him.”

Hermione frowned. "Would you rather go back to the Manor so you can speak freely with her? I'm sure that I could ask... despite the fight I mean."

"Not at all, Mistress!" said Posy, her eyes going wide. "Tis a great honor to be bound to a house such as this. Posy is young for this position. I is trying very hard to live up to my job! I is hoping to stay."

Hermione relaxed a little. She didn't like house elf enslavement, but she had grown accustomed to it after living around Kreacher and then Poppy. And she could tell Posy was proud to have been selected to care for Grimmauld Place.

To care for her.

"Alright," she said. "But..." and Hermione hesitated a moment because she *knew* that what she was about to say would get back to Draco. She hated to distress Poppy though. Hermione cared for the little elf very much.

"...but you can tell Poppy that I am here and safe and being cared for very well by you. You have done a wonderful job with the house. I scarcely recognized it."

Posy lit up at this. "I is telling her Mistress."

"Although..." Hermione hesitated.

"What is it?"

"Well, for at least a few nights I think I'm going to sleep in my tent."

Posy stared at her in confusion.

"I have a tent," Hermione clarified. "I think I would prefer to sleep there. Maybe I can set it up in the gardens since they should be warded."

"But why?"

"I'm just not ready to accept all of this. Not yet."

"But 'tis yours, Mistress."

"No, it's Columba Black's. And I'm not her yet."

Posy looked terribly confused, and truthfully Hermione was struggling as well. She knew Draco was a spy and working in his own way to help the Order. She knew that if he just abandoned his position for her he would lose his chance for a pardon and there would be a price on his head. She knew he had to stay in Voldemort's good graces to do his job, and that meant he could never tie with her without Voldemort's approval. Getting that approval would require a superior match to Astoria. And a superior match meant somebody like Columba Black.

The entire thing was twisted, but it was also very logical and sensible given the world they currently lived in and Draco's personal goals. She could see the way he had rationalized it and mapped it all out, point by point, step by step. And yet...

The inherent prejudice really hurt, and it also perturbed her that she had not been involved with it at all. Perhaps if he had bothered to talk to her about *any* of it at first she would have entertained his plans. She could have assured herself that he really wanted *Hermione* and this persona of Columba Black was all just a ploy to appease Voldemort. Hermione had no problem assuming a disguise to trick the Death Eaters and Voldemort. She had done it before, numerous times by now. But this time it felt so much larger, so much more *permanent* that she worried his reasons for it ran deeper than just a surface-level deception.

She didn't have a chance to really test his reasoning behind it because he never involved her. He and Theo both looked so shocked by the things she said she knew they had never once thought about it the way she did. They needed at least a few days to stew on it and really look at it from her perspective. Then she would need some reassurance that Hermione Granger was good enough before she could accept this.

She spoke slowly as she tried to make her point clear to the little elf and also to herself.

"I need to know that Draco wants Hermione Granger more than Columba Black before I can accept this. It's my second identity, not my first. I need to believe that it's temporary, and if You-Know-Who is ever gone, Draco would accept the biggest mudblood of them all without forcing her to remain as a pureblood to fit into whatever perfect world he's been imagining. If it's ever safe for me to be Hermione Granger in public again, that's who I want to be. I need to know that he understands that and accepts it before I can accept all of *this*."

Posy was frowning, but seemed to be thinking hard.

"How is Master Draco telling Mistress this if she is not speaking to him?"

Hermione hesitated. "I just need some time before I reach out. It won't be forever."

Posy nodded, still looking a bit perturbed and even a little hurt.

"Well can Mistress at least *eat* in Grimmauld Place? Posy is not knowing the kitchen in Mistress's tent."

Hermione felt a rush of guilt, as she realized Posy was taking her rejection of Grimmauld Place a bit personally.

"Yes, of course," said Hermione quickly to soothe her.

"And also... I is hoping..."

She turned beet red, and Hermione looked at her curiously.

"Hoping what?"

“I is hoping that I is doing Mistress’s hair. My mother is saying that Mistress has the finest curls she has ever seen, and Posy knows she must be right. But I is needing to ask my mother about it, Mistress. I is not having as much experience with curls as she is.”

Posy looked very nervous, but Hermione relaxed into a sad smile.

“Of course, Posy. Of course.”

Draco was standing in his closet, partially drunk on his fourth emergency firewhiskey, trying desperately to occlude. Theo had left after the second drink, having not said a single word to Draco after Hermione floo’d away. They just sat in her room together and drank and cried. They had fucked up — both of them — and Theo obviously blamed himself because he didn’t even bother to *cruciate* Draco this time.

Or perhaps Theo simply knew there was no need. The pain Draco was feeling was worse than a hundred *cruciatu*s curses.

How could this have happened? Why didn’t he tell her when he had the chance? Why hadn’t he taken the opportunity to control the messaging? Why hadn’t he eased her into it so he could offer Grimmauld Place to her as a *gift* instead of setting himself up to make excuses for something he had already done?

Why had he let her go to that *fucking* garden party?

He looked around the closet dimly. It was stupid for him to have kept his collection here. He should have moved it as soon as he caught her after the Battle of Hogwarts. But he spent a lot of time in here while plotting to make her his. It was his little retreat, his comfort place, and he had leaned on it heavily while trying to be patient as she started to fall for him with excruciating slowness. He hadn’t been in here as much over the last couple of weeks after she finally let him into her bed, and that should have been his cue to move it before she found it.

He hadn’t though.

Perhaps it was inertia or arrogance or that itching sense that he would need it again as soon as she learned about everything he had done. Whatever the reason, it was still here and intact, just waiting for her to find it.

He winced.

As if the revelations hadn’t been bad enough, he had been forced to spill everything after she saw *this*. He was certain this closet had amplified her negative reactions to everything he had done for her.

He truly believed that the things he had done for her were important. It was his way of giving her everything he had to give. But he had known this sort of wealth and status would be a little overwhelming for somebody like Hermione who hadn't been born into it, and that was why he kept it from her. He didn't want to scare her away with his very powerful feelings. Besides, he didn't just do this for love, though he did love her very much. It was also because of that obsession that had consumed him since he first saw her at eleven years old. He fought it and then begrudgingly accepted it and then eventually embraced it and used it to drive every decision he made when it came to her. He held deep fantasies about providing for her and caring for her in every conceivable way. His extra home should be hers. His extra fortune should be hers. Even his extra *name* should be hers. All of it should be hers. He certainly didn't need it, and she deserved every bit of it. It would sate that urgent, compulsive need to always know that she was safe and under his protection.

Draco was deeply paranoid when it came to her safety. She had been so close to dying *so many fucking times*, especially during the previous year when she went on the run. Over and over again, he heard about her near misses and close calls. Draco had always been just seconds behind her, arriving a moment too late to catch her and get her away from Harry fucking Potter and into some place safe. Maybe he had gone overboard with it when he finally had his chance to build a true cocoon around her, but he had *needed* to do it for his own sanity. He could scarcely breathe when he knew she was in danger.

It had never once occurred to him that she would be *offended* by the things he wanted to give to her. He thought she would be angry with him for going behind her back, and she was. But to hear her say that this was simply another way of telling her she wasn't good enough had truly taken him aback. Draco had not seen that coming at all, and he suspected that some of the things she found in this closet had triggered it.

She must have read his journal. She must have been reminded that he had fought his feelings for her. For a long time he thought she was supposed to be lesser than him, and he struggled to understand why she so obviously wasn't. He actually *had* done that soul searching years ago, or so he thought, but he realized now that they had barely talked about it. They had only ever touched on it obliquely.

Had she really believed that he thought her to be lesser than him this whole time?

He was chagrined to realize that he had never considered just how much something like this could make old wounds fester. His sweet girl's feelings had been hurt by him for *years*, and evidently they had never fully healed. This fucking closet reminded her of it just as all of his other secrets came out. It was truly the worst possible timing for her to discover this place, not that he had ever intended to let her see it.

Draco had always planned to tell her about the things he had done for her after she had fallen in love with him. He had it all planned out to minimize her anger. First, she would say she loved him. Then, he would say that he loved her too. In fact, he loved her so much he had done all of these wonderful things for her.

That was at least part of the truth, and she would have believed him. She would never need to know just how dark his fixation had become. She would never have to learn that he had

stalked her for years and clung to every single scrap of hers that he could find while he dreamed of making her his.

But the moment she saw the closet, all of his plans to keep that side of himself hidden away had flown out the window, and the depths of his depravity were fully exposed. Of course she had fled from him. She was probably disgusted and terrified. He knew Theo had sensed both of those emotions through their bond before they got to her. Her horror and fear was so strong that Theo legitimately thought she was being attacked, so of course Draco tracked her even though she had asked for privacy. He thought it was life and death. It turned out there was no life at all. It was just death for their budding relationship and Draco's heart.

And yet, even now, when this closet had fucked him over so badly, he couldn't bring himself to move the things inside of it.

It had been the product of years of watching and collecting. The only people who knew about it other than Draco were Theo and Poppy, and now Hermione too. Nobody else understood the true extent of Draco's obsession, not even Blaise or his mother. Of course he knew that something like this wasn't entirely *normal*. But Draco considered it to be very much like any other collection other wizards maintained. Some wizards collected art. Others collected books. Draco collected objects and memories of Hermione Granger. It had always been a way to get close to her when there had been a hundred barriers between them.

It all started the day he watched her open a sugar quill in the library, suck on it for a few minutes, and then discard it, barely-used. Draco had picked it up, intending to use it as a way to talk to her. Perhaps he would taunt her with it or demand to know *why* she would be so wasteful. But then he froze when she turned and her curls caught a beam of sunlight. His mouth had gone so dry he knew he would bollocks it up if he tried to talk to her. So he had said nothing to her that day and just pocketed the sugar quill instead.

That had been the first item in his collection, and it grew from there.

Hermione was the type to always be touching something whenever she was lost in thought, which was most of the time. She also had a tendency to leave small things behind: spare bottles of ink, muggle pens, hair pins and elastics, buttons that popped off her jumper or blouse that she fiddled with while studying. She mindlessly fidgeted whenever she was thinking about something and left a small trail of objects behind her all over Hogwarts. She never lost anything important. She was very responsible. But if she didn't care about something, she never noticed when it went missing. It had been relatively easy to follow her around at Hogwarts and pick up the things she left behind.

Once Draco befriended Crookshanks it became even easier. Crookshanks was the one who brought him some of his biggest prizes: her hair clips from the Yule Ball, her prototype D.A. galleon that she had created before charming the others, a few of her prettier hair ribbons, and even once a pair of her knickers. The dresser in his closet was filled with her old things.

The photo album had also been inspired, or so he thought before Hermione found it. Once Colin Creevey showed up at Hogwarts, it became easy to get pictures of her. Draco would never forget the day he caught Creevey asking Potter for a signed photograph in the school courtyard. Draco had mocked them both for it, and then Lockhart intervened.

That encounter had given Draco an idea though. Draco had collected a couple pictures of Hermione during their first year, often studying them and then studying Theo too to compare their similarities. Draco convinced himself he needed more pictures to discover her secrets and piece together his theories about a hidden pureblood background or squib parents.

Draco found Creevey later that night and told him he would receive a galleon for every photo of Hermione Granger that he took and gave to Draco. He told Creevey that if he breathed a word of their arrangement to anybody, the deal would end, and Draco would send him back to the muggle world in a casket.

Creevey had been both very intimidated and very poor. He took Draco up on his offer immediately, and it worked well for both of them. Within a year Draco knew Hermione was truly a muggleborn, so his excuse for buying pictures had ended. But he found he didn't want the pictures to stop. Just the idea of it made him anxious and agitated. That was one of his first clues that he really fancied her.

Well, that and the sweaty palms and tied tongue and shallow breathing that always seemed to hit him whenever he saw her smile. He had collected a few more sugar quills and hair ties by then too and could never seem to make himself talk to her while he did it.

For five years Draco received a steady stream of photographs once a week via various school owls. It meant that Creevey, and then later his little brother Dennis, could afford new books and school robes that weren't hand-me-downs simply by selling his services to the school's wealthiest student. He was a rather talented photographer and got better the more he practiced. Creevey's own obsession with Potter was well-known, so he was totally ignored by the lead subject of his greatest works.

Hermione had taken many things from his closet, but not all of it, much to Draco's surprise and enormous relief. The books and papers were all gone, but Draco could live without those. All of the things that were in her beaded bag were also missing, but Draco didn't mind that either.

The things that were most important to Draco — the contents of his dresser, the photo album, and the memories of her — were still intact.

Draco didn't know why she had left those behind. Perhaps she just ran out of time. Whatever the reason, Draco was nearly faint with relief that they were still here. They were some of his most important possessions, and he didn't know what he would have done if she had taken those away from him too.

Especially not when his collection was already missing the thing he had prized most: her wand.

Fuck, she will never forgive me for her wand.

This was a betrayal that Draco had trouble justifying even to himself. He had collected her wand after she arrived at Malfoy Manor with the Snatchers all those months ago. Draco had been tasked to deal with the Snatchers while his parents debated what to do about Hermione and the others before his aunt showed up. Draco led the Snatchers out of the room and then

became distracted when he heard her screams. He bound them and then immediately returned to find Bellatrix torturing her, and every plan to extract her and make her his evaporated as he was frozen with horror.

After Hermione managed to escape and the Malfoy family had been punished for letting Potter go, Draco had to take his anger out on *somebody*. He returned to the Snatchers who were still bound where Draco had left them, and he searched them. He found her wand, and his mother arrived just as he was killing all three of them from rage that they had dared take that wand from Hermione. She might have never come to the Manor and been tortured if she hadn't been separated from it. Narcissa said nothing as she watched Draco kill them and hold Hermione's wand with reverence once that little round of murder was complete, but her expression told him that it disturbed her.

He didn't care.

He tucked Hermione's wand away and kept it safe for her. Nobody but his mother was aware he had it. That wand had become the centerpiece of his collection.

He could feel her magic in it. He could feel *her* in it. Up to that point it was the closest he had ever come to the *real* her, and he guarded it closely.

But then there was a day a month ago when Astoria crashed his weekly dinner with Narcissa. She had a standing invitation and made use of it now and then to simmer at Draco, while he did his best to ignore her. She claimed that she and Daphne had been practicing their dueling in case the resistance ever breached the wards in their home. One of Daphne's spells hit Astoria's wand, and it snapped in two. She required a new one, but the wand shortage was severe, and Ollivander had been hidden away by the Order. Getting a new wand often required a trip to the continent, which now took several weeks to arrange thanks to new security measures.

"Draco, do you have a spare wand, by any chance? I hate that mine is broken, but perhaps it is for the best. It used to be my late aunt's, and it never worked that well for me in the first place. Father insisted I use an heirloom wand while learning, but I've needed a stronger one for ages. I know you're one of the Dark Lord's favorites, and you have been critical in capturing members of the resistance. Have you taken their wands too?"

Draco shook his head. "Captured wands are all turned over to the Dark Lord for redistribution after skirmishes. Occasionally they get snapped in battle. Those wands are reserved for Death Eaters."

"But you do have a spare wand, Draco," Narcissa reminded him. "How could you forget? And in fact, it's a very powerful one."

Astoria sat up eagerly, while Draco cast a warning look at his mother, which she ignored.

"Do you remember Hermione Granger?" continued Narcissa, now looking at Astoria. "The Dark Lord allowed Draco to take her wand as a token of his service after he executed her. I think it would be perfect for you, Astoria. Don't you agree, Draco? It should serve Astoria well until she's able to get to a wandmaker on the continent."

"No. That wand is not available."

"Why not?" pressed Narcissa. "Surely you have no need for it."

"It's a trophy that marked my rise, Mother."

"But Draco, I really need one. I can't be without a wand, it's not safe! Can't I just borrow it for a few weeks until I can get another?" pleaded Astoria.

"Of course you can, Astoria," said Narcissa firmly. "Draco has no real need to keep a trophy from a mudblood like that, right Draco? I'm sure you will see sense and cooperate."

"The wand is mine, Mother. It's not to be used by anybody else."

"But why on earth do you care so much about it if it was the mudblood's" asked Astoria in confusion. "Isn't she dead?"

"Of course she is. Like I said, it's just a trophy. It marked a pinnacle moment for me."

Astoria sniffed. "You care more about a trophy than my safety? When we are meant to tie eventually?"

Draco was very tempted to tell her yes, but Narcissa jumped in. "Of course he doesn't, my dear. He's just not thinking clearly. Isn't that right, Draco? Astoria can certainly borrow the mudblood's wand for a few weeks. The mudblood is dead, after all, and she has no need for it."

Draco suspected his mother offered up the wand because of the thing she had seen that day with the Snatchers. It scared her, and she wanted the wand out of the Manor and away from Draco. It angered him, but there wasn't much more he could say with Astoria present. He had felt backed into a corner, but he heard the warning in Narcissa's voice. It could expose his feelings about Hermione to Astoria if he continued to resist.

Draco couldn't let Astoria guess that Hermione was alive and well, so he begrudgingly went along with it. He told himself it would be temporary. It would reinforce the fiction that Hermione was dead. And perhaps it would appease his mother and buy him some time before she seriously considered tying him. She would think he was coming around to Astoria all on his own if he cooperated with minimal objection.

Draco allowed Astoria to take the wand, though the guilt flooded him the moment he handed it over. It ate away at him and continued to grow worse day by day.

He *hated* knowing that Hermione's wand was with another witch. It somehow felt more wrong than keeping the things he had done for her a secret. It felt like a violation, like he wasn't keeping every part of her safe.

After the conversation with Blaise about tying with Ginny, Draco had known the day was coming that he would have to tell Hermione everything. As part of it he quickly put together a plan to get Hermione's wand back for good. He had always intended to return it to her once she knew and accepted everything.

Draco decided to use his influence to push through the red tape at the Ministry to acquire an emergency portkey so he could take Astoria on a day trip to the continent. They could go to a wandmaker, and she could select a new wand before returning to England. His mother couldn't very well object to it when she only offered up Hermione's wand on a temporary basis in the first place. Narcissa might even be convinced that Draco was truly coming around to Astoria if he presented the trip as some sort of romantic jaunt. And most importantly, Draco would have Hermione's wand back in his possession where it belonged.

Draco needed it back before he told Hermione everything. He might need more leverage than the Order members on his list when he begged her for forgiveness.

He needed something to trade, something Hermione wanted more than anything.

Fuck.

But no, somehow Hermione learned Astoria had it. He wasn't certain *how* she learned of it because society witches never did magic at social events like that fucking garden party. Maybe Astoria told the others about it, and Hermione overheard in her Columba form.

Draco couldn't blame her for taking the wand herself, but the timing was fucking *terrible*.

All he had needed was a few more days – a week at most – and he would have retrieved it for her to correct that horrendous lapse in judgment. She would never need to know what he had done.

But she did know, and now she was gone.

Draco stifled a sob as he opened the photo album and began to flip through the photos, until he got to his favorite one at the very back.

It was from sixth year, and Hermione was nestled in a window seat in the Gryffindor common room with Crookshanks curled on her lap. She was reading a book and twirling a lock of hair, when she suddenly looked directly at the camera and gave an easy smile before rolling her eyes and laughing a little. Then she bit her lower lip, blushed, and looked back down at her book.

Over and over again on loop, she twirled her hair, smiled, laughed, bit her lip, and blushed.

Draco loved it. He had given Creevey a huge bonus for taking it, and he had stared at it every single day while she was on the run, in between revisiting memories of her. He could so easily envision her doing the same thing on the window seat he had installed in her bedroom.

Because no, that window seat in her bedroom wasn't original to the house. Draco had it built to make his Hermione happy.

She used her window seat too, he knew that. How many times had he caught her napping on it? It was her favorite spot, and this picture was the thing that inspired him to give it to her.

But now she was gone, and she might never grace that window seat again. Draco pulled the photo out of the album and clutched it to his chest as he sank to knees and began to sob in earnest.

He needed her. He fucking *needed her*. He knew what her lips tasted like now. He knew how his name sounded when she was in the middle of an orgasm. He knew how to soothe her nightmares and all the foods she craved and every single time her pulse skittered and she required his calming touch.

He had known this could happen, but he always convinced himself she would forgive him after he explained it to her. Even now he thought she might have forgiven him if she hadn't seen this closet first and been reminded of their terrible history together while learning just how dark his love for her had become. And even though he had tried to prepare for it in case she *didn't* forgive him, the experience of actually losing her was so much worse than he had ever imagined. She didn't want him right now. She had actually said that. And *Draco* had been the one to hurt her so badly that he pushed her to that point. He had never wanted to hurt her, not ever. And he had never known that emotional pain could be this excruciating.

He had cast an emotional *cruciatus* upon his darling girl, and then she gave it right back to him tenfold when she left.

Every single instinct was screaming at him to go to Grimmauld Place and bring her home so he could beg for forgiveness and love her the way she deserved. It was true he had arranged everything in advance so that she would be safe and cared for if she was ever alone, but he knew that wasn't what she needed. She needed him. He needed her. They needed each other. Being alone would be intolerable for both of them, *surely* she must feel that way too.

He needed to know exactly where she was and what she was thinking and whether she might ever smile at him again.

But no, he couldn't even have that much. She had prohibited any contact at all until she reached out first. Draco had stopped himself from tracking her a dozen times already, and it was driving him mad. Yes, he heard her shout the floo address, but what if something happened? What if his purportedly unmonitored floo was actually monitored, and the Ministry was trying to break her wards at this very moment?

He had to know where she was. Hoping she was at Grimmauld wasn't enough. He needed to know if she was eating enough at dinner or if the tub he installed was to her liking or if her nail polish had chipped or if her curls were becoming unruly while she burrowed herself into bed.

Fuck, how could he check on her at night with the rules she had set for him? He had checked on her every single night for months. Even when he was at Nott Castle he tracked her to her bed so he would know she was safe and sound before falling asleep. And now he was just supposed to *stop*?

He would go insane, he was certain of it.

His heart was shattered, and he was breathless from it. He had no idea he was capable of feeling so much pain.

He was crying himself out just as Poppy appeared with a *CRACK!*

Draco lifted his head to stare at the little elf, whose ears were drooping as she looked at him.

“I is having news, Master,” she said tentatively. “Posy is reaching out.”

Draco’s heart leapt, and he had to stop himself from grabbing Poppy.

“What?” he breathed. “What is it?”

“Posy is saying that Miss Hermione is arriving at Grimmauld Place. She is liking the house and is saying Posy is doing a good job caring for her. She is letting Posy talk to Poppy about fixing her hair.”

Draco slumped with some relief.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good. Did she say anything else?”

Posy twisted her pillowcase a bit awkwardly. “She is telling Posy not to report too much to you. She is saying you is not speaking right now.”

Draco didn’t know his heart could sink any more than it already had, but somehow it managed to.

“Oh,” he said glumly.

“And…” now Poppy was grimacing, and Draco started to grow worried.

“And what?”

“And Posy is saying she is sleeping in her tent.”

Poppy actually squeezed her eyes shut as if waiting for the explosion, and sure enough…

“*WHAT?!*” bellowed Draco.

He leapt to his feet and started to head toward the floo, when to his shock, he heard a crack of magic, and then he was frozen in place.

“Master must not!” cried Poppy. “Poppy is punishing herself for this, but Master is losing Miss Hermione forever if he is interfering!”

At her words, Draco’s face crumpled, and Poppy released him with a sigh of relief. Draco slumped to the floor.

“She’s not even sleeping in the house?” he asked desperately. “Where then? Posy said she liked the house!”

“She does, Master,” said Poppy quickly. “But she is saying that the house belongs to Columba Black, and she is not Columba Black yet. She is putting the tent in the gardens. Posy is saying it is within the wards.”

Draco was awash with anxiety now. Yes, the gardens were warded so technically nobody but those she permitted could cross them, but she could still be *seen*. The house wasn't under a fidelius anymore. He didn't want her outside. He wanted her *inside*, tucked safe in bed, with the doors locked and blinds closed.

No, scratch that. He wanted her here with him, so he could watch over her himself.

But in the absence of her bed at Malfoy Manor, he would accept the *interior* of Grimmauld Place as the only alternative. A fucking tent in the gardens felt far too exposed.

“Poppy, I need you to tell Posy to convince her to disillusion the tent at the very minimum. Remind her the gardens are visible. And try to talk her into sleeping indoors, *please*.”

“I is trying, Sir, but Posy is saying she is not accepting most of the house.”

“But... I just...”

Draco gripped his hair in frustration. Not only had she left him, she wasn't even using the things he needed to give to her for her own safety. It was both infuriating and heartbreaking.

“How can I make her take the house?” he asked Poppy desperately. “I *need* her to take it.”

“Then you is needing to tell Miss Hermione that as soon as she is letting you talk to her,” said Poppy firmly. “Posy is thinking Miss Hermione is afraid you is wanting Columba and not her. Miss Hermione is saying she is not being Columba if the Dark Lord is gone.”

Draco stared at the little elf as she fell silent. Those old wounds that had been reopened today were haunting him again. He thought he had done all the soul searching he needed to do years ago. He wasn't prejudiced. Maybe he had been foolish when he failed to consider her feelings toward purebloods as he created Columba Black, but he wasn't *prejudiced*. Draco had stopped being prejudiced the moment he accepted that he wanted Hermione, even though she wasn't a pureblood.

He froze as the phrase floated through his mind.

Even though she wasn't a pureblood.

His pulse ticked up.

I want her despite her blood status. I want her even though she wasn't born pure. I want...

Draco dropped his face into his hands as he finally understood what she meant by unconscious prejudice. He loved her with his whole heart, and yet he was thinking about her blood status as though it was something to be overlooked, as though it was a problem that could be fixed.

“Goddammit, I’m so fucking stupid.”

His sweet girl had been suffering silently for years, and Draco was the reason why. How had he never seen it? He had done nothing but watch her obsessively for years, and yet he hadn’t noticed this pain of hers?

Because you never lived it. You were never hurt like that. You were never told that you didn’t deserve your magic or your life.

But Hermione had heard all of those things. *Draco* had been the one to say them to her when they were children. And then he tried to turn her into a pureblood anyway so he could tie with her.

Of *course* she thought Draco wanted Columba Black and not her. He didn’t — not at all — but she couldn’t possibly know that. He had given her an entire second identity and then explained to her that it was the way he wanted to make their relationship permanent.

Columba Black was only intended to be a ploy for the Dark Lord. What he really wanted was Hermione Granger. But hadn’t he *just* been thinking about how much he loved her *even though* she wasn’t a pureblood? It didn’t matter that he had collected her things for years and confessed his feelings to her. He was still viewing her blood status as a problem that needed to be solved. Maybe he hadn’t worked hard enough and still had some unconscious prejudice, even though he hadn’t been aware of it. It would certainly explain his *colossal* blindspot when it came to her reaction to Columba Black.

Goddammit, he would actually have to listen to her and search what little soul he had left all over again.

“It’s true you is not always thinking clearly, Master,” started Poppy. “But...”

Draco’s head shot up so fast he wrenched his neck.

“But what?” he prompted.

“But Posy is saying that Miss Hermione is looking very sad and is thinking about you a great deal. She is crying as soon as she is arriving. Posy is thinking she is missing you. And Posy is saying Miss Hermione is eating inside the house, and she is needing to stock food soon.”

Draco’s eyes bored into Poppy’s, who was giving him a very knowing look. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wasn’t allowed to reach out to Hermione directly, but perhaps...

“Poppy, please have the kitchens whip up a quick stew and take it to Grimmauld Place. I want to send some fresh bread as well. That’s the sort of thing she will want after a day like this. And please give Posy my blanket that Hermione loves so much. She left it in her bedroom. She needs it more than I do.”

Poppy’s eyes softened. “Anything else, Sir?”

“No. I can’t send her a message yet. She has forbidden it. But I need to take care of my witch however she will allow me to do it, Poppy. I have to keep doing it even if she won’t

talk to me right now. Please work with Posy to make sure she has the things she needs and report back.”

“I will, Sir. And now I is also needing to tell you that my Mistress is expecting you for dinner very soon.”

Draco groaned, but swiped his face and stood. Dinner with his mother was the very *last* thing he wanted to do, but he knew there was no choice. He needed to get out in front of Hermione’s disappearance, and he needed to begin actively managing the situation with Astoria.

Draco nodded. “Let Theo know and then arrange to send dinner and the blanket to Hermione.”

Poppy curtsied and disappeared with a *CRACK!*

Draco steeled himself and took a moment to force his occlusion into place. It felt cold, distant, but it was precisely what he needed to get through the next hour of his life.

He strode out of his room and a few minutes later was pushing open the door to the dining room.

“Mother,” he said coldly, just as Theo arrived behind him.

“Draco,” she said cautiously. “The elves said you and the boys were home.”

“We are,” he agreed.

“And your weekend?” she asked hesitantly.

“Rather unfortunate.”

“Forgive me Draco, but something seems very wrong.”

Draco glanced at Theo, whose occlumency was barely intact. But in a glance they agreed to let Draco handle Narcissa.

“I arrived home to find my boon missing,” he said. “It was... quite a shock.”

Blaise walked in at that moment and came to an abrupt halt when he heard these words. He had known that Draco and Theo rushed off to deal with an emergency at the Manor, but he had stayed behind to talk to the Dark Lord about Ginny. Draco shot him a glance, and in a single look he was certain Blaise would follow his lead too.

“Oh dear, are you sure?” asked Narcissa. She was acting concerned, but Draco sensed a sharp glint in her eye, as though she was trying to determine whether or not Hermione had spoken to him first.

“Considering the fact that the wards to my room were broken, and some of her clothes and my spare gold was missing, I feel quite certain that she’s gone. I don’t know how she

managed it, but she must have acquired a wand this weekend. That's the only explanation for my wards."

Narcissa seemed to relax, just a little bit, though she was still watching him warily, as though afraid a bomb might go off if she didn't say the right thing.

"I'm so sorry dear, I know how much you cared about her. Do you have any notion of where she's gone?"

"Not yet, but she's Granger. She can't resist Gryffindor heroics, and she will no doubt show her face soon enough. As soon as I locate her, I will blood ward her in and never let her out of her room again. I was far too indulgent with her, and I've learned my lesson. I don't want this rumor being spread among the wives and daughters while I'm looking for her though. It would threaten my position, and this issue will be resolved as soon as I find her."

"No, of course not," said Narcissa quickly.

There was silence, as Draco caught Theo's eye. Theo nodded to him a little in agreement that he would follow that story for now.

There was a brief silence, and then his mother seemed to steel herself for something.

"This may not be the best time to mention this, but I invited Astoria and Daphne to the Manor for tea tomorrow. They fell into a brick wall at the garden party and both suffered terrible blows to the head while they did it, the poor dears. It's the least I could do, and I know they would love to see you and Theo while they are here. Will you be available to join us? It may cheer you up."

Draco stared at Theo, who looked almost as sick as Draco felt by the prospect. Both of them knew that the so-called brick wall was really Hermione, and neither of them wanted to hear the word 'Greengrass' ever again. But after the news Hermione had dropped about Narcissa's plans to tie him, he knew they had no choice. They needed information.

He gave one nod, and Theo did too.

"Excellent," said Narcissa with a smile. "In that case, tell me all about your weekend."

To Draco's relief, Blaise jumped in so that Draco and Theo wouldn't have to. As he listened to Blaise recite stories about the hunts, Draco allowed his mind to wander back to his witch.

His poor little dove was so distressed she was sleeping in a tent all alone. How would she cope without Draco? Would she ever smile again? Would he?

Somehow Draco didn't think so.

Tonight he would find some prisoners to torture. And while he did it, he would search his soul just like she had asked.

It was the only thing he had left to give.

Chapter 28: Choices

By the time Hermione finished setting up her tent in the gardens and exploring the first floor of Grimmauld Place, it was closing in on dinner time. She called for Posy, who hurried off to fetch it, and before Hermione knew it she was staring down at a fragrant stew and crusty bread that almost made her emotional again.

It was comfort food, the sort of thing she had always gravitated toward whenever she had been upset or had a difficult day in training. Draco knew it, too. Whether she wanted it or not, Grimmauld Place was apparently hers now, along with the little elf inside of it, but Hermione couldn't help but wonder just how much Draco was pulling the strings behind the scenes. It was incredibly obvious that he had set up the house to be as comfortable for her as Malfoy Manor had been, and Posy was the only elf in residence. The stew had appeared seemingly from nowhere, and even house elves couldn't do *that*.

It wouldn't surprise her at all to learn that the food had really come from the Manor and Draco had ordered it sent to her.

Some part of her wanted to ask, but a bigger part didn't want to know. After the boundaries she had just tried to set with Draco, the logical part of her mind knew that it should upset her if he was already subverting them a little bit. The emotional part of her, however, absolutely craved it and wanted to know that he was thinking about her and worried enough that he was sending her meals under the cover of a new house elf.

Since she was conflicted she didn't ask so that she could maintain plausible deniability. It occurred to her that putting her head in the sand about Draco's behavior was a key reason she found herself in this position in the first place. But she really did not have it in her to examine this with the honesty it deserved, and she knew it. She tabled it for another day.

The other thing Posy had left for Hermione, along with the stew, was a very old book about the wards of Grimmauld Place.

"You is the Mistress and you is controlling them," she said.

"Are the current wards left over from Draco, then?" she asked, her heart clenching as she said his name.

Posy nodded. "Yes, Mistress. He is setting the wards so that the two of you, Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, Luna Lovegood, and Ginny Weasley is the only people who is allowed to come inside. I and my mother are the only elves."

Hermione paused as she considered this. Some part of her wanted to ward out Draco just to prove that she could do it. But then again, she rather thought that if he had access then it would be a good test for him. Hermione knew that Draco could never show her that he was able to stay away and respect her boundaries if she didn't allow him in first. She knew he

would never physically harm her. She certainly wouldn't put it past him to *abduct* her, but there wouldn't be a single blemish on her while he did it.

She also knew she would offer up Grimmauld Place as a sanctuary if any of them needed it, even Draco. It didn't matter how angry she was, she would never want any of them to be in real danger.

Hermione decided to leave the wards alone, though she did study the small book so that she knew how to change them in the future. It was a rather simple matter of *greeting* the house as its new Mistress and then controlling who could be let in on a case by case basis. Like so many things that appeared to be so simple to use, Hermione was certain that the magic behind it was incomprehensibly complex.

And so, with wards in place and stew steaming in her bowl before her, Hermione ate her first meal alone at Grimmauld Place.

It was an overwhelmingly isolating experience.

When dinner was complete, Hermione found herself a bit adrift, and she wandered back into the sitting room with a cup of tea. She was hoping to think or perhaps read or do something to pass another hour or so before going to her tent and falling into what was sure to be a fitful sleep.

She was staring into the fire, brooding and sipping her tea when a bright voice from a previously empty portrait said, "Hello!"

Hermione jumped so hard she sloshed tea over her hand and hissed a little in pain.

"Oh I do apologize," said the witch with some concern."

"It's alright," said Hermione, trying to calm her galloping heart. "What's your name?"

"I'm Columba Black Thackery!" she said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Hermione blinked and looked harder. Sure enough, Columba was beautiful and had the dark hair, high cheekbones, and blue eyes that were so prevalent among the Blacks.

"It's nice to meet you," said Hermione carefully. "Erm... I didn't realize they had a portrait made of you... after, you know..."

"After they disowned me, you mean? Of course they didn't. But my darling husband *did*, and Draco tracked me down and rescued me from a dreadfully boring attic, where I have been for the last several decades. I was happy to return here."

Hermione was a bit frustrated by just how curious she suddenly she found herself. She shouldn't want anything to do with *any* of Draco's ancestors. And yet...

"Has he told you about me?"

“Draco? Oh yes, the poor boy is terribly smitten with you. He told me he renamed you after me! I’ve been dying to meet you. He said you had a surprise to show me, but he refused to tell me what it was.”

“A surprise?” asked Hermione in confusion.

“Yes, he said it had something to do with your name.”

“Oh!” said Hermione. Then she narrowed her eyes. “Err... do you have any other portraits?”

“No, just the one,” said Columba cheerfully. “That’s why I could never leave that blasted attic.”

Hermione smiled a little at this. “Alright then. I can’t believe I’m going to show you this, but...”

She set her teacup down on the coffee table, focused, and then transformed into her own version of Columba. A moment later she turned back into herself, and Columba was beaming at her with excitement.

“Oh that’s just wonderful! I loved it! Please tell me he found my pendant? It would be so perfect for you!”

Hermione’s stomach soured a little, but she dutifully pulled the Columba pendant out from under her shirt. She was still wearing it and had not been able to bring herself to take it off, despite their fight.

Weak. I’m weak.

But Columba was delighted by this as well and was clapping her hands with glee until she was interrupted by a rather snooty voice saying, “Her dove is good, but her eagle will be better once it’s finished. I *do* hope you will be continuing on with it, won’t you, Miss Granger? I assume that’s still your name? I can’t imagine you wish for me to call you Miss Black after everything I just witnessed.”

Hermione blinked in surprise to see the only other empty portrait in the room fill with the blonde woman who had been watching Hermione silently for months at Malfoy Manor.

“You’re talking to me, now?” she asked in confusion.

The blonde scowled. “Yes. My great great great great nephew rather... what is it they are saying these days? Bollocksd it up? Yes, that’s it. I’ve decided I have had quite enough. I’ve been watching you eat and sleep and train and mope around Malfoy Manor for months. It’s high time we met properly.”

Hermione looked at her warily.

“You have at least one other portrait.”

“I have two,” she conceded. “The one in your room and the one in Draco’s room.”

“I really don’t wish for you to spy,” said Hermione firmly.

The blonde rolled her eyes. “Please. My... let’s just call him my nephew, shall we? All of those ‘greats’ can become tiresome. Yes, well, as I said he’s a proper cad, and at the moment I am not speaking to him. I knew he was obsessed, but I had no notion of just how much until I heard you interrogate him and his friend. It was high time, too. You were much too easy on him the other times he erred.”

Hermione blushed scarlet to realize just how much the portrait must have overheard. Hermione had truly forgotten about her presence, as she rarely moved and had *never* talked before now.

“Who are you then?”

“I’m Aquila Malfoy of course.”

“Of course,” breathed Hermione, her eyes growing wide as she realized just who had been watching her for so many months.

“And you have my knives,” said Aquila approvingly. “You wield them well.”

“Draco said that there are family legends that you killed with them.”

“Family legends, *bah*. I told him that myself, because it was true, of course. The little welp always had a flare for dramatics,” said Aquila, rolling her eyes, while Columba looked scandalized in the portrait next door. “Anyway, who do you think suggested the knives? It took him ages to find them in the vaults, but he managed eventually.”

Hermione fell silent as she studied the two portraits in the sitting room with her. “So Columba and Aquila... Tell me: can you go anywhere else in Grimmauld Place, or just here?”

“Just here,” said Columba cheerfully. “I was having a kip in the house in the background just there when you arrived. Draco wanted you to have company, but privacy too.”

“Me as well,” said Aquila. “Though of course I can visit my other portraits. *Not* that I will be visiting Draco’s any time soon.”

She turned her nose up a bit at this.

Hermione nodded and picked up her tea to sip. She would need to be cautious around Aquila especially, but Hermione supposed it was alright. Some company might be welcome in this large and silent house, and Hermione could escape to any other room or her tent if she didn’t wish to speak to them.

“Very well,” she said. “Columba and Aquila... tell me all about yourselves.”

Hermione talked with Columba and Aquila later than she meant to. It didn't take long to learn that Columba was a romantic and an optimist. She was the forgiving type and fretted about the fact that Hermione had fled to Grimmauld Place to get away from Draco.

Aquila was much less forgiving. She was sharp and dry, her drawl an almost physically painful reminder of her nephew. Hermione learned that she had the honor of being the only Malfoy daughter to remain unmarried her entire life.

"Not that there were very many of us," she said wryly. "But I'm the only one who avoided holy matrimony. Who needs men, really? I killed one suitor and permanently incapacitated another, and then my father rather lost his taste for foisting them upon me. The local vicar actually told my father he should send me to a muggle convent of all things, but then I cut out his tongue, and he never made such a boorish suggestion again."

It appeared that violence was a Malfoy family trait. Columba looked at Aquila with some disdain.

"Why are you so proud of your behavior?"

"Because I'm a Malfoy," said Aquila, as she raised one imperious eyebrow. "Nobody can contain us. We always come out on top."

"Even Draco?" asked Hermione shrewdly.

"For all of his irritating flaws, my nephew always does seem to come out on top. He will do everything he can to make you forgive him, I'm certain of it. Surely you know how he is by now."

"Do you think I should forgive him then? Or Theo?" she asked them both. She had not intended to bare her soul to them that night, but she couldn't seem to help it. And given that Aquila had overheard their fight she didn't see any point in keeping it from them. The situation with Draco and Theo felt like a gaping hole in her chest.

"We should always seek to forgive," said Columba gently. "I'm sure they are both truly remorseful. Draco cares about you very much, and surely your brother does too."

"Use my knives to take a pound of their flesh and then you can think about it," was Aquila's response.

"I'm not sure that a pound of their flesh will make me feel any better."

"Won't it? Shame. In that case, make them give you the things you want before you forgive them, and Draco especially. Oh, and some groveling. That never goes amiss."

"I'm not ready to talk to either one of them."

"Perhaps not, but there are other ways to grovel, yes? Trinkets, tokens, messages, gestures. Make a list for them both and see how quickly they jump on it. In fact, you should make it so

long they go a bit mad with it. It would serve them right.”

Hermione gave a bitter laugh and was staring broodily at the fire as she thought about this.

“Well according to Narcissa, Draco’s already mad. What do you think, Columba? Are all the Blacks really mad? Narcissa seemed to think so.”

Columba frowned. “I’ve never met Narcissa so I couldn’t say... but in my experience, yes that’s been true at least a little bit. Most of the Blacks are at least a *little* mad or melancholy. And Draco certainly has his own version of it, based on everything you’ve told me.”

Hermione’s heart sank.

“You don’t seem mad though.”

“Is it not madness to forgive my family over and over again? To expect them to behave differently than they have ever done before?”

“You seem to expect *Draco* to behave differently if I forgive him,” Hermione pointed out.

“Yes, and as I just said I’m a bit mad.”

Why must portraits be so frustrating?

“Your supposed madness doesn’t seem to bother you,” said Hermione wryly.

“Why would it? This is all I have ever known. There are a billion lives I could have lived, but I was only graced with this one.”

“And Draco? Does his madness bother you?”

“Certainly not. He’s treated me well enough. He rescued my portrait and found a worthy owner for my pendant. I can forgive him for his little foibles.”

“Creating an entire second identity behind my back and letting another witch use my wand are a bit more than ‘foibles,’” she insisted.

“Perhaps, but I’m sure he’s learned his lesson. It sounds like he’s very sorry.”

Hermione fell silent as she listened to Aquila bicker with Columba about whether Draco could ever really change. Aquila didn’t seem to think it was possible, at least not very much.

“He has his tail between his legs for now, but he’s still a Malfoy. Our blood is too proud to ever *really* change. And besides, he’s a man. Men, especially, are what they are. Hermione knows who he is now, and she has to decide if she wants it. She should use his guilt to leverage a few favors from him in the short term, but expecting him to really change very much would make her a fool.”

They talked later than she had intended and left her with thoughts swirling.

By the time she let herself out of the house, night had fallen, and Hermione shivered in the darkness as she lit her wand to pick her way across the short garden path. She was forced to admit that she didn't like this. The garden was rather small, and though it had a brick wall to separate it from the others on either side of her, it was still visible from the surrounding buildings. Grimmauld Place was quite large, but it was technically a townhouse, and Hermione had neighbors on both sides. Posy pointed out that the house and gardens could be seen now that the fidelius charm was broken, even if nobody unwelcome could cross the wards. She had disillusioned the tent, but even though she knew precisely where it was, it was very hard to find it in the dark.

Hermione stuck out a hand and grasped blindly until she felt the fabric and followed it to the flap. She left herself in, and it dropped closed as she looked around a bit glumly

It was very rustic.

The tent Hermione had shared with the boys for all of those months on the run had a decent extension charm on it, and it was at least moderately comfortable. It was true it was really one large room plus a small loo, but it was spacious enough that they weren't on top of each other, even if they could never truly get away from each other.

The tent she was facing now was very different. It had no furniture except a single cot. There was something that *might* pass for a kitchenette if one had no other alternatives and a very old loo that smelled a bit like an open drain. That was all.

Hermione had slept in rougher conditions than this before — the Hogwarts dungeons came to mind — but there was no question this old tent and musty cot ranked very low. She had never been the type to embrace rough conditions unless she had no other choice or was feeling very stubborn.

She idly wondered if she was being truly ridiculous for sleeping here. The beds inside of Grimmauld Place were no doubt perfect and used the same type of mattress that she had grown to love at Malfoy Manor. But Hermione *was* quite stubborn, and her feelings were still bruised. She rather felt that sleeping in Grimmauld Place made the whole thing feel too real. If she only went there during the day she could at least pretend to be a visitor and not its fake pureblooded owner.

She approached the cot and wrinkled her nose before sighing. Unlike the Malfoy Manor gardens, the small garden at Grimmauld Place was not charmed to be warm. It was October and rather chilly. The thin blanket on top wouldn't do much, so she pulled out her wand to cast a warming charm around her. She knew from experience when camping with the boys that it would wear off in the middle of the night. She would wake up in a few hours, absolutely freezing, and it would take her just enough time to recast the warming charm that her brain would turn itself back on. If she was very lucky she would be able to go back to sleep, but somehow she doubted that would work tonight.

Still, there was nothing for it. She lowered herself onto the cot, which made an almighty creak, and she groaned.

Maybe I should just sleep in the sodding house.

But no. She wasn't ready for that.

Just as she expected, she slept very poorly and woke up in the early hours of the morning from the cold. Even after recasting her warming charm, she never managed to fall back asleep. The thoughts tumbling about in her head were intrusive, and the cot was truly wretched. Something about it was almost worse than the Hogwarts dungeons.

It was only as the sun was breaking the next morning that she gave it up as completely hopeless and emerged to see the gardens in all of their autumn glory. She and the boys had left this place to go on the run almost exactly a year ago, but Hermione remembered just how striking the few trees and shrubs were this time of year. They were ablaze with orange. It was orange everywhere, while the neighbors' gardens trended more red and gold.

She had never thought she would find herself back in this place, let alone sleeping under the sycamore tree that she had stared at from the Grimmauld Place window as she watched it turn with Harry and Ron.

She missed them again, *desperately*, and she felt a pang in her chest that had nothing at all to do with Draco.

She sighed and pushed away her maudlin thoughts as she reentered the house. She hesitated for a moment, but then made her way to the staircase to explore the second floor. She hadn't gone up there the previous day, and she was more curious about it than she cared to admit.

She opened the door to room after room to discover that the bedrooms all matched each other now. She looked around Sirius's old room with sadness. Every trace of him was gone, even the posters of muggles in bikinis that had thwarted his mother for years. Regulus's room, too, was no longer an homage to Slytherin. It matched the neutral palette of everything else, the linens refreshed and the furniture handsome.

Draco had obviously replaced everything for her, even the bedrooms she wouldn't be using. And as she sank down onto a large chair in Sirius's old room, she pulled the green and gray blanket around her that had mysteriously appeared on the foot of the large bed. She shouldn't want it because it was obvious Draco was interfering and had it sent to her. But she couldn't help it. It was her comfort object and smelled like him.

Sufficiently bundled she peered through the window at the garden. Her tent was still hidden by the disillusionment charms, but Hermione knew where it was. It was directly beneath that orange sycamore tree. And though the gardens and Grimmauld Place itself were not nearly as large as Malfoy Manor, for one person the space she now commanded felt enormous.

One person.

Hermione forced back tears as she debated about calling Posy to help with her hair. She hadn't explored this room yet, and no doubt this was where Draco had expected her to sleep since it had belonged to Sirius once. Eventually she sighed and unwrapped the blanket before standing and walking over to the bathroom. There she saw that he had installed a tub, which she was certain had not been there before. Duplicates of her products were on the counter, just like her room at Malfoy Manor.

She gave a mirthless laugh as she opened the large wardrobe to find robes and dresses in a variety of colors. The selection wasn't as extensive as her closet at the Manor, but it was still far more than she would ever need while living here alone. An exploration of a nearby dresser revealed a familiar selection of underthings, loungewear, and nightgowns, though Hermione did not find any lingerie. Also missing was the seemingly endless collection of matching ribbons.

She sighed as she looked around. She didn't know how she was supposed to feel about everything that happened the previous day. She was still angry and unnerved by that creepy shrine she had discovered in his closet. She was still hurt by the implications that she would need all of this to be a suitable match for him. The fact that he had let Astoria use her wand made her stomach clench with anger whenever she thought about it.

But she already missed him *so much*. And then she became angry at herself for feeling that way. Shouldn't she be raging at him? Shouldn't she be like Aquila and entirely unforgiving? So why was it so *hard*? And even more difficult to face was the knowledge that she should have expected something like this the whole time. She knew precisely who he had been in school and how he had been raised. Over the last few months she had seen dozens of red flags to suggest unhealthy, obsessive behaviors, but she buried her head in the sand about them. It was ridiculous for her to feel so surprised and hurt when the truth came out.

She had never been that foolish before.

Her eyes fell on the last thing in this room she hadn't explored yet. Just like Malfoy Manor she had left it for the end: the dressing table.

Because of course Draco had given her a dressing table here, just like he had provided at the Manor. Even if there had not been one here originally, he certainly would have added it once he learned just how much Hermione had come to use it. Her morning routine with Poppy had become one of her favorite times of the day and was a much-needed ritual to focus her thoughts and center herself.

Hermione sank down on the small tufted stool and stared at herself in the mirror. She looked terrible, there was no other way to describe it. Her eyes were haunted, dead, exhausted, *lonely*. She felt so lonely here. Even during the early days at Malfoy Manor when she had been ignoring Draco, she had known he was just next door. Only now was she realizing just how different it felt to be *truly* alone. Portraits and elves might give her conversation now and then, but she would have no contact with any of her friends unless she sought them out.

Hermione knew she needed some time, but she was forced to acknowledge that she might not last as long as she hoped. *She* would be the one to go mad if she stayed truly isolated from other people for too long.

Hermione absently traced the edge of the small jewelry box he had left on the dressing table for her. She had already looked in the drawers of the dressing table and found the identical hair products with the French labels she had never studied too closely. No doubt this jewelry box was filled just like the one at Malfoy Manor. She debated about opening it, but it was the

last thing she hadn't explored in the room. Sighing, she lifted the lid and then furrowed her brow at what she found there.

It wasn't filled with jewelry. In fact, it contained only two things at first glance: two gold signet rings, one larger than the other. She pulled them both out, and her magic seemed to spark a bit and warm when she touched them. She slipped the larger of the two on her thumb experimentally, but it slid off. The smaller one was more appropriately sized, and it fit her ring finger perfectly.

They had matching crests on top, which Hermione recognized as being House Black's. She swallowed hard as she realized why he had left this for her.

She turned back to the jewelry box and lifted the top tray to see if there was anything in the cavity underneath, and she blinked in surprise to find several pieces of parchment, tied closed with that same silver ribbon he had once used to give her the Columba pendant. She had forgotten all about it, but she pulled it out and hesitated for a full thirty seconds before she gingerly untied it and smoothed the parchment out to read.

Greetings my darling,

Welcome to Grimmauld Place.

Alright, that's a terrible way to start, but I don't know how else to begin. I'm up very early, as usual, watching you sleep next to me in bed, and I know I have to start somewhere. Because right now I'm cherishing this time with you in case it ends once you finally learn the truth.

Grimmauld Place is yours now. You already know this if you are reading this letter, because you won't be going there without knowing that part of the truth. So that means you are here, in your (our?) room, reading this, knowing that I performed blood magic on you to give you a claim to a pureblood House and fortune.

I should probably apologize for it, but I'm not that sorry. The thing I'm desperately sorry about is not telling you before I did it. I have never really experienced guilt like that before, but my overwhelming desire to have you and give you this outweighed it. The security this gives you, the rights it gives you... I can never be sorry for that. You deserve the whole world, little dove, but I can't give that to you quite yet. I can only give you House Black, so I did.

The fantasy in my head shows you being generous and forgiving when you learn the truth, perhaps even eager to go to Grimmauld Place and see it again with me at your side. I close my eyes and imagine myself in bed with you there. Perhaps you're in one of your nightgowns when you discover this letter, and I coax you back to bed with me to read it. I would settle you in front of me and read it over your shoulder, kissing your neck to distract you because I'm more than a little nervous to watch you read these words that bare my very cracked soul to you. But you would eventually shush me after letting me tease you a little. And then when you reach the end of it you would turn around and tell me you love me too.

That's the fantasy in my head, at any rate. I suspect the reality is far different from that.

If I'm not there with you, then it means I may have lost you for good. I know that's what I'm risking by doing this behind your back, but we're in a war, and I need you to be safe and cared for more than I need you to be with me. I have been telling myself from the beginning that you will forgive me someday because you always do. I can only hope I'm right about that.

The other thing I hope you have learned by now is that I'm in love with you. I swore to myself that I would tell you before you go to Grimmauld Place for the first time. I hope to control the timing of when you find out, but if not then I hope I at least had the chance to tell you that much. If I did, then please know it's true. If I didn't, then let me tell you now.

I love you. I've loved you for years. It has been painful, maddening, and terrible at times. But the very first time you smiled at me I decided that it was worth every bit of madness and pain to see it. My plots, my rise in the Dark Lord's service, my deception of the Order to save you, the lives I've risked and those I have taken... all of it was worth it to see you smile at me.

There is a part of me that wants nothing more than to keep you confined to your suite at Malfoy Manor for the rest of our lives together. I could do it, and I'll confess that I intended to do it when I took you prisoner at Hogwarts. But when I finally got to learn about you up close and not from the distance that our social groups and the war imposed upon us, I knew that would never work. I am too weak for you. I can never tell you no, not really. You could command me to do nearly anything, and I would find a way to give it to you. I am still me though, and that means I have to give it to you in my own way. Your freedom is something you've wanted since the day I caught you. I know it as much as I despise the thought of it. But you want it, so you will have it. My deepest hope is that someday you will choose to stay with me anyway, even when you know the truth about the things I've done.

I'll admit some relief whenever I imagine you learning about it. As we grow closer I know the time I have to tell you is also approaching. I can't ever know your real feelings for me if you don't know this. If you stay with me (or come back to me) after this, then I'll finally have the certainty I need to believe that you want me the same way I want you.

And I do want you, sweet girl. You surely must know this, but I want you more than anything in this world. I want you in a way that's a little dark and maybe not right, but you capture my entire attention and always have. It's been that way ever since I met you, and it's only grown stronger as we've gotten older. I can't help it though, it's who I am. The ways I want you will probably never change, and the best I can do is give you the freedom to choose it – to choose me – knowing who I am and the lengths I've gone to have you.

And Merlin, I hope you choose me someday. I suspect my mother is plotting to marry me off to Astoria, though I don't know if she will really take it that far. But if she ever does, and that's where we find ourselves, please know that I still choose you. It could be now, it could be fifty years from now. If you ever come back to me after this I'll drop to my knees and thank you. Then I will settle in and kiss that sweet cunt until you come all over my face and I exhaust you with pleasure (did we get that far before you found out the truth? Salazar help me, I hope so).

This leads me to explain the other things you must have found in your jewelry box. The smaller signet ring is yours, as head of House Black. You are the only person who now bears its name, so it is right for you to have it. The connection to the house and wards will be stronger if you wear it. The larger ring is mine, which I have given up for now. If you are ever willing to tie with me for life – assuming I have not been forcibly tied to anybody else – then you need only give me my ring back and bring the ribbon that I will include with this letter. It is House Black's marriage ribbon and is used to secure magical engagements and marriages.

Perhaps I should have left other jewelry for you there or your hair ribbons or other pretty things (have I seen you in lingerie yet?), but I'm a selfish bastard and can't stand the thought of anybody but me seeing you wear them. If I am there with you while you read this, then I promise to correct this oversight as soon as possible. And if I'm not, then you will have to come back to me if you ever want those things again. It's petty and small of me, but it's who I am. Those parts of you are all mine now, and I need you to choose me at least a little bit before you can have them back.

Because whether we are tied or not, I will always choose you in whatever way I can have you.

And this leads me to the last thing I must tell you. I'm going to go against every instinct I have as I write this, but I need you to understand what it really means to choose me. If you choose me after this, I will never let you go again. That is true whether you agree to tie with me or not. You need to be sure, because I don't think I will have it in me to let you go a second time. I will do it once and only once, and then if you run from me ever again I will follow you to the ends of the earth to find you. I can track you now. I can find you anywhere. And I will do it.

For now though, you have a choice to accept me and who I am – or not. I am not a good person. I will never be a good person. But I will be good to you, and that's the only thing I can promise you. That's the biggest reason I love you of course: you make me feel things, and those things are good. I have never been good in any respect before I met you.

Choose carefully, darling girl. And while you are thinking about it, please consider giving me a scrap to hang onto — something that lets me know you got this letter and will think about everything I wrote.

You're waking up now, sleepyhead. It's time for me to kiss you good morning.

Love, Draco

Silent tears were coursing down Hermione's cheeks as she read the letter. Crookshanks appeared from seemingly nowhere and hopped into her lap with a quiet purr. She clutched at his fur as she read it a second time. Then she finally folded it with shaky hands and tied the ribbon back around it carefully before placing it at the bottom of her jewelry box. She

replaced the tray on top and put both signet rings back where she found them as she closed the lid shut.

It was a lot, but she was grateful he had written to her about this. The warning that this was her one opportunity to be free of him resonated. Now she understood that it wouldn't be enough to just forgive him. She would have to choose him and accept who he really was with all of his flaws before she faced him again. He was no longer hiding his true nature from her, and just like Aquila surmised he was not promising to change a single thing if she went back.

If she returned, she would be choosing him and that would mean accepting him – *all* of him – not just the best version of him that was only hers.

And now she knew why he had respected the boundaries she set the previous day, or mostly at any rate. This was a moment he had been mentally preparing for. He knew it might come to this, and he was determined to give her the space to decide. But if she ever went back to Draco, she would be pulled entirely into his orbit. There would be no second chances.

She exhaled and tried to reassure herself that she had time to really think about it. He had invited her to take fifty years if that was what she needed, and surely it wouldn't take *that* long. But she also shouldn't rush back the moment she forgave him. After that letter she was perilously close to it already.

Please consider giving me a scrap to hang onto...

Hermione was unsure about this, fearing he might take it the wrong way. But then again, she thought that letter was the most honest thing she had ever gotten from him. It was the kind of honesty she had always wanted from him, and he had written this to her before she was angry with him and demanding access to all of his secrets. She could surely give him something small – very small – that would let him know she was thinking about it and continue to remind him that she required some distance right now.

"Posy," she said.

Posy appeared with a *POP!*

"Yes, Mistress?" she asked with concern as she saw Hermione's wet face.

"Posy, I have a message for Draco Malfoy."

Posy's eyes widened, but she straightened up to listen.

"Please tell Draco that I read his letter and have a lot to think about. I am giving him a scrap while I do it. He may activate his tracking spell once per day and only once per day for his own peace of mind. But if he does it more often than that I won't be inclined to return any time soon."

Hermione was privately unsure if she really believed her last threat, but she had to try. She needed him to understand that she hadn't made her choice yet.

Posy bowed and squeaked, “I is telling him right away, Mistress!”

Posy apparated away, and Hermione was a bit surprised that the tracking spell did not immediately activate. Nor did she feel it during breakfast or in the lead up to lunch and then tea. By the evening, she was feeling slightly hurt that he hadn’t checked on her and knew this was something else she would need to examine when she finally had the energy to sort through her jumbled thoughts.

It was only as she laid down on that horrible cot for her second night of cold and discomfort that she finally felt that tingle on her palms, and now she understood why he had waited. She had told him he could only do it once a day, and he was using his one chance to tell her goodnight.

Hermione’s heart broke all over again as she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 29: Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

TW1: References to domestic violence (past).

TW2: Mild gore - skip the part between the *** if you don't wish to read.

It took Hermione nearly ten days before she was on the verge of truly forgiving Draco. Aquila was not in favor and thought it far too fast, but Columba seemed relieved. Hermione had spent quite a bit of time in her dove form during the first few days and found herself missing the person her little dove had bonded to every time she transformed.

It helped that Posy was keeping nothing from her, though she swore Draco wasn't getting too many details about Hermione in return.

"My mother is saying he is truly miserable, Mistress. He is not smiling at all."

"My mother is saying he is thinking very much about the things you said. He is revisiting his memories of you."

"My mother is saying that he is crying over one of your nightgowns, Mistress. He is truly sorry."

With each update Hermione's anger melted a little more. And then she received a letter from Ginny and Luna that made the rest of it burn out, or as much as it could until she allowed Draco to speak for himself.

Dear Hermione,

Ginny and Luna here. We wanted to let you know that Draco and Theo told us everything they have done to you. In fact, they brought us into Draco's pensieve to show us the memory of you dressing them down (great job by the way, we're proud of you)!

We aren't speaking to either one of them right now, and we probably won't until you've forgiven them first. We're both appalled that they could have been so short-sighted about your feelings and everything you've been through. We told Draco that if he wanted to earn your love he was going to have to do better than some gold and a house and stop putting his own desires first.

We wish we could say we were surprised that he and Theo completely missed the plot when it came to pureblood prejudice, but unfortunately it surprised neither one of us. We're both purebloods of course, and Ginny is a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. But we were still "outsiders" in a way, thanks to some mixed marriages in Luna's family and a lack of wealth in Ginny's. The things we faced were never as bad as you, but they at least made us aware of how painful the behaviors of the Sacred Twenty-Eight elite could be.

We know that it's hard to think differently than the way you were raised, and the fact that Draco and Theo grew up in that world is not their fault. But we've made it clear that they need to think beyond it to be worthy of you or Luna.

Blaise agrees, by the way, and as a half-Veela, he has his own views of this that very much align with yours. Your departure has inspired us to talk about it a lot, and we learned that Blaise clung to his father's pureblood status for years as a way to fit into Slytherin. For a long time he was embarrassed by the fact that he's half-Veela. It took some growing before he embraced that side of himself. He does understand prejudice, though, perhaps even better than the two of us do. You probably won't be hearing from him directly, though he asked us to send you his best wishes and support. He is still speaking to Draco and Theo because Merlin knows they both need somebody to knock some sense into them, and he's the best choice. We are both too angry to do it right now.

Draco also confessed to letting Astoria Greengrass carry your wand. We have very mixed feelings about this because it's an enormous betrayal, but he was also pressured into it by his mother. We won't say any more about it because it's his story to tell, but he showed us that memory too. Whether it's forgivable or not is something only you can decide. For what it's worth, Blaise and Theo returned our wands after Draco confessed to this, and all three of them gave us the choice to leave if we wanted to.

We both thought about it, but for now we are going to stay. It's still the safest place for us (other than Grimmauld Place), and in the case of Ginny it might actually kill Draco if she leaves his protection before You-Know-Who is gone. His Vow with the Order was rather broad, and as angry as we are with the prat, neither of us wants to risk triggering his Vow so he actually dies. We may still drop in for a visit if you want to see us, but if you wish for space to think we're also happy to stay away until you're ready.

We both love you, Hermione, and we hope you write back! Please take whatever time you need away from Draco and Theo, and if you want to hear news from this side of the floo, let us know. We won't be keeping any secrets from you.

Love, Ginny & Luna

Somehow, hearing that Draco had confessed to them too, even going so far as to show them his memories so that he couldn't paint it in a better light for himself, made Hermione's anger fizzle. She still wasn't ready to *choose* him yet, and there was still some lingering hurt about her new pureblood identity and the things he had done with her wand, but she could no longer bring herself to be truly angry about it.

As for Theo, she had forgiven the things he had done within a few days, especially once she realized it was affecting his relationship with Luna. It was true he had stalked their parents in much the same way Draco had stalked her, but his reasons for it were so heart-breaking that Hermione couldn't help but move past it. Even the secrets he kept for Draco she forgave. She knew just how intense Draco could be, and she was certain Draco had gone to great lengths to convince Theo to back him up. Still, she wanted honesty from him going forward, so she made sure her anger and hurt were really gone before she reached out to him.

Theo? she called through their bond hesitantly one morning.

He opened instantly.

Hermione!

Hi.

Hi. Oh Merlin, I'm so sorry, I just –

It's okay. I've forgiven you. I think I forgave you a few days ago, actually, I just had to be certain. I've been trying to forgive Draco as well.

And have you?

I'm getting there. I'm not that angry anymore, but I'll admit I'm still a little hung up on the pureblood thing and the fact that he let Astoria have my wand. He left me a letter that was illuminating. I can't come back there unless I'm ready to accept everything about him, and I'm not ready yet.

I can understand that. On the pureblood thing though... I didn't have a chance to apologize to you for it, but I've been thinking about it a lot like you asked.

Hermione hesitated, but she knew she needed to hear this.

And?

And you're right. I didn't even think about how that new identity could hurt you. I've never faced the things you did, and I should have been kinder to you before I ever knew the truth about us. I'm sorry.

Thank you.

I really want the world to know, Hermione. If the Dark Lord ever dies, I'm going to reveal the truth about both of us.

Hermione blinked in surprise.

You're going to tell the other purebloods that you're muggleborn?

Yes. I can't do it while the Dark Lord is alive because it would be too dangerous and would compromise my work with the Order. But if we ever take him out, I won't hide it anymore. I

promise you that. I'm not ashamed of it, I just didn't learn the truth myself until the summer before sixth year started. By then it was too dangerous to go public with it or acknowledge our relationship. My father would have killed us both.

Hermione paused. Somehow amidst all of her hurt she had forgotten that Theo had not always known about it. He was right it would have been too dangerous to acknowledge her back then. It was *far* too dangerous now. She was so used to thinking of Draco and Theo as being on top of Voldemort's list of favorite Death Eaters that she had lost track of just how precarious their home lives had been before their fathers died.

Do you think Draco worried about the same thing?

She hated how vulnerable she sounded, but she couldn't help it. She couldn't shake the feeling that Hermione Granger wasn't good enough.

I think you should let him tell you himself.

I'm not ready to talk to him yet.

Are you sure? I know he would like to apologize to you.

I'm certain. I just can't do that to myself until I'm ready to choose him. It's too painful.

What about another letter then? I know he's been writing you a second one on the off-chance you will accept it. He keeps crumpling it up and starting over, but I think it's about this.

Hermione fell silent as she thought about it. She knew that even if her anger burned out she would not fully forgive him until he had been given a chance to respond to the pureblood issue, at minimum. It hurt too much. She didn't think that hearing an apology would make her *choose* him, but she deserved to have some closure from that pain. She also couldn't fully accept the things he had given her until she was certain how he felt. Her very sore back was begging her to let him send the letter. Her cot was still terrible.

She couldn't let Draco come in person, because that was too dangerous. If she saw him her heart may be swayed before she was really ready to choose him. A letter though... she could probably handle another letter. The first one he had left for her had made her emotional, but it didn't make her go back. She had even given herself space from it and then revisited it a few days later.

Okay. You can tell him I will accept one letter. I probably won't respond because I don't want to give him the impression that I'm coming back unless I'm fully prepared to do it. But I promise to read whatever he sends me and think about it.

Thank you.

And Theo, I forgive you. Really. If you're willing to come out as a muggleborn after it's safe and be open about our relationship...

I am.

Then I can't ask for anything else.

Thank you, Hermione. I'll try to do better.

Hermione felt some tension drain from her. Being at odds with Theo wasn't quite as painful as Draco, but it was close. And now that they had made up, she had questions.

How is Draco holding up?

He's not doing very well.

Hermione's stomach twisted at this. She had suspected as much. *The Daily Prophet* had been delivered regularly by Posy each morning, and though Hermione didn't have their daily breakfasts or teas to discuss what she was reading she didn't need them to see just how much Draco was hurting. The Wizengamot had supposedly sentenced several people to death, and Draco had actually volunteered to execute them. He hadn't just *Avada'd* them, he had bled them. It had been a closed execution this time, but one member of the press was invited to write about the immediate aftermath as a way to remind the wizarding world that traitorous acts against Voldemort would be swiftly punished through legal channels. The picture of him with dead eyes and blood all over his robes made her heart ache. She knew he was right to say he wasn't a good person, but she also thought Narcissa might have been right too to insist that Hermione kept him from spiraling into *this*.

With Hermione in his life he might be unfeeling toward others. Without her, he turned into a true monster.

It was something else she would have to accept before she returned to him.

I'm sorry to hear it, but I need to read his letter and come to terms with everything he's done first. Has anybody asked to see his boon recently?

Not yet. The others are intimidated by you two, and right now Draco is not inviting any questions.

Okay, good. Please let me know if that becomes an issue.

I don't think it will. We haven't confronted Narcissa about Samhain because we don't want her to move the date up any earlier, but it's coming up soon. If she ties him, Draco's boon can always just disappear if that's your decision. He wouldn't be the only Death Eater to give one up for a fiancée. We would probably fake your death and say he killed you so no other Death Eater could have you either. Nobody would question it with the way he's been acting.

Hermione shivered a bit as she considered this. She couldn't be certain *why* she was so certain that a Draco who was this hurt would not physically harm her too. Isn't that what some men like him did? They became so obsessed and unstable when facing rejection that they lashed out against their former lovers?

But Draco wouldn't do that. No, he had always clung to the belief that she would forgive him for every single thing he had ever done, and she thought he probably *still* felt that way somewhere deep down. It was the tiniest dose of optimism that meant he would continue to be gentle with her and hold out hope that she would come around again one day.

She was safe, and he would never hurt her. It didn't matter what the other Death Eaters believed him to be capable of.

Is Draco really not going to fight being tied?

How can he? Narcissa can do it in his place, and she would have to be dead for Draco to be in the same position I'm in. The only reason we got away with killing our fathers was because we did it during the Battle of Hogwarts, and both of us hated them enough by that point to make it happen. Neither of us wants to kill Narcissa, even with the things she's doing to him. And if either Astoria or Narcissa turns up dead, it's going to draw the Dark Lord's attention and invite questions about you. You know the Dark Lord wants more pureblooded children, and women are needed for that even more than men are. He hasn't put a true breeding program in place just yet, but killing any pureblooded woman is now a capital crime.

Hermione had a sinking feeling as she considered it, but she knew Theo was right. If there was a good way around it that did not involve tying Columba Black instead, Draco would have found it already.

I don't like it, Theo.

No, and we are trying to delay it. It's the only thing we can do at this point. But Draco will be tied to somebody eventually, Hermione. He has to be. It's part of his duty to the estate. Mine too.

Will you do it with Luna then?

I'm hoping to suggest it after Samhain. The Dark Lord finally agreed to let Blaise and Ginny tie since she is Sacred Twenty-Eight, and he thinks she has turned. They are going to do it on Samhain with the Dark Lord in attendance. Ginny hasn't been speaking to Draco or me, but she still knows he's in a really tight spot here. She and Blaise are hoping to claim Samhain for themselves so Narcissa will delay tying Draco to Astoria for a little longer.

But that's permanent!

Blaise and Ginny are in love, Hermione. Wizards and witches typically do this much younger than muggles. Besides, it's not a marriage, not yet. It's just a promise. It can be undone if both parties willingly agree to it without magical influence.

So Draco could untie with Astoria then?

I said both parties would have to agree to it without influence.

And Astoria never would.

Probably not. I don't think Narcissa would either, and she will stand for him.

God.

I know. But my point is that it's common to tie and then wait a few years before actually getting married. Ginny and Blaise know what they are doing.

And after them...

Then I will ask for Luna when the time is right. Mine is a bit more precarious than Blaise's because I'm higher ranked than he is, and the Dark Lord favors Daphne. Luna is a pureblood, but she's not Sacred Twenty-Eight. I'm not going to rush into anything until I know he will say yes. Right now he's preoccupied with Blaise, and then he will probably become preoccupied with Draco. I have some time before his attention turns to me.

I don't like any of this.

I know you don't. Neither do we. But it's the way of things, and there are delicate games that all three of us have to play as long as the Dark Lord is alive. Blaise is getting the witch he wants out of it, which is very unusual. I may get lucky too, but I may not. You have to understand that Draco and I have always expected to tie with somebody we didn't care about for our entire lives. If that's what ends up happening, we will just have to manage it. You can't let it influence any decision you make about whether to return or not.

I'll try not to.

But Hermione couldn't help but think about it. She knew the wizards were trapped by their duties and families, but she had never really talked to them about this sort of thing other than the day she left. Only after reconnecting with Theo did it occur to her that they may not really understand the prejudice she had faced as a muggleborn, but *she* also didn't know what it was like to be a pureblood with all of the pressures that came with it. There was no way for her to relate to it, no matter how hard she tried. She knew that similar pressures existed in the muggle world among the elite, especially those who were considered royal. She supposed it wasn't that different for wizards when there was generational wealth and hundreds of years of traditions to consider. Draco and Theo had obviously been conditioned from the cradle to preserve their estates by marrying and reproducing and breaking no rules that could cause their lines to be disinherited.

It was entirely different from how she viewed the world.

She was forced to acknowledge that neither 'side' would ever be able to fully understand the other, because they were too different. There wasn't anything to be done about that, not really. Something about that realization softened her further.

The promised letter from Draco arrived the next day. His normally elegant handwriting was messy, and the parchment was marred with words crossed out and wet blots as though tears had fallen and then dried on it. Hermione's heart squeezed as she read it.

Dear Hermione,

I have written and rewritten this a dozen times by now. If I knew the words you needed to hear that would make you come back to me, I would write them. I don't know what they are though, so I have to write the truth. You have asked me for honesty, and it's the only thing I have left to give to you when it comes to writing about my prejudices and behavior toward you for the first seven years I knew you.

I hesitate to tell you some of this, but you've seen the darkest parts of me. I expect that you loathe me by now, so it probably won't make a fucking difference anyway.

I am in love with Hermione Granger, but it took me longer than it should have to accept it.

When we were children you forced me to confront the lies I had been told my whole life. I learned that the very thing that supposedly made me great was utter bollocks. There was a time, especially when we were younger, when I hated you for wrecking my entire world view. But even still, I fell in love with you because you are brave and beautiful and brilliant. You're relentless when you want something and can be stubborn to a fault. But I love every single thing that makes you Hermione Granger. How could I not?

I think I realized my feelings for you were inevitable by the end of third year. Up to that point I was in denial about it or tried to tell myself it was a crush and would pass with time. Both of my parents were aware of it by the time the World Cup came around, and Father probably would have gone after you that night if I hadn't sworn to him that I would give you up before I went into the forest.

By the end of fourth year I had worked up the courage to tell Father I wanted you anyway, and then he foiled my plans by taking me directly to the Dark Lord the moment I exited the train. I knew then that Father had been right all along: I would never be allowed to have you. It wasn't just my parents who would pose a barrier, but the Dark Lord too.

You were right about that too, my darling: I was trapped, and you were free.

The next year was terrible, and I continued to watch your every move while lashing out whenever you noticed me doing it. I felt angry and resentful and took it out on you. It wasn't until I started fixing the Vanishing Cabinet in sixth year that I finally had the sense to leave you the hell alone. The Dark Lord was testing me, and I wanted you far away from me when it was time to execute his plan.

I've never apologized to you for the way I treated you in school because I didn't think I deserved your forgiveness. I realize now that was selfish of me. It doesn't matter if you forgive me or not, you should have heard me say those words. It's probably too little too late, but please let me tell you now that I'm sorry for it, my darling. I'm sorry for all of it.

By the time my seventh year rolled around, you were on the run, and Father could tell I was truly lost to you. He always had spies that kept tabs on what I was doing, and it was obvious to them that I had no interest in the pureblood girls around me. Father knew the truth: I

wanted a muggleborn witch. I didn't believe in blood purity any longer. I was his heir, and I was harboring deep fantasies about ending a millennia of purity if I could convince you to have me.

That was the reason he inserted the clause about forced ties into the contract with the Greengrasses. It was to keep me from having you. Reggie thought it was a fantastic idea and proposed the same thing for Theo, so that's why he has it too. But the origins of it were a way for my father to keep us apart.

Have I ever wished that you were a pureblood before? If I'm being honest, then I have to say yes, I have. I've wished for it countless times. But it has nothing to do with thinking you are less worthy and everything to do with the fact that it was an enormous fucking complication given all the people who wanted to stop me from having you because of it. I have been trapped in my pureblooded prison my entire life. Even with my father dead, I'm still trapped by the Dark Lord. I'm going to be trapped until he's gone.

You asked me to do some soul searching after you pointed out my own prejudices, and I had a revelation over the past week: the muggleborn 'problem' was always mine and never yours.

I am sorry for that too.

I don't think I treated Theo differently when I learned the truth because by then I decided that blood purity was bullshit. But I did have similar prejudices about Blaise when I was younger because he is half-Veela. Just like the muggleborn thing, I eventually decided all the half-breed nonsense didn't matter, but it took a few years. I was never as cruel to Blaise as I was to you, but I talked to him about it, and evidently he knew that I was prejudiced when we were younger. I had no idea he was aware of it, but he said prejudice is insidious and those who are on the receiving end of it always know.

I also told Blaise and the girls everything I had done to you. Blaise suspected I had done some blood magic to tie us together, but he didn't know how far I had gone with it. He confirmed that I was a colossal idiot for never realizing that the persona of Columba Black could hurt you. If I had told Blaise everything from the beginning, he may have knocked some sense into me before it was too late. I regret keeping it to myself.

I don't know why I didn't tell him. I think it's because he didn't need to know about it for the plan to work, but maybe it's because I still have some unconscious prejudice toward him. I really hope not, but I can't be sure. Isn't the point of unconscious prejudice that you continue to have it without realizing it?

How do I know when my prejudice is completely gone? I don't think it's possible to know. It's hard to fix something you don't even realize is there, but I'm finally becoming more aware of it.

I did apologize to Blaise for believing some of the half-breed bullshit my Father fed to me when we were younger. He gave me a couple crucios for his past self and says we are good now, but I don't know if it will ever really be enough. He also gave me a few crucios for you because Theo feels too complicit to do it.

Blaise did say I need to be clear with you about my feelings and motivations for Columba Black. I now realize that he's smarter than me and understands this kind of thing on a level that I probably never will. So I am going to take his advice.

I did not create Columba Black because I think you need to be her to be worthy of me. My reasons for doing it were precisely what I told you that day: it gives you security, protection, money you could access with little risk, and yes it made you superior to Astoria if the Dark Lord was ever to compare you side by side.

That being said, I want you to understand something very important: I love Hermione Granger, and I'm not in love with Columba Black. Regardless of any unconscious prejudice I may still harbor, I am absolutely certain of this.

Columba Black was always meant to be a backup plan and nothing more than that. If we had found a way to end the Dark Lord before I caught wind of my mother taking matters into her own hands, I would have asked to tie with you as Hermione Granger once he was dead. Columba Black was merely a failsafe if my mother made a move too soon. Columba Black was also meant to be there to give you security if I was gone and couldn't care for you myself.

My backup plan obviously blew up in my face.

I never wanted to make you feel like you weren't good enough precisely the way you are. I am sorry for it, and I realize it's my own damn fault because of the way I've always treated you in public up to this point.

I want you as Hermione Granger, my darling girl, and I'm so sorry I fucked it up that badly.

I will probably continue to fuck it up. I wasn't raised as a muggleborn, and you and Blaise are both right that I can never know what that pain feels like. But I will try to be more mindful of it going forward. And when I inevitably fuck it up again, I hope you will tell me and give me a chance to work on it.

That leads me to the last few things I have to say.

First, I'm not going to ask you to come back to me as Columba Black. I don't want you to feel like you're not good enough exactly the way you are, and if Columba Black makes you feel that way then please don't turn into her for me. She was never what I wanted anyway, she was just the closest thing I could have to Hermione Granger while the Dark Lord is still alive.

Second, I'm also not going to tie with you as Hermione Granger while the Dark Lord is living, because it would be a death sentence for you. Perhaps I can delay my mother until after he's gone. Only time will tell. I just know that I cannot risk your life like that while he is alive, my darling, so I will not do it. Please know that whatever comes next, the world is going to know that I'm in love with Hermione Granger the day that bastard is dead.

Third, the things I wrote to you previously still apply: if you ever return to me, in any capacity, I am never letting you go again. This has been the most painful thing I've ever experienced, and I'm not capable of doing it twice.

Fourth, I owe you an explanation about your wand, but it's not a good one. I killed the Snatchers who took it from you in the first place, and I gave it up a month ago to pacify my mother. She and Astoria pressured me to do it, and I caved so that she would think I was being cooperative. I was just trying to buy myself more time, and in doing so I gave up one of the most important pieces of you. I should never have let it go, and I know that. I should have fought harder to keep it safe for you, and I'm sorry I didn't. I felt guilty about it the moment I turned it over. For what it's worth, I intended to retrieve it right after we returned from Nott Castle that weekend. You simply got to it first (of course you did).

And finally, I am begging you, pleading with you, to please accept Grimmauld Place as your sanctuary even if you can accept nothing else from me. If it would help you to think of it as Potter's last gift to you, then do that. It doesn't matter if you have it because you're Potter's best friend or Sirius's daughter. It's yours. It was always supposed to be yours, and it's much safer than that goddamned tent you've been using. Please, Hermione, stop being so stubborn and just sleep in the fucking house. I promise I won't read anything into it, I just need you to do the intelligent thing and stay inside so the Death Eaters don't see you. I love you too much to let you risk your life night after night just to prove your point to me.

I'll always love you, Hermione. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry for all of it. I don't know how to move on from this because I need you in my life. I can barely breathe when you aren't with me. But I told you in the letter I left in your jewelry box that I will try to give you anything you want, and right now I know you want space. I'm trying, sweet girl, I really am. Still, if you could find it in yourself to see me so we could talk again, I beg you to consider it. I want to say these things to your face, my darling. Words on paper aren't enough.

Love, Draco

Draco had said the magic words.

Hermione didn't know what they were, precisely, but the letter was exactly what she needed to hear. He loved *her*. He wanted *her*. He didn't think she was less than him for being muggleborn, and the muggleborn 'issue' had always been his problem and not hers. Perhaps he still had some unconscious biases due to the way he was raised that would emerge now and then, but he was willing to acknowledge them and apologize for them and then try to be more aware the next time. And what more could she ask for than that, really? There was no way for her to wave her wand and erase his prejudices overnight. It was something that took years to work through, but he had been working on it even while hurting her at Hogwarts.

He had hurt her because he was jealous, sad, trapped, angry. He had a ferocious temper and lashed out when he got frustrated. He grew up with terrible role models who told him the world was one way while he saw it differently. He had to unbrainwash himself while living with his father and Voldemort, and he had mostly done it. The things he had said to her those years had been cruel, but reactionary. They were his way of coping as he tried to give up on his dreams of her.

Hermione felt she could give him some grace for that.

His soul-searching had even led to some similar revelations about Blaise. She had suspected it, and she was glad he acknowledged it. He hadn't made empty promises about never behaving that way again. He hadn't even offered to change, not really. He was one of the most flawed and imperfect people she had ever met, and he would probably never get it completely right. She just needed to know that he cared enough about Hermione Granger to try to understand the way it made her feel. That he had naturally extended these ruminations to include Blaise spoke volumes.

Columba Black finally felt like nothing more than a disguise. She wasn't the person Hermione had to become to capture Draco's affections. Oddly enough, it made Hermione far more willing to embrace the persona of Columba Black and all the things that came with it because he was no longer forcing it upon her.

Columba Black was just a backup plan.

The wand was the last thing between them then. There was no excuse for him turning it over to Astoria. It hadn't been a life or death situation. He had simply caved to pressure.

It was a moment when Hermione realized that sometimes forgiveness had to be gratuitous. There was nothing he could do or say to justify it to make her feel better. She could continue to resent him for it or she could be satisfied that he was truly sorry. Until she made up her mind it would simply be wedged between them indefinitely.

She hesitated a moment longer, and then she made a conscious decision to let it go.

She let all of it go.

Draco's letter certainly wasn't enough to make her *choose* him. She also wasn't prepared to see him yet, nor did she want any more letters from him while she mulled over the two he had already given her. Draco had a way of totally disarming her whenever she was around him, and she knew she needed more space to think about all the other things she had to accept before she returned to him.

She had to accept his violence, his anger, his instability, his distinct lack of morals. She would work on that next, but she couldn't see him or communicate with him while she did it. It was too important for her to come around to it on her own time, without any influence from him. If she allowed herself to be swayed any further, she would always doubt herself if she returned.

She didn't want that for either one of them.

Still, that sick feeling of lingering hurt and resentment had finally disappeared. Hermione breathed easier for it. She discovered that by forgiving Draco, she bought herself peace as well.

She had certainly earned it.

Hermione slept inside Grimmauld Place for the first time that night. When her palms tingled that evening, she thought she sensed exquisite relief on the other side.

Draco had spent a couple of weeks searching his fucked up soul, and he had never felt worse. The thing he found was ugly, broken, tortured, scarred. He didn't like to look at it. He didn't think he could change it. He had seen too much, done too much, to ever be redeemed and become worthy of his little dove. The more he examined it the sicker he felt, and he began to self-destruct. His soul was already so damaged that very little could make it worse. What did it matter if even more pieces chipped away with every round of torture? There was only one person who could heal him, and she wasn't here.

Draco took a three day break from torture after Hermione said she would accept a letter from him. Theo had warned him that she probably wouldn't respond, but Draco refused to believe it. For a brief, wonderful window of time he had been eagerly anticipating something in return. Surely she would let him see her. Surely she would understand just how sorry he was and let him back into her life.

He was devastated all over again when she continued to keep him at arms length.

Draco knew she had read the letter. She had even addressed it obliquely with her friends, but she had not responded to Draco, other than through a single message she sent via Theo.

"Hermione read it, mate. She said she's not angry anymore, but she still needs time to think. She's not ready to see you yet."

That was all Theo would say. Getting information about her out of Theo or Posy was exceptionally difficult, and his best sources became the letters she wrote back to Ginny and Luna. He ordered Poppy to steal every single one when they were asleep so that he could copy them.

Then again, sometimes her letters had a way of making him feel even worse, especially the one she sent back soon after his second letter to her had arrived.

"I've finally forgiven Draco for the things he's done. I'm not angry so there's no need to keep him or Theo in the doghouse any longer. But this time, forgiveness is not enough. I can't come back yet. I don't know when it will be enough for me to return."

Why wasn't forgiveness enough? What else did he have to do? Draco didn't know, but he began to spiral badly after he realized he truly may have lost her for good.

The letter had arrived on a Saturday evening. Draco stole it after the girls had gone to bed, and within thirty minutes of reading it, Draco had fled to a Death Eater revel to lead the prisoner torture that night. He killed three prisoners entirely by accident because he couldn't make himself stop.

Severus had cornered him afterwards to demand to know what was going on. Draco had little choice but to tell him that Hermione had escaped, though he kept the story consistent with what his mother believed to be true. Severus had gripped him tightly, frog-marched him back to the Manor, and the moment they stepped through the floo they nearly ran into his mother. The look on her face when she saw him covered in blood was one he would never forget. She looked terrified.

“Are you alright?” she asked urgently.

“It’s not mine,” he said dully.

“Then whose?”

“I don’t know. They’re dead though, so does it really matter?”

“Draco...”

“Get out of my way, Mother, before I lose my temper with you too.”

Narcissa blanched and immediately fled, but Draco scarcely noticed because suddenly Severus was shoving him against the wall and getting in his face.

“Do not threaten her, Draco.”

Draco’s lips curled. “Why the fuck do you care? I thought you still had a hard on for Potter’s dead mother.”

At this, Severus practically growled.

“I care because Narcissa is a dear friend. *You will not threaten her.*”

“If she’s such a dear friend then why the *fuck* didn’t you intervene with my father?” snarled Draco. “Or didn’t you notice that he used to beat her?”

Snape released him and stepped back, looking at Draco with a terrible kind of coldness. Somehow Draco knew that Severus was about to go for the jugular. He usually stopped just short of being cruel, thanks to their relationship, but when he didn’t hold back he had a way of voicing every negative thought in Draco’s head.

“I could ask you the same thing. You were *living* with them after all. She’s your mother, and you are more than capable of incapacitating men like your father. How many times have you done it now, Draco? Dozens? So why weren’t *you* the barrier between them once you realized what was happening? As for me, I *did* intervene once, and Lucius nearly killed her for it. He thought we were having an affair after I stepped in to defend her. I finally convinced him it wasn’t true, but not before Narcissa was so beaten up she was nearly dead. I stopped stepping in after that little incident because Lucius grew paranoid and continued to suspect something between us. It wasn’t safe for her to be around me after that. But *you* had no such barriers. You could have done it. So why didn’t you?”

Draco was nearly breathless with fury and with something else, of course.

Guilt.

He had been thinking these very thoughts for years.

Why didn't I defend her?

"She... she stopped me. The one time I tried," said Draco, and he hated how his voice cracked.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Even so, you should have found a way to handle it once you became old enough for it. Perhaps I should have found a way too. Neither of us helped her though, and it's made her mind fragile, regardless of how composed she may appear in front of others. Her occlumency is the only thing keeping her mind from totally crumbling, and you know it. We both allowed Lucius to hurt her over and over again, and we owe it to her to be sensitive about it. Do not threaten her, not even in jest. It does not matter how much you may be hurting and wish to lash out. Making your own mother more afraid than she already is is a cruelty that is beyond even you, and I will no longer stand aside. If you harm her, you will answer to me for it."

Snape left Draco soon after that, but his words left a sick feeling in Draco's gut.

Draco's relationship with his mother had been complex for a long time. Other than Hermione, she was the only woman who could hurt him over and over again and face no risk of retaliation. Just like the promise Draco once made to himself that he would never raise a hand to Hermione, Draco had made the same promise about his mother. No matter what she did to him, he would never physically harm her. He *wouldn't*.

But it struck him that very few people seemed to realize this, perhaps not even Hermione. He had a nagging feeling she hadn't told him everything from her encounter with Narcissa in the gardens, but of course he couldn't very well ask.

Was Hermione protecting Narcissa from Draco?

Hermione had gotten to see the best sides of him: he had the ability to care and feel and love, at least when it came to her. He cared for his mother too. But Narcissa could no longer see it. Snape couldn't see it either. Had Hermione lost sight of it too? Had his goodness dimmed so much that it was becoming invisible to those who were closest to him?

Draco knew Narcissa had suffered. He had been self-flagellating for a couple of years whenever he thought about it. Draco knew he should have seen the signs of abuse earlier than he did. He should have found a way to kill his father the moment his blinders came off. Perhaps he couldn't have done anything about it before then, but he cast his first *Avada* on a human when he was barely sixteen years old. He had to prove to the Dark Lord he was capable of casting it before accepting the assignment to kill Dumbledore, so a muggle man died under Draco's wand within hours of being marked. Theo then managed the spell a year later, and they could have killed their fathers then.

Draco could never kill his father *directly*, of course. The Blacks punished patricide with impotence. The Malfoys punished it with poverty. Being disinherited and losing control of

his estate was far more obvious than being unable to father a child years down the road, so the Dark Lord would have known all about it if Draco had done it himself. But he and Theo had found the obvious solution to that little problem, and they made their pact.

Fuck, they should have done it as soon as Theo could cast the spell. It would have saved his mother a whole year of violence.

Narcissa had been battered and beaten and terrified for *years*. She had loved his father once, but he turned on her, and Draco sensed that it got worse as Draco got older. Whenever Lucius was disappointed in Draco — which became persistent once Lucius realized that Draco would never give up Hermione — he blamed it on Narcissa for being too soft with him.

She had been rightfully terrified of her husband, and now she was becoming terrified of Draco too.

He could see it on her face whenever the topic of Astoria came up, which was becoming increasingly more common. She walked on eggshells around him and practically flinched every time the name ‘Astoria’ was mentioned. And yet, in this one thing she was uncharacteristically determined to get her way, and Draco knew it was all his fault. Narcissa saw too much of Lucius in Draco and felt like she had no choice but to save the Black and Malfoy lines, since she could no longer save Draco himself. She had grown to fear him so much that she had even come to fear his children who did not yet exist.

That was the only reason she continued to foist Astoria upon him. The explanation Hermione had given to him — that Narcissa believed her too powerful to bear his children — was the only thing that fit. Over the last few weeks he sensed that Narcissa really *was* upset by Hermione’s absence. She knew how important Hermione was to Draco and how happy she made him. Narcissa wanted Astoria to be his wife, but she was kind about Hermione whenever she mentioned it. She offered to join the search. She suggested performing protective magic and researching wards to keep Hermione safe once she was found. Narcissa knew Draco needed her, perhaps more than ever. Draco simply couldn’t marry her because the prospects scared her too much.

Draco sometimes wondered if Narcissa was mad herself. But if she was, what could he do about it? And how could he hate a mother who was slowly descending into mental instability and paranoia thanks to the violence perpetrated upon her by her husband?

Draco tried to hate her for it, but he couldn’t do it. Instead, he hated himself. He should never have let his mother see that side of him. He should have realized it would shock and disturb her and resurrect terrible memories.

He should have kept her ignorant so she wouldn’t believe that he was becoming his father.

He hadn’t though, and now that Hermione was gone he couldn’t seem to make himself stop. The violence had only gotten worse, and Narcissa was fully aware of it. She continued to look at him with fear and sadness, along with a knowing expression that told Draco she was fully convinced that she was right: she thought Draco was too dangerous, and he needed to tie with somebody whose power did not rival his own.

It's for everyone's safety, her eyes seemed to say. Please don't kill me for it.

And perhaps Narcissa had good reason to be concerned. Draco had thrown himself into the Dark Lord's plan to question the Wizengamot members with enthusiasm. He had been inviting them to tea at the Manor, one at a time, for privacy. Then he questioned them using his preferred methods. He would always start by binding them and drawing his knife while he relished their looks of abject fear.

"Tell me, Lord Garrison, do you believe in blood purity?"

"Of... of course!"

Wrong fucking answer. Draco moved swiftly and stabbed him in the side. He rejoiced in the screams as he twisted the knife.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes! Please!" he gasped.

This time Draco began to sever an ear as the man started to go hoarse with his screams.

"I need you to convince me."

"Please! Please stop, I believe it! I believe it!"

"I need to know for sure. *Crucio!*"

The man's screams were inhuman as Draco pushed his anger and pain onto him. He exorcised it out by giving it to Lord Garrison instead, though he knew it would build again within hours. It always did. He had been casting the cruciatus every single day to purge himself of it, but the relief was only temporary. He had never been in so much pain, not ever.

When Draco lifted his wand, he felt deflated as he stared at the man covered in blood.

"You're bleeding on my rug. Take the floo to St. Mungo's and do not speak to the others about this. Consider your answers more carefully the next time I question you."

He watched as the man crawled to the fireplace in tears, trembling from blood loss. Draco threw some floo powder into it for him. When he turned around he found Theo and Severus watching him warily from the doorway. Narcissa was also with them, her face pale as she swallowed hard and looked at the stains on the rug. No doubt Lord Garrison's screams had attracted them.

"Draco, you need to stop this," said Narcissa in a shaky voice.

Draco narrowed his eyes as he looked at them. “Is this some sort of intervention?”

“Yes,” said Severus simply. “You can’t keep doing this, Draco.”

He gestured toward Draco’s clothing, which were covered in Lord Garrison’s blood.

“He said he was a blood purist. He deserved it.”

“Hermione wouldn’t want this, mate,” said Theo softly.

Draco felt rage building as he turned on all three of them. “WELL I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK SHE WANTS BECAUSE SHE’S GONE! SHE’S GONE, AND I HAVEN’T GOTTEN HER BACK! IT’S THE ONLY THING I KNOW TO DO FOR HER NOW! I CAN MAKE THEM HURT! I CAN MAKE THEM BLEED! I CAN DESTROY THE PEOPLE WHO WOULD DESTROY HER!”

He was breathing hard, and none of them seemed willing to break their silence. He hated every one of them in that moment, even Theo. Theo was back in Hermione’s good graces, but Draco wasn’t. Theo had been reluctant to tell him very much whenever Draco questioned him. Hermione had him entirely under her control.

So no, Draco didn’t know what Hermione wanted. She said forgiveness wasn’t enough, but maybe blood would be. Or maybe hurting others was just what he did now. He had always been fucked in the head, hadn’t he?

He made to stride out of the room, when to his surprise his mother spoke up.

“Stop, Draco. I must tell you something.”

Draco halted and turned to face them again. She was actually trembling, but she lifted her chin resolutely.

Is this it then? Is she finally going to confess to what she’s been up to?

He glanced at Theo, and he could see Theo seemed to be wondering the same thing.

“What is it?” he asked, as he tried to make himself occlude. It barely worked.

“You are aware that Blaise and Ginny are tying on Samhain. You will be doing the same with Astoria. It is time, my dear. If you won’t do it yourself, then I’ll be standing in for you to fulfill the contract with the Greengrasses.”

Draco thought his mother was very brave to tell him this, and now he knew the *true* reason Severus was there. It was because she worried Draco might kill her for it.

But Draco wouldn’t kill her. Of course he wouldn’t. He still loved his mother. He always had.

She thought him capable of it though. Whether she was mad or not, he could tell she really believed it. Severus seemed to believe it too or else he wouldn’t have bothered to come.

Draco knew that Theo didn't believe it because they had actually talked about it once — but Draco was starting to think that Theo was the *only* one who understood this.

Narcissa was sidling close to Severus, who stepped in front of her ever so slightly. She was pale and skittish, but her face looked resolved.

Draco felt sick.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself that this wasn't a surprise. Maybe, just maybe, if he could control his temper she would agree to delay it.

"I would like for you to wait," he said softly. "Give me a few more months, Mother."

"I wish I could, my dragon," she said, and Draco thought she sounded sad as she said it. "I have never wanted this to happen without Miss Granger here to ease your heart. I know a tie with Astoria is not what you wish for, but you must understand that marriage is nothing more than a rather unpleasant arrangement to fulfill one's duty. That is all it is, and harboring romantic notions about it does nothing but lead to tremendous heartbreak and disappointment. Somehow the marriage bonds make that heartbreak worse when it's your spouse who hurts you. It is much better if emotional fulfillment can be found in the arms of a lover who has no other motive but to make you happy and who cannot tug on any tie or marriage bond to enhance that terrible pain when they are at odds with you. Still, I know this is difficult for you, and I had truly hoped Miss Granger would be found by now so that she could help you through it. I know how much you love her and need her. If it were up to me, I would wait until she was found and you two were on good terms again before doing it."

This is really about Father. She is projecting her own marriage onto me.

There was a slight ringing in his ears as he fought his temper. A marriage to Hermione would *not* be the same. Draco knew this as well as he knew his own name. Narcissa didn't know it though, not anymore. She was too hurt, too broken. She might even be mad.

It made Draco feel helpless.

"Then why not wait until I find Hermione so she can help me through it? I've only been looking for a few weeks, Mother. Nobody but you three and Blaise are aware that she's missing. I need more time to find her. I can't tie with another witch while she's missing. I just can't do it."

Narcissa closed her eyes as though saying a prayer, and Draco's stomach began to sink.

"It can't wait because the Dark Lord summoned me himself to ask about it. It was your father's idea to tie you on Samhain if you didn't do it yourself. He told me this before he died, and apparently he communicated it to the Dark Lord too. The year will expire in a few days, and the Dark Lord knows it. He has asked for you to tie with Astoria when Blaise ties with Ginny. He ordered a double ceremony and celebration at the Manor. We have no choice, Draco."

Draco shot a glance at Severus, who had a grim expression, but just nodded.

“It’s true, Draco. I was there. He has ordered it.”

Severus then glanced at Theo. “And you will tie with Daphne on the Solstice. He views your union as being nearly as important as Draco’s. He wants two separate celebrations for two of his favorites.”

Draco glanced at Theo, who now looked ill too. It was all too much, too fast. It was true Theo’s tie wouldn’t happen for a couple more months, but he had missed his chance to socialize the idea of Luna with the Dark Lord.

It was too late for both of them now.

We have never had a choice, either one of us. I thought we had to worry about Mother, but it was never her. It was always the Dark Lord and our fathers. Of course our fathers told him everything about it. They found a way to fuck both of us over even while they’re dead.

Draco knew that now. All of his efforts to give himself some choice had been for naught, and he managed to push Hermione away while he was trying to do it. Theo, too, had been too slow and too cautious. They were both trapped, just like Hermione had said. Soon Draco would be tied to Astoria and Theo would be tied to Daphne.

Hermione would never accept being a mistress. That had become very clear to Draco over the last few weeks, and he couldn’t blame her for it. That wasn’t what he wanted for her either.

She would be gone forever.

His last flicker of hope died. Draco was surprised to feel it extinguish. He didn’t know that he had any left.

She will never want me now. I’m going to have to wait until the Dark Lord is dead before I can kill Astoria and escape this.

The thought crystallized in his mind as though fully formed. It was the only contingency plan he had left. He would happily do it too, but he didn’t know how long it would take. And by the time it was safe to rid himself of Astoria, Hermione would surely have moved on. She would be lost to him.

Draco said nothing as his facade cracked, and he turned to flee. He would bury himself in memories of her whenever he was alone. He would occlude through whatever social interactions he was forced to bear, including the tying itself. He would continue to volunteer for interrogations and torture because blood and daily *cruciatu*s curses were the only things that leeched out his own pain, temporary though it may be.

Tears fell as Draco made his way to his pensieve so he could watch a memory of her smiling at him. It was all he had. It was all he would ever have.

Because the real Hermione may have forgiven him, but this time it wasn’t enough.

Chapter 30: Enough

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief description of gore. Skip the *** if you don't wish to read.

Hermione didn't write back to Draco, and she didn't hear from him again, though she did check in with Theo each day. And every night, at precisely the same time, Draco would track her and she would feel that tingle to let her know he was checking on her and saying goodnight. Her heart squeezed each time, and it became the highlight of her day.

It was something she dwelled on as Samhain approached.

Hermione had hoped they would have more time and Blaise and Ginny's plan to claim Samhain night for their own tying would push Narcissa off to a later date. But two weeks before Samhain, Theo reached out with news that it hadn't worked.

Narcissa confronted Draco. She is still planning on tying him on Samhain. Unfortunately, the Dark Lord is involved with it. There is going to be a ceremony and feast at Malfoy Manor for both couples that night. Then it's my turn to tie with Daphne on the Solstice.

Can't you just lock her away in a warded room or something? Hermione asked in frustration.

I wish. The Dark Lord is already aware of it, though. He's expecting it. There is nothing either one of us can do.

The thought of Draco tying with Astoria on Samhain was like a poison. It made her feel physically ill every time she considered it. But she knew that stepping in to interfere would be very dangerous and might not work anyway. That Theo would find himself in a similar position just two months later made Hermione feel even worse.

Hermione felt time slipping away from her while she tried to make peace with the things Draco did.

He murdered. He tortured. He used people. He was obsessive. He was manipulative. He lied.

Regardless of how he treated her, he was not a good person. Hermione didn't think she was that good anymore either – after all, she had committed murder too. But her soul had only cracked once. Draco's had cracked innumerable times by this point, and that was just scratching the surface.

She tried to be logical about it, and she made an effort to test her own moral compass alongside his. To her slight surprise, she discovered that it had gone rather off course ever since being caught by Draco.

Would I kill to save myself? Yes.

Would I kill to save Draco or one of my friends? Absolutely.

Would I kill to save an Order member I don't know? Yes.

Would I kill an innocent person if it meant that Draco, Theo, or Blaise could grow closer to Voldemort? Most likely, and if I'm being honest, that's what the Order tried to do to me.

Would I kill for no other reason than to have a public relationship with Draco? I wouldn't like it, but I would consider it.

That last realization was jarring, and Hermione struggled with it. She knew Draco would kill to have Hermione all to himself. He had already done that when he and Theo killed their fathers. But would she do the same thing? And did it even matter if he would go further than she would?

As she thought about it and tried to come to terms with it she filled her days with studying and training. She eventually ventured into the Grimmauld Place dungeons for the first time to find a makeshift training room in the largest space and a potions lab in another. This lab was complete without any of the editing Draco had done when he gave her the small one at Malfoy Manor.

She immediately set to work brewing some polyjuice and veritaserum, both of which took a few weeks. She knew she didn't need it. At this point she was sure that if she wanted some she had only to send Posy to the Manor, and Draco would probably trip all over himself to give her potions from his stores. But she enjoyed the complexity of those brews and relished the freedom she felt while finally working on potions that had been out of her reach for months thanks to her confinement.

And while she wasn't brewing she spent an hour a day practicing with her knives. Another hour a day was spent with wandless magic and her new animagus form. Then there were the frequent conversations with Theo to keep her in the loop about everything that was happening with the Death Eaters.

Because they were still in a war. And Hermione's indecision about Draco could not override the importance of her mission. She didn't know if she would ever go to Nott Castle with *Draco*, but she was coming to believe that Theo would let her in himself. The wizards had been back twice more and had finally located the snake in a remote section at the edge of the property. It was heavily warded though, and it was something they would need to study further. They had found nothing more that might be a horcrux and the invisibility cloak was still missing, but Theo reported that Voldemort continued to wear that gold serpent buckle on his cloak around the clock.

Yes, at some point Hermione would be going on a mission to Nott Castle, and she needed her training and skills and to be sharp once that finally happened.

She achieved her full Aquila form after she had been at Grimmauld Place for just over two weeks. The moment was bittersweet because none of her friends saw her do it, and she didn't tell them it was done. She wanted Draco to be the first to know, but she couldn't very well inform him without speaking to him, so she kept it all to herself.

A few days later, Theo reached out to inform her that Luna had achieved her form and then several days after that Ginny did as well. He told Hermione that her guess about an Arabian for Ginny was correct, and Hermione's heart ached that she wasn't there for it.

She thought about inviting Ginny and Luna over so she could see their animagi forms for herself, but she resisted. The person she wanted to see the most was Draco. But she couldn't, not until she was absolutely certain that she wanted all of the bad along with the good.

Still, with her new animagus form in place, Hermione finally ventured outside the wards of Grimmauld Place, both to practice flying in her new form and to do some much-needed spying on the fate of the wizarding world. As an eagle she had excellent stamina and exceptional eyesight, and she could coast the thermals high above the ground and see everything.

One day she flew through the magical barrier to Diagon Alley and was slightly shocked at just how normal it looked. The last time she had been there, shops had been boarded up and nobody was lingering in the streets. Her sharp eyes observed the passerbys below and saw that they still looked tense – but it didn't look like they were really in a war anymore, at least not on the surface.

She considered going to Gringotts as Columba Black just to see what Sirius had left behind, but she resisted. She knew Grimmauld Place was the safest place for her to be outside of the Manor. She had clothing, books, everything she could possibly need. Food continued to magically appear, and her potions ingredients stores seemed to replenish themselves without a word from her. She still hadn't asked Posy for details, but she knew Draco was caring for her behind the scenes. She was being fed from the Manor kitchens. Her hair potions and makeup were being carefully monitored and would never run out. There wasn't a single thing she had to buy for herself, so there was no reason to risk Gringotts in either of her identities as long as Draco was alive to care for her.

Another day she flew to Ottery St. Catchpole and over the remains of the Burrow. It was just like it had been in her dream. The bed where she slept was not there anymore, but she thought she saw some twisted metal where it used to be, and she could see that it had been burned separately from everything else. Perhaps Draco really *had* set it on fire. The thought made her uncomfortable, but she wouldn't put it past him.

Of course he would want to wreck the home she had associated with her magical past. She should probably be relieved that her parents' home was still standing. Something told her that if Theo hadn't been there to buy it, Draco might have burned that one down too.

It was yet another thing about him she was forced to confront.

Yes, every day she spent some time outdoors, finally seeing the larger wizarding world. She watched a few skirmishes and once even thought she saw a white blonde head before she flew on. She couldn't bear to watch him fight, knowing that she might intervene if it really *was* him. She also found several more smoldering remains and some abandoned buildings.

In between her flights she kept up with her training and potions and enhanced the protection at Grimmauld Place, even going so far as to place it under a new *fidelius* charm. It took her several hours to manage it, and she completely drained her magic for a few days after it was done. It was one of the most taxing spells she had ever completed, but adding a *fidelius* charm to Grimmauld Place was time well spent and made her feel more secure.

Draco had stayed away for three weeks by that point and had proven he wouldn't be encroaching on her space until she invited him in. The *fidelius* was really not intended to keep him out. Hermione had simply seen through the veneer of Voldemort's perfect world during her hours in the air. It put her on edge and made her believe that more protection for her sanctuary could only be a good thing.

She concluded that the war had truly moved underground, and Voldemort was doing his best to keep order on the surface. But there were deep cracks, and the longer she watched the more she could see it.

One of those cracks was the Wizengamot. Voldemort needed them to maintain some air of impartial judgment so it appeared legitimate, but he really wanted every single one of them under his thumb. The task of interrogating them had fallen to Snape and Draco, but Theo reported to her that it wasn't going well.

Draco's tortured seven of them now just for fun, and they are all terrified of him.

Why?

You know why.

It was because of Hermione of course. He had no patience for his duties when Hermione wasn't with him.

What will make him stop?

I don't think anything will make him stop until he can speak to you.

I'm not ready, Theo. He just does things to my head whenever I'm around him. I need to be certain.

I understand that, and I'm not asking you to let him come by. But he's spinning out of control, and something has to be done.

Even Snape was growing alarmed, and he finally came to Theo to ask for help in controlling Draco so they could finish questioning the Wizengamot members and learn the *truth*. Snape

insisted that the Order needed to know the Wizengamot's loyalties just as much as Voldemort did, because if they ever disposed of him they would leave behind a power vacuum.

Snape says the Order is trying to position those who would support a coup in strategic places throughout the Ministry. If he falls, they need to be able to step in immediately. We need a read on every Wizengamot member and department head at the Ministry.

How?

I told Snape about the veritaserum trick. He doesn't love it, but he agrees it's necessary for this. Draco is becoming too erratic to be involved anymore. They are all terrified of him and telling him what they think he wants to hear instead of the truth.

I can help.

I was hoping you would say that. There is a large event at the Ministry on Saturday night, and there will be staff for it. Ginny and Luna will be going undercover, and Nita will be there as well doing some Veela magic to get them off their guard. There are a lot of people we need to hit, but Snape, Blaise, and I are going to split the list. We'll just ask a few questions before obliterating them and moving on to the next.

I can help question them too.

I don't know, Hermione.

Seriously, I'm an expert at obliviation. Give me the ones I spike and then you can take Luna's, Blaise can take Ginny's, and Snape can take Nita's. It will be most efficient.

Fine, but I'm not telling Draco you will be there. I don't trust him not to do something very stupid if he knows you're outside of the wards. He's barely able to stay away from Grimmauld Place as it is.

No, you shouldn't tell him. Will he be there?

Yes. The Dark Lord wants all the Death Eaters to attend.

Then I will be careful. Give me the ones that he doesn't know and probably won't bother to meet.

Alright.

And that was how Hermione found herself on the last Saturday before Samhain getting dressed in a similar outfit that she had worn to the autumn ball at Malfoy Manor. Posy had visited Theo, who snuck her some clothing and her hollow ring under Draco's nose, along with a syringe and an extra vial of veritaserum to refill it after she had emptied it. He had also sent Hermione her list of targets with pictures of each so she could find them in the crowd. She had a list of twelve people to hit and question. It was slightly overwhelming, but she was determined to do it.

Theo had also slipped her a holster for her wand that let her call and return it with the merest thought. He attached a short note to it when he sent it to her.

Consider this another token of apology. I love you, Sis.

The holster was beautiful, delicate, and absolutely perfect for the task she was set that night. She secured it to her right forearm and practiced calling her wand so just the tip was visible before returning it. It worked flawlessly.

Her special knives she strapped to her left forearm and right thigh as always. The spare veritaserum and syringe she placed inside of her bra. The ring she placed on her finger and her Columba pendant she clasped around her neck for protection. She was dressed in her uniform: a black oxford buttoned high enough to hide her pendant, a black skirt, and black tights. Once again she charmed the shoes she was accustomed to wearing to be black as well.

Then she pulled out her wand, headed into the loo, and got to work.

Hermione took time changing her face so she would be unrecognizable to anyone, but especially Draco. She made a point not to change her body in case she had to fight, but she hoped the clothing was not fitted enough for him to recognize her in that way.

She made her face long and pale and transfigured the rest of her skin to match. Her eyes turned blue and her hair nearly black and wavy. She had the oddest thought that she really did look like Sirius's daughter like this.

Then she performed an experiment and transformed into Columba for a moment before immediately transforming back. To Hermione's great relief, the transfiguration she had used for her disguise actually held. That was excellent news in case she had to use one of her animagi forms to get away temporarily.

Breathing a sigh of relief she mentally ran through her twelve person list again and took one last look at herself in the mirror before letting herself out into the crisp evening air. Samhain was approaching, and the nights were getting colder with each passing day.

Hermione closed her eyes and transformed into Aquila, her vision being better in the low light than Columba's. She flew a couple of miles to the Visitor's Entrance at the Ministry of Magic to help clear her head and then found an empty alleyway to transform. Taking a moment to check that her appearance had indeed stayed the same, she walked two streets over before squeezing herself into the familiar phone booth. She couldn't help but be on edge. She had only been to the Ministry of Magic twice in her life, and both times had ended in a fight to get out.

She dialed STAFF on the phone as instructed, and the booth shuddered before descending lower into the belly of the Ministry than the general atrium where the event would be held. She stepped out and looked around, but could not immediately identify Ginny and Luna. She knew that Draco had been cut out of this plan entirely, so of course they wouldn't reuse a disguise he might recognize. She just had to trust that they were already present, ready to find their own marks.

To Hermione's relief the staff was quite large. It wasn't just Draco's employees who were there, but several other Death Eaters had supplied staff for the event tonight due to its size. Hermione grimaced slightly to learn that she was apparently being paid by Adrian Pucey tonight.

The staff was given instructions, and then invited to take a tray of drinks or appetizers and begin serving the crowd. Hermione made a beeline for a tray of wine – both red and white – and started to move toward the door that would lead her to the atrium. In an event of this size there were no bartenders, and the drink selection was limited to basic wine and butterbeer. Hermione was grateful for it because it made it that much simpler to hit a dozen selected people with potion. She crossed her fingers that all of her targets would prefer the wine and wouldn't want butterbeer. With so many drinks to spike, she and Theo had decided not to waste time by waiting for them to get drunk first. She would dose the very first drink she could manage to hand off to them.

Hermione entered the Ministry atrium and stared around in some surprise. The lights were low, and dozens of people were mingling. There was a band on a stage and the floor continued to flash green as more and more people arrived.

The event tonight was to celebrate an agreement to bring the giants back to Britain as allies of Voldemort, which was spearheaded by Fenrir Grayback. They had selected several muggle villages that would be destroyed to give them lands. It was appalling, but it was precisely the sort of policy Hermione had expected with Voldemort in power. The celebration was a command performance tonight and most of the Wizengamot and important department heads would be there, along with a strong showing from the Death Eaters. Hermione shuddered a bit as she thought about it.

She looked around quickly, trying to spot one of the dozen faces she memorized and *there* ... just arriving was Dortha Blishwick, who was currently the Head of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes.

Hermione approached her before another server could.

"Good evening, would you like a glass of wine?"

Dortha blinked in surprise at being accosted nearly the moment she stepped foot into the atrium, but then seemed to recover.

"Oh... yes, of course. White, please."

Hermione smiled and selected a glass in the back, positioning her ring over it as she released the vertiaserum. She handed it to Dortha who took a sip. Hermione made a show of starting to back away until she saw the familiar glaze pass over Dortha's face, and Hermione whispered quickly.

"Do you support the Dark Lord's agenda?"

"No," she said in a flat tone.

“Do you support the Order of the Phoenix?”

“No. They are too violent.”

Hermione blinked. She had not expected this.

“So you don’t support either?”

“No. I am a mother. I will not resist any regime that is in power. It would not be safe for my family.”

“Between the Dark Lord and the Order, who do you prefer?”

“The Order, but only just.”

“*Oblivate.*”

Dorthea’s eyes glazed over again as Hermione erased the memory of their discussion and planted a new memory of some urgent matter that required her attention at home. She and Theo had agreed that anybody who had Order sympathies would need to be sent home so they didn’t endanger themselves the rest of the night with their honesty.

To Hermione’s great relief Dorthea turned and floo’d away moments later.

Hermione then moved off to seek her next victim, making a mental note of Dorthea’s responses.

She saw Nita conversing with an elderly man in one corner, who was staring at her with something akin to wonder as her hand passed over his glass, and Hermione allowed herself a smirk. Nita’s list was twice as long as the others, but Hermione knew she was more than up to the task. She saw Snape hovering in her periphery, preparing to pounce as soon as she moved away.

Hermione’s second and third victims were as easy as Dorthea. The second fully supported Voldemort and the third supported the Order but was terrified to outwardly stand against Voldemort. She sent him home too.

She took a quick break to refill her ring in the loo and then grabbed another tray and continued.

Her fourth target was significantly harder than the first three, since he was in a large group, and that group *included Draco*.

She saw his blonde head the moment she approached, and she nearly tripped. Seeing any part of him was like a vice in her chest. She had missed him *so much*. She hesitated and nearly moved on to somebody else, but she saw her target was just getting to the bottom of his red wine. Hermione knew she had to take the opportunity before another server gave him a refill.

She went to him first.

“May I offer you another?”

“Oh, yes, thank you,” said Yusuf Kama. He was on the Wizengamot and somebody that neither Snape nor Draco knew very well.

Hermione did her best to keep her back turned as she spiked his drink. As he sipped it she quickly passed out wine to the others, not even bothering to ask Draco as she shoved a red into his hand. She glimpsed only the briefest moment of surprise on his face at her pushiness before it flattened again into an almost terrifying mask. He was occluding heavily, and he practically radiated cold as he listened to the others talk.

When Hermione made her way around the entire group, she approached Yusuf again.

“Sir, one of the elves has a message for you. If you could follow me?”

Yusuf, who mercifully had not been asked a question by any of the others while Hermione passed out wine, nodded and followed her toward the staff entrance. She glanced behind her and saw that Draco was ignoring her.

Good. She had done it.

Her questioning of Yusuf was much like Dortha's. He was a fence-sitter and would not do anything to undermine Voldemort but would also do nothing to help him retain power. A quick obliviate later and she sent him home while slipping away from him, looking for her next targets.

It was going rather well until Fenrir Grayback took the stage. Hermione stilled as she looked around to find her other targets, and she slowly began to work her way toward them as Grayback started to speak.

"Good evening, witches, wizards, and magical creatures! Tonight we celebrate a moment of triumph for the Ministry of Magic and the Dark Lord's regime! As you know, we have successfully negotiated a treaty with the giants, who will be returning to their ancestral lands in the coming months. And as part of this momentous occasion, the Dark Lord has authorized me to announce the death of an Order member whose demise made this night possible! Allow me to present, the head of Rubeus Hagrid!"

"No!" gasped Hermione, as her tray went crashing to the floor. Several guests nearby jumped out of the way, and the commotion drew some attention to her, but she was not the only one. At least four other servers dropped their trays too at precisely the same time, and the gasps of shock and even some cheers from the crowd masked it.

Hermione could not tear her eyes away as a large *thing* was brought out on a platter carried by two other werewolves, and her stomach rolled as she recognized her old friend. His eyes were vacant, his tongue lolled out of his mouth, and even his hair seemed to flutter as they walked forward with him to show off their prize.

"Oh Hagrid..." she whispered, as tears began to course down her cheeks.

Theo sensed her pain and immediately started to siphon for her as he pushed into her bond.

I'm so sorry Hermione, I had no idea this was happening tonight. You shouldn't see this.

I have to, Theo... Hagrid was my friend.

Hermione was no stranger to grief, but the brutality of this moment was still shocking and *horrifying*. Hagrid had been missing of course, but now she knew what he had been doing for the past months: he was back with the giants trying to prevent them from joining Voldemort. He had failed, and then they executed him brutally.

Hadn't Draco once warned her about this? Hadn't he said that Voldemort would have paraded Harry's head through the streets if Draco had not preemptively cremated him? Hermione had never really believed it until that very moment, but now she realized he had not been exaggerating. She caught a glimpse of Draco's face in the crowd, and he appeared almost unaffected by the disgusting sight on stage. He must have seen this sort of thing before. He knew this was what happened to senior-ranking Order members who were caught. This was what would happen to *her* and to *him* if they were ever discovered.

For the first time since she learned the truth about him, the steps he had taken to create an entirely new identity for her in case he died did not seem like an overreaction. He was paranoid, yes, but she realized it was well-founded.

Hermione crouched to the ground and used her wand to clean up the mess, murmuring apologies to those in her periphery as she tried to get a grip on her emotions. *This* was why she was here tonight. *This* was why Voldemort needed to die. *This* was why the Order needed to know who they could trust at the Ministry of Magic because something like this could never happen again.

Hermione allowed herself several minutes to feel the grief before she pushed it aside. She would have time to move through the full grieving process later, but tonight she would use it and she would finish this *fucking* mission for her old friend. She would not let his death cripple her. She would not let *Draco* distract her. It was too important that the Order gain the intelligence she was gathering tonight.

Hermione took several calming breaths and headed back toward the kitchens to refill her tray while she thought of cauldron bottoms and pushed her feelings about Hagrid aside.

Not now. Later.

When Hermione emerged back into the crowd, Grayback's speech was over and the guests were mingling again, though the atmosphere had shifted. It was more tense, but there was also an undercurrent of dark excitement, and Hermione grimaced. She took a deep breath and located her next victim, who was unfortunately within a few meters of Draco.

Despite her commitment to ignore him, she couldn't because this time Astoria Greengrass was with him too, clutching his arm and simpering at him.

He wasn't reacting to her, but he also wasn't doing anything to stop it.

Hermione's heart wrenched when she saw it. He looked so dead, so cold, so *awful*, and Hermione felt a rush of guilt that she had left her decision lingering this long. No doubt she was the reason he had turned into this.

Every single part of her seemed to be reaching for him, and after the thing she had just witnessed she wanted nothing more than his arms to wrap around her and give her a hug so she could cry into his chest and mourn Hagrid. But his arms weren't around her, they were being held by Astoria, whose crimson nails brushed his fringe back before pecking him on the cheek.

Hermione's magic almost slipped.

Disgust, sadness, *jealousy* hit her all at once, and she wondered how on earth she could go on knowing that Draco was going to end up with her. The force of her emotions - especially the jealousy - took her by surprise. She realized the glasses on her tray were starting to rattle as that corrosive envy coursed through her, and Hermione was at risk of losing her second tray of drinks in a row. She had to close her eyes and breathe deep to stop herself from exploding the lot of them.

Was this how Draco had always felt when he saw her with another wizard? And why was the jealousy so much worse this time than when she saw them together at the autumn gala? During that little public display Draco had actually kissed her on the cheek and flirted with her. Now, he was doing nothing but standing there with a dead expression on his face and totally ignoring her. And yet, Hermione was nearly losing control.

It had to be because the plans to tie them were well underway by now. It was no longer hypothetical. And Hermione knew that even if he didn't care about Astoria – and Hermione could see from his face that he didn't – he would still have to allow a public show of unity now and then. They would be photographed together, trotted out together, and eventually he would have to sleep with her again to produce that magically deficient child Narcissa was hoping for.

It made Hermione sick, and she had to put her tray down and step into the loo to compose herself so she could continue with her mission. She had three more hits, and she had to finish it for Hagrid. She promised herself she would get through her entire list, and she meant it. She couldn't be distracted by Draco or Astoria or even the thing she had seen earlier that evening. She had to focus, and then she could fall apart once she got back to Grimmauld Place.

She took a deep breath and emerged with a full ring of veritaserum and grabbed what would hopefully be her final tray of wine. She had managed to dose her tenth victim and was just obliterating him when she went cold.

Her palms were tingling.

On instinct she darted away to try to put as much distance between herself and the place she had just been standing.

Of course. Draco didn't know she was here tonight, and it was her normal bedtime. He was saying goodnight, just like he always did.

Unconsciously her gaze slid to him on the other side of the room. Astoria was still clutching his arm, but as Hermione's marks activated she watched him wrench his arm out of Astoria's grip and look toward the empty spot in the room she had just vacated. She had gotten away in time, but he knew she was here in the Ministry atrium.

Somehow, she had completely forgotten to plan for this.

Hermione shrank further into the shadows and watched Astoria question Draco, but he shook her off with a sneer and strode away, now looking more alive than he had all evening. He pulled out his wand as though preparing to cast the tracking spell again, but then hesitated. He had already used his single allowance for the day. His mouth turned grim, but he looked resolved as he shoved his wand back into his robes and then moved to Theo. Draco didn't even ask as he pulled Theo sharply away from the person he was talking to before interrogating him quietly in one corner of the room.

Hermione took a deep breath and hurried to her eleventh person. She could see Theo beginning to crack under the pressure of Draco's questions, and she had to finish her job and get out of there before he found her. Theo didn't know what she looked like tonight – nobody did – but Draco didn't need the tracking spell to know precisely where to look for her: among the staff.

She was just dosing victim eleven when Theo pushed into her bond.

Draco knows you're here.

I know. He's allowed to track me once a day and just did it. I'm almost done.

Go quickly. And occlude.

He severed their connection, and Hermione immediately began to think of cauldron bottoms, though she suspected Draco would know it was her the moment he sensed it.

There was nothing for it though. She questioned person eleven, made a mental note that she was in favor of the Order and sent her home and then searched frantically for her last victim. She watched Draco begin to prowl through the staff, looking at each one carefully and engaging them all in brief conversations before moving on to the next. Hermione grimaced and tried to stay on the other side of the room from him as they circled each other.

She finally found her last mark: Belinda Dagworth, a Wizengamot member. She was talking to a small group of women that included Astoria and had a completely full glass of wine. She wouldn't need a refill for ages.

Shit.

There was nothing for it, though. Draco was making his way through the wait staff at an efficient clip, and he would surely make a point to reach her before Hermione could finish this.

She took a deep breath and marched over to Belinda, intentionally jostling her from behind so she sloshed the full glass of wine she was drinking.

“Oh let me help!” cried Hermione, placing her tray of drinks on the nearby stage and then springing forward. She pulled out her wand to vanish the mess before slipping it away again. Then she pulled Belinda forcefully aside and offered a new glass to the rather shell shocked woman, as she quickly spiked it with her ring. Hermione was making soothing, apologetic gestures until Belinda took a sip. Hermione then found herself patting Belinda on the arm as she whispered to her frantically, quickly determined she was a Voldemort supporter, and then subtly obliviated her before practically shoving her back toward the circle of women she had just been speaking with. The other women had been watching her in disbelief, but Astoria’s eyes were fixed on Hermione, fury in her gaze.

Belatedly Hermione realized why: she had just pulled out her wand.

Shit again.

Unfortunately the commotion also drew the attention of a few others, including Draco, and he started to look toward them intently as Hermione backed away, abandoning her tray of drinks on the stage. She had to get out, now.

She caught the briefest glance of Astoria’s face that turned demanding as she pointed an angry finger at Hermione and mouthed, “*My wand!*” to Draco.

Then Hermione made the colossal mistake of allowing her gaze to slide to Draco’s face, as his eyes snapped up to meet hers. The moment their eyes connected, he pushed toward her mind *hard*, and Hermione nearly flinched to hold her cauldron bottom in place. The instant he saw it he released her, and he abandoned all pretenses as he started shoving other guests out of his way, his eyes nearly burning as he tried to get to her.

That dead look was gone now. Hermione wondered if he had ever looked more alive.

She turned her back on him and fled, frantically debating with herself about the best way to get out.

Hermione glanced around quickly and decided floo was too risky. She didn’t know if Grimmauld Place was connected to any place other than the Manor, though she doubted it. That was information she now realized she needed to obtain as soon as she could get away. The apparition point was on the far side of the atrium, and Hermione didn’t think she could make it.

That left the sodding visitor phone booth.

Hermione flung herself into it, shut the door, and dialed MUGGLE as fast as she could, just as Draco threw his body against the door and pounded a fist against it in frustration.

Their eyes met through the glass, and a thousand things passed between them in an instant.

He gave her a pleading look and flattened his palm against the glass as it rose. Hermione couldn't help herself. She knelt down and pressed her palm against his just on the other side.

Fierce determination lit his face at this, and he tore himself away, sprinting toward the other side of the atrium and the apparition point as the phone booth made its steady rise. Just as it left the atrium, she glanced down and saw a number of people staring back at her and Draco in shock.

Hermione internally winced at her moment of weakness.

The phone booth came to a shuddering halt back in muggle London several seconds later, and Hermione wrenched the door open and turned to disapparate *anywhere* else, just as Draco apparated nearly on top of her.

He gripped her hard, and pulled her to him, looking at her face wildly.

"Tell me that meant you're coming home," he said frantically, as he raised one hand and placed it gently on her throat while gripping her curls with the other. "*Please*, my darling girl, tell me you've made up your mind, and you're returning."

Hermione's breath caught, and she nearly said yes. Feeling his hands against her like this made her pulse tick up in that familiar way and her brain almost blank out. She wanted to give in, she *did*. She was exhausted, emotionally drained, and grieving all over again. She needed him and his care more than ever. But the rational part of her intervened. She had not made her decision before coming here tonight. She was reacting to him, just like she always did, and she couldn't say yes. She *couldn't*. This was the entire reason she had stayed away. He did things to her. He tugged on her emotions. She could scarcely think straight. If she returned to him it had to be on her own terms and not because her soul reached for his every time she saw him.

"I haven't decided yet," she breathed.

Draco's forehead dropped to hers, and he huffed out an exhale. Hermione felt his hands shaking just a little as he stroked her neck, and Hermione allowed herself the briefest moment to enjoy it too before she stepped away. When their eyes met again, she saw such devastation and heartbreak on his face that she had to look away.

"I just... I need to think, Draco. You're tying with Astoria soon, and I just..."

She trailed off, and then glanced back at him to see him sink to his knees on the pavement. She blinked in astonishment

"Please," he rasped. "Please don't let that be the thing that keeps you away from me. I will do anything at all to get you back except put you in danger or kill my mother. Those are my only limits, Hermione, my only ones."

Hermione was struck by this, and she approached him slowly. She reached a hand out for him and found herself stroking his hair a little. As usual, it was soft and light, the blonde strands almost gossamer. She had nearly forgotten what his hair felt like, and the realization made her breath catch. As for Draco, he leaned into her touch like it was the only thing that could save him.

“You’re hurting,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” he whispered.

It was only one word, but it shattered her heart.

“I’m so sorry, Draco.”

“You owe me no apologies, Hermione. I’m the one who should apologize to you. I’m so sorry for everything, my darling. My prejudices, my lies, your wand... I’m so sorry for all of it.”

Hermione’s hand moved to his face. His eyes were closed as he allowed himself to soak in her touch, but Hermione felt a tear materialize under her fingers. She brushed it off and sighed.

“You can stop apologizing. I’ve already forgiven you for all of it. But I still need to think about what it means to *choose* you. That’s what I’ve been thinking about ever since I forgave you.”

He opened his eyes to look up at her, and Hermione watched as he struggled to compose himself.

“Because forgiveness isn’t enough...” he said, looking absolutely devastated.

He read the letters I wrote to Ginny and Luna.

Hermione had wondered if he would do that. But she had to admit she did not think he would take her words to heart like this. He looked shattered, and she had never felt guiltier.

It started out as his fault, but if I let it linger much longer then it’s going to become my fault too.

She had never wished this kind of pain on him. She simply needed time to be certain. She *still* needed time to be certain, because he was kneeling in front of her, and she found herself wanting to say yes.

Yes, I’ll come back to you. Yes, I’ll be yours in any way we can be together. Yes, I’ll compromise every moral I’ve ever clung to if it means I can have a life with you.

But no, she couldn’t do that. She wanted a clear head and no regrets. She didn’t want to ask herself tomorrow morning if she had been coaxed into this.

“That’s right,” she agreed, as gently as she could. “It takes more than forgiveness this time.”

Draco slumped away from her and put his face in his hands. Even in the dim light Hermione could see he was trembling.

“Draco...” she sighed. The guilt was surging again.

He lowered his hands, and when he looked up at her his expression was so open it broke her heart. “*Please...*” he whispered. “Please just come home to me. I won’t touch you if you don’t want me to. We can keep some physical distance until we can be together properly. I’ll make it happen, my darling, I swear it. I just can’t do it quite yet because he’s still alive.”

She hesitated. “Yet?” she asked softly.

His eyes lit with something fierce, something almost manic, as he sensed her wavering.

“If the Dark Lord is ever gone, I’ll make sure Astoria’s gone too,” he said hurriedly. “She can break the tie voluntarily or she can force the issue with me. I don’t give a fuck. I promise I’ll be able to correct it if we can find a way to take him out first. But he’s still alive, so it must wait a little longer until he’s gone. Please don’t let the tie be the reason you stay away from me, Hermione. If you don’t want me to touch you while I’m tied to another witch, I won’t. I promise I can control myself around you until Astoria is handled, but I have to do things in the right order. It will probably be a few more months, at minimum, before I can take care of it. I can’t bear to be apart from you while we wait. I love you, Hermione. You’re the only one I’ve ever wanted.”

He’s offering to murder her for me.

“I’ve... wondered if I could just take care of it myself,” she confessed.

She had. She had asked herself if she could kill another person to have a public relationship with Draco, though she had never identified that other person as *Astoria*. But if she was being honest with herself, who else would it be? Draco could be erratic, but she knew he still cared about Narcissa in his own way. And that meant Hermione had to care about Narcissa too, especially because her conversations with Theo led Hermione to believe that the woman wasn’t intentionally cruel — she was being ruled by fear and paranoia. Besides, Hermione was now subject to the family rules about one Black killing another. She would become barren if she ended Narcissa, and Hermione was not prepared to forever cut off the possibility of children in the future. Astoria, however, was not somebody Hermione cared about at all. She wasn’t somebody Draco cared about either. And there was really nothing stopping her from doing it, except for her morals.

Then again, Hermione’s morals had been slowly chipping away for months. She felt them disintegrating even further as she watched Draco plead with her on his knees.

Hermione certainly didn’t wish Astoria dead in the abstract. It would be much better if she would just leave Draco alone. But Hermione was starting to believe that she would never stand aside, and desperate measures would have to be taken to resolve this.

Could Hermione kill Astoria Greengrass to have Draco all to herself? It was possible.

Draco blinked in surprise that she had thought about it, and then he rose and gripped her face again.

"Not yet," he said firmly. "It's too dangerous while he's alive."

"But Draco..."

"I'm serious, Hermione. I love you too much for you to do something like that. If anybody is going to kill her, it will be me. Casting an *Avada* on a woman is much harder than doing it to a man, and I would never let you do that to yourself. The aftereffects would be too much for you, little dove, and you are too soft-hearted to end her through some other kind of violence. I know you're hurting, my darling. I know you must have seen Hagrid tonight - that is something I *never* wanted you to see - and you don't have enough darkness in you to take a life like that. You could never just beat her to death."

Hermione slumped a little, her heart giving another ping of grief for Hagrid. Draco made soothing sounds and pulled her into his embrace, and then she felt the tears begin in earnest. How long did he hold her? Seconds? Minutes? She couldn't be sure, but his arms around her made her break. He whispered comforting sounds, promises, encouragement. And when she looked up at him with a tear-streaked face she felt that a little bit of her grief had just been purged. He wiped the tears from her cheeks and looked at her very seriously once more.

"Let me be clear... murdering Astoria is not how I prefer to handle things, but if that's what becomes necessary then we must wait until the Dark Lord is gone too. My occlumency is very good, but if she dies, he is very likely to search me under torture to learn if I had anything to do with it and to understand my motivations for it. I could break and allow him to see you. We can't risk that, not ever."

Hermione felt a flash of fear as he said this, a memory of Hagrid's head suddenly at the forefront of her mind, and she nodded. He was right of course. Ending Astoria now was far too risky.

Draco brushed a trembling finger against her lips.

"*Please...*" he whispered. "Please come home..."

Hermione felt her heart softening once again, and she opened her mouth to respond. The *yes*, was on the tip of her tongue, but then she was pulled out of the spell by the phone booth rattling again to descend back to the Ministry.

She blinked and swallowed hard as she realized what she had almost done. She took a step back, and Draco released her, as his hand fell in bitter disappointment. Hermione hesitated, but she knew she had to say something to ease his pain, at least a little bit. She couldn't stand to leave him like this.

"I can't yet, Draco. I'll confess that I'm close..."

Hope lit his features, and Hermione's own heart eased to see it.

“How close?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think I can stay away forever. I just need to make sure I’ve accepted everything first.”

The phone booth began rattling beneath the earth, and Hermione eyed it warily.

“Look, someone may be coming,” she added. “I need to go. Keep giving me space. But in the meantime, you should know that Hermione Granger’s address is 12 Grimmauld Place, London. I put a new *fidelius* on the property. This is not an invitation to visit, but if there’s an emergency you can get in.”

She didn’t tell him that he was the only other person who could get in now. She would tell Theo and then find a way to tell the others eventually. She just wanted Draco to be first.

He nodded and looked relieved.

“Thank you. I’m glad you did that.”

She took one last look at him before stepping into the light of a street lamp so he could see her properly. She closed her eyes and turned into Aquila before opening them to observe him.

His eyes were huge as he stared at her.

“You did it,” he whispered in awe. She inclined his head. She had told none of the others. Her second form was entirely Draco’s idea. He deserved to be the first one to know about it.

A faint, almost wistful smile seemed to cross his lips as he zeroed in on the mark on her chest that was in the same shape as the Aquila constellation.

“I’ve never been prouder of you, fierce girl,” he said quietly, just as the phone booth reappeared at the street level and came to a grinding halt. Hermione saw Astoria was inside, and she took off and flew to the top of a nearby building, hidden in the shadows to listen. Draco’s eyes tracked her form as the door opened and Astoria came marching out.

“Did you get it?” she demanded. “Do you know who that was?”

“She was somebody who is very wanted,” said Draco without tearing his eyes from her.

Hermione heard the subtext loud and clear as Astoria huffed and crossed her arms.

“So she got away. You have to keep looking, Draco, you’re the only one who knows that it’s missing! I can’t believe I don’t even have my new wand back to make up for your *terrible* behavior tonight! You *must* treat me better! Everyone was talking about how cold you were!”

Again, Draco continued to stare at Hermione, and as he spoke she knew he was talking to her just as much as Astoria.

“You’d best get used to it. I will never be warm to you again. And there’s something else you should know... you and my mother might tie me, but I will never marry you. Mother can’t stand in for me for *that*.”

Astoria gasped, and Hermione’s heart rose.

“You can’t be serious!”

“I’m very serious. We’ll be permanently engaged and forever unwed. We’ll see how long you last like that, won’t we? I can drag it out for years with the Dark Lord if I have to. I’m one of his favorites.”

“But—”

“Go away, Astoria. I have nothing more to say to you.”

She made a frustrated little sound before spinning on her heel and heading back to the phone booth and slamming the door closed.

“I love you,” Draco said softly toward the dark shape that was Hermione. “Come home when you’re ready, my darling. Once you do, I’ll make sure we’re never apart again.”

Even in her eagle form, Hermione’s heart squeezed. She took off into the night and looked down to find Draco watching her until she was just a pinprick against the stars.

Her emotions were raw and her cycle of grief was beginning all over again, but her heart sang to have been so close to him tonight. She knew she was weak for him, but he was weak for her too. They were weak for each other. As she flew toward Grimmauld Place she began to wonder if it was really a weakness or if something about that was actually a strength. It could drive them and motivate them and give them every incentive to accomplish great and terrible things if it meant they could finally be together out in the open.

Draco would kill to be with her. He already had. He had arranged for his father to die. He was preparing to go after Voldemort and then turn on Astoria if that was necessary so that he could have her. And as she considered it, Hermione was beginning to think that *yes* she was willing to kill to be with Draco too.

It was startling, but it was the truth.

It was only as she was circling Grimmauld Place that it finally struck her *why* she wasn’t perturbed by his threats against Astoria, not even after seeing one of her oldest wizarding friends dead tonight. She finally realized why she would be willing to do precisely the same thing if she had no other choice. She finally understood why the past month had been so painful and why the things he had done had hurt so much in the first place.

It was because she loved him.

She was in love with a Death Eater, one of Voldemort’s favorites. She was in love with a man who tortured and killed without a second thought to get his way. She was in love with someone who was a bit mad and who had dark, obsessive fantasies about her. She loved a

man who had stalked her, marked her, imprisoned her, and misled her. She was in love with Draco Malfoy because she knew that nobody would ever love her like he did.

It was more than forgiveness, and it was finally enough.

Hermione let go of any lingering hesitation about him as soon as she acknowledged the truth of her own feelings. Maybe it was because she had fallen in love with him during the war. Maybe it was because she had finally seen first-hand just how much Draco had given up when he stepped back to let her choose. Maybe it was because she had seen Hagrid tonight and was struck once again by just how fleeting life could be. Whatever the reason, Hermione found herself accepting the things he had done. He was terribly flawed, but she had his whole heart.

She wanted to choose him.

In that moment, Hermione pushed away any desire to improve him or change him and fully embraced the Draco Malfoy she actually had.

He was her dark other half.

He was her twisted partner.

He was her unhinged boyfriend.

He was the love of her life.

Hermione wanted nothing more than to keep flying and go home to him, and she *would*. But she had chosen him now, and that meant there was something she had to do first.

She circled Grimmauld Place and landed in the gardens, her brain already ten steps ahead of herself. There were ideas that had idly crossed her mind during her rare breaks at Grimmauld Place, things she had barely allowed herself to examine until she was certain about Draco. But now that she knew what she wanted, those formerly half-baked ideas hit her in a rush and began to solidify.

Hermione knew that one of her greatest strengths rested in planning and research. Harry and Ron might have been better at instinctive magic whenever things around them went to Hell, but it was Hermione who had figured out how to get into the Ministry of Magic to steal the locket from Umbridge. Hermione had worked out the plan to break into Gringotts, after interrogating Griphook. Hermione had put together the clues of Voldemort's unintentional horcrux all on her own and schemed to keep Harry alive as long as she could while also helping him march to his death.

Hermione wanted to go back to Draco, but she wanted to do it in her own way. It would take very careful planning to pull it off, but she knew that she could do it.

Hermione transformed back into herself under that same sycamore tree. She cast a glance back at it in the dark as she approached the dimly lit house. Its leaves were almost gone now,

but she knew there was still some orange remaining. She swore to herself she would finish this before the last leaf fell.

Hermione let herself into the house and before long she was heading toward the Black family library. She had explored it now and then over the months she lived at Grimmauld Place, and she knew where she needed to begin.

She lit a lamp and approached one of the shelves in the back of the library. Her fingers glided over the books until she found one that looked promising. She pulled it off the shelf and settled into one of the new chairs Draco had provided to read.

Hermione had research to do.

Chapter 31: Samhain

Samhain was nearly upon them, and Hermione was growing frantic.

The last few days had found her buried in the Grimmauld Place library and the dungeons, desperately cramming her head full of things she needed to learn and very quickly. She took breaks only to eat and sleep and shed a few more tears for Hagrid. She had to learn everything she could about certain families. She had to practice certain spells. She felt like she was preparing for an O.W.L. on all things pureblood.

She made extensive notes on family trees, poured through Black family journals, and asked the portraits of Columba and Aquila to explain tying rituals and all the variations of them they had ever seen.

She learned that each person entering a tie had to present a token to the other that was representative of their House. Any object would do, but magical ones made the tie stronger.

She learned that the marriage ribbon Draco had left for her was several hundred years old, and the faint weaving on it she had once noticed and then never thought of again was the Black family crest. Each person entering a tie like this would present a ribbon.

Words would be said, promises would be made, and it was nearly as good as a marriage.

Hermione truly wondered why wizards bothered to undertake a wedding after going through with a tie because it did not change things very much except make the bond between the parties truly permanent.

Then again, Hermione was grateful that Narcissa could not actually *marry* Astoria on Draco's behalf, so perhaps it was good that the marriage part took place later.

There were traditional robes for wizards and ceremonial gowns for witches. As Narcissa had told Hermione, performing a tie during certain nights of the year enhanced the magic and was said to bring a couple closer together. Tying on Samhain was believed to mean that the couple would follow each other even in death, and whoever was the first to die would be able to revisit the other on Samhain night when the veil between worlds grew thin.

Hermione wasn't sure if it was morbid or darkly romantic. Somehow she didn't think the veil would stop Draco from following Hermione *anywhere*, whether she was tied to him or not.

She continued to communicate with Theo a little bit, but she was suddenly so busy their conversations had become limited. She didn't tell him what she was up to because she didn't think he would be able to keep it from Draco.

After everything Hermione had been through over the past month she was determined to return on her own terms, and she didn't believe either Draco or Theo would allow her to do it in the way she envisioned. They had to remain ignorant.

She nearly broke, however, when Theo reached out with some terrible news: Draco had decided to stand on his own to tie himself, instead of making Narcissa do it for him.

Hermione's heart nearly shattered at this.

Why? she asked, and Theo started siphoning her pain from afar.

It's for the best, Hermione. The Dark Lord made it very clear that he expects Draco to be willing. Besides, he can't stop it from happening on Samhain, and if he is the one that ties himself then there's always a small chance he will be able to undo it someday without having to kill anybody else. If Narcissa is the one to stand in then Draco would have to get her to break it as well, and she would never do that. Astoria would have to die.

Hermione realized he was backed into a corner yet again, but she felt so miserable she let the slightest hint of her plan slip.

I wish there was something I could do to stop it.

You can't. Even if you came back today and offered to tie yourself instead, the Dark Lord is expecting Astoria. He would think Draco was getting cold feet and questioning his judgment. There is nothing to be done, Sis. I'm sorry.

It's not fair.

No, it's not. And this is little consolation, but please know that Draco feels even worse about it than you do. This is pretty common in pureblood marriages, but he never wanted it. There are many marriages of convenience where the parties lead largely separate lives and find comfort in their lovers.

I don't want to be with an engaged man, Theo.

I know you don't. But absolutely nobody would judge you if you decided to do it. Draco has told Astoria point blank that he will never be giving up his boon. He's also told me that if you come back he won't touch you if you don't want him to. He will respect whatever limits you wish to place on him while he works his way out of the tie. He seems to have some new hope that you will return someday.

Don't tell him this, but I'm close. I'm just not quite there yet. I'll admit his tying is... causing a complication for me.

That's understandable. But Draco has no plans to have anything to do with her, Hermione. You can come home, and it will be just as it was.

If I ever come back, I don't want it to be as it was. I want fewer wards around my door. I want access to my wand and a fully stocked potions lab. I want to be able to roam the wing that is safe for us instead of being confined to my room. I want to be able to spend time in

Draco's room too, and that creepy shrine in his closet needs to be gone. You can tell him that.

She heard Theo snort in amusement over the bond.

Anything else then?

I also want Minerva McGonagall and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

What do Minerva McGonagall and Kingsley Shacklebolt have to do with anything?

It doesn't matter. Draco will know what I mean.

Theo reached out within minutes after she told him this.

Draco has agreed to all of it and now wants to know when you will be arriving. I haven't seen him this happy in weeks.

Tell him I'm thinking about it and still need a little more time. Like I said, this event on Samhain is giving me a hangup. I need to work through that first. But if I do decide to come home, I will expect him to give me those things.

You will have them.

The problem with the tying ceremony wasn't the *ceremony*. Hermione had done enough research that she now felt confident that she knew exactly what to expect from it.

The problem was Narcissa Malfoy.

There were a few reasons Hermione had not told Draco about the spell Narcissa cast on Astoria. First, it had been to protect Narcissa, because Hermione wasn't sure that Draco would be able to control himself if he learned that his mother was that ruthless. Then it morphed into a nagging fear that Draco would do something very reckless and put himself into danger if she shared that information with him. Over and over again Theo had warned her that Draco couldn't question Voldemort's judgment, and Voldemort was insisting upon a tie with Astoria. Hermione knew that Draco was feeling trapped and desperate, and she worried he might misstep around Voldemort if he knew.

Hermione was certain that Draco was ignorant of what his mother had done, and with Samhain so close now, she was relying on his ignorance for part of her plan. Out of the dozens of things that could go very wrong, the prospect of Narcissa casting the same spell on Hermione to drain her magic was one of the most alarming to her.

Narcissa had said that only a member of her family could reverse the spell that had surely turned Astoria into a full squib by now. And because of the blood magic Draco had performed, Hermione was pretty sure that she qualified as a member of Narcissa's family already. That meant she could reverse the curse if Narcissa ever cast it upon her, but Hermione had to *find* the damn thing first.

Because if Hermione's plan worked out the way she hoped it would, Narcissa would be sorely tempted to use it against her. She hadn't done it yet because Hermione was a mere boon and would never be a wife. Narcissa believed that it was a trump card she could always hold over Hermione's head to make sure she behaved and never reproduced.

But Hermione *was* a Black now. And just as Draco didn't know his mother had performed a blood curse on his prospective fiancée, Narcissa didn't know that Draco had performed blood magic on Hermione.

It was one of those rare moments when Hermione was the only one who knew everything, and she was determined to use it to her advantage.

But she had to find it. God, she had to find that spell before Samhain.

That was what she had been researching the most. When she wasn't memorizing family trees and tying rituals, she was trying to find that curse. She searched every book on dark magic in the Black family library, and there were dozens. She looked through journals and family records as she tried to locate the ancestor who had used it before Narcissa.

It wasn't until Hermione remembered the books in her beaded bag that she took from Draco's closet that she finally found it: the Black family grimoire, which housed the spells that were particularly suited to the Black family line.

They were many and varied. Hermione found the blood spells Draco had performed both to adopt her and then to foist Grimmauld Place upon her. She found rituals that enhanced fertility and others that halted it. She found a tying ritual that went further than the typical promise to marry and actually resulted in death if the couple wasn't married within a specific period of time. Another variation entwined the couple's souls. Yet another enhanced their magic, allowing one Black to feed off of another. Hermione eyed this last one very curiously because it required intermarriage.

In fact, quite a few of them required intermarriage. Perhaps this was why the Blacks were so inbred.

And then finally, the night before Samhain, Hermione found it: a spell to deplete a witch or wizard's magic, cast from a member of House Black upon a member of a rival House. Hermione went nearly faint with relief to read that the Houses had to be different for the spell to work, so Narcissa could *not* cast it upon another Black. That meant Hermione and Draco would both be safe from it if Narcissa wanted to retaliate. It was the first time Hermione had been truly grateful for her new identity.

Still, Hermione made a note of the countercurse. There was a very small chance that not all of Astoria's magic was gone, and if things went Hermione's way and she was feeling charitable she might see what she could do for Astoria. As much as Hermione didn't care for her, she had been a hapless victim.

With her most urgent issue resolved, Hermione flipped back to the front of the grimoire and began to read again, this time more slowly.

The Black family magic was fascinating, indeed.

A few hours before the ceremony, Hermione was feeling increasingly nervous. The slow trickle of information from Theo had begun earlier that day.

There would be a grand feast in anticipation of the event.

The tying ceremonies would take place just after dark.

Blaise and Ginny would go first.

When the tying ceremonies were complete, there would be a party for the guests.

Everything would take place outdoors, where the earth magic was strongest.

Several hundred people would be in attendance to watch, including Voldemort and the press.

With each nugget of information, Hermione grew queasier. But there was nothing for it. She had made her plan, and as long as the dozens of things that could go wrong did *not* go wrong, it would be fine.

Hermione really wished she could panic.

But she couldn't. She didn't have the time for it. She would have to be brave like Aquila.

The actual Aquila, however, was proving to be less brave and more stubborn.

"I'm still not speaking to him," she sniffed. "And I really think you're forgiving him too quickly."

"*Please* Aquila, I need you to watch Draco. I need to know when he has left for the ceremony."

"He will ask me a thousand questions about you the moment I arrive!"

"Just stay silent then! Go a bit early so he can get it out of his system and then watch. If you must say *anything* about it, you can always tell him you are making sure that Astoria does not come to his bed. That will hack him off, and then he'll ignore you."

Aquila rolled her eyes and huffed something that sounded like, '*feelings*,' but finally agreed to visit her portrait in Draco's room, much to Hermione's great relief.

As the afternoon moved on and started to edge toward the evening, Aquila reappeared.

"He's gone," she said. "He's in red."

Hermione smiled slowly. “Good. *Posy!*”

Posy appeared with a *POP!*

“Yes, Mistress?”

“Posy, please go to my bedroom at Malfoy Manor and retrieve a few things for me. This is what I’ll need...”

It was only when Hermione was reading about tying rituals that she finally understood some of the clothes in her closet at Malfoy Manor. There were several gowns and robes that looked medieval, and Hermione had been baffled by them when she first arrived. But after her research, she finally understood what they were for: they were traditional tying gowns, bedecked in satin ribbons. The color of the gown changed depending on the variation of the ritual that would be taking place.

Hermione realized with a jolt that Draco had wanted this from the very beginning. He had given her everything she might need for it, including a gown in every single color.

There was white for pure and innocent love. Black for love after death. Yellow for prosperity. Green for fecundity and birth. Blue for peaceful relationships. Orange for passion. Purple for happiness. Red for power.

Some of the more obscure tying ceremonies actually required certain colors to work, but with the odd exception of white, most tying ceremonies could take place wearing any of the colors. Typically the witch and wizard simply selected the color that meant the most to them – the one that declared to the world what they were hoping for out of their future marriage.

Draco was wearing red, and Hermione knew why: he thought he was tying himself to Astoria. He had no love for her. He wanted no children with her. He didn’t want them to be prosperous or peaceful or passionate or happy.

The only thing he could hope for in a union with her was power. The tie with Astoria would endear him to Voldemort. It was the only good thing that could come out of it.

Hermione had really wanted him to choose red. She had known from the beginning what *she* would wear, but red was what she wanted for him because of the magic they could do with it.

As for Hermione, her choice was simple. There was only one color other than red – and to a lesser extent black – that had a magical meaning that overlapped with the meaning she had privately ascribed to it. Every color reminded her of Draco in a way, but only one really fit when she thought about herself.

When Hermione looked at yellow, she didn't think of prosperity. She thought of the sun she had not seen for months while she was a prisoner, until one day Draco let her outside so it could kiss her face once again.

Blue did not represent peaceful relationships because the blue of her room at Malfoy Manor had been a prison as much as a sanctuary. She had hated it just as much as she loved it, and it was something that was a constant source of tension with Draco. It was the very opposite of peace.

Green had nothing to do with childbirth, but made her think of the gardens that Columba loved so much. But while blue had been her prison as a human, green was her prison as a bird. It was only in the last few weeks that Draco had finally, truly set her free.

Orange and purple both reminded her of Grimmauld Place: the first color was the sycamore tree where she had pitched her tent and the second reminded her of the flowers Posy insisted upon placing in every room. Orange became stubbornness and purple became loneliness. They were the opposite of passion and happiness in every conceivable way.

Hermione's feelings about black were getting closer to aligning with the magical meaning, but it was still a shade too distant for a tie like this. She didn't think of love after death, she thought only of death. She thought of murder and cracked souls and Draco teaching her that death dwelled in everyone. She remembered summoning death with Draco's wand and then rending her soul apart when she took her very first life. He had taught her how to do it and then heal from it. There was certainly an act of great love in that, but there was sadness and desperation there too. She shied away from it for that reason.

Besides, Samhain night would accomplish the same thing as black: there would be love after death for them both in any event.

Red was closer still because she saw it and thought of purebloods. She thought of their power and status and wealth. She thought of the hurt that pureblood prejudice could cause, but also the healing she had gone through over the last few weeks after making Draco more aware of it. Knowing that Draco was wearing red made her think of his own journey to slowly and methodically reduce his prejudices bit by bit. Red would always be imperfect, but then again, so was Draco. It was fitting for him, she thought.

There was only one color left, and of course it was white. How could Hermione ever wear anything but white if she wanted to tie with Draco? White was ribbons and nightgowns and soft touches and extraordinary care. It was Draco stopping every single time she became uncomfortable with the physical act and never making her feel ashamed for her innocence. White was the entire reason she trusted him to teach her about black and overcome the prejudices in red. It was the reason she held out for yellow while dwelling in blue and then green. It was the thing that pushed past orange and could heal the pain of purple.

White was the only shred of innocence Hermione had left, and it was the reason she had fallen in love with Draco in the first place.

Besides, there was something very curious about white. While other colors were interchangeable in most tying ceremonies, white was not. White would only work in a tying

if the person wearing it was a virgin. Hermione had accidentally stumbled upon an *actual* virgin sacrifice, though this one was a bit more metaphorical than Draco's fake execution ritual from months earlier.

White was a color that no boon should be able to wear. It would make an extraordinary statement. Hermione decided that she had to go big if she wanted to go home.

And she also couldn't hyperventilate while she was doing it.

God.

Hermione forced herself to steady her breathing. She could do this. She *would* do this.

She dressed in the gown with Posy's help, tying what felt like a dozen ribbons and laces to tighten the odd garment. It was really a cross between a gown and robe, Hermione decided. It had the full, diaphanous skirt that Hermione associated with robes. It would billow when she walked. But the bodice was sleeveless and cinched tight with a low-cut square neck that pressed her breasts up. It was practically a corset.

Next came her hair, which Hermione transfigured into Amalie's locks and Posy left unbound. It fell in soft waves over her shoulders, and Posy wove her a crown of tiny white heliotrope to wear, which symbolized love and eternal devotion.

Then came her Columba necklace, with the pendant nestled between her breasts, and her Aquila knives in their holsters. Hermione wanted the knife on her arm to be seen tonight.

Then came Hermione's face, which she carefully transfigured into Amalie as Posy brushed soft colors on her lids and cheeks to make her face practically glow.

The last things she gathered were the signet rings and the marital ribbon. Her ring she placed on her right ring finger, and she felt that warmth that made her feel a stronger connection to Grimmauld Place the moment it happened. It was a magical artifact, and Draco's would be too. Draco's ring she placed in a small pocket of her dress.

It took her a moment to decide where to place the ribbon. The waist was traditional, Hermione knew, but she decided to take it a step further.

She tied it around her neck like a choker.

She swallowed hard.

"Posy, please take my wand to my room at Malfoy Manor, and then return to me."

She handed the wand to Posy, who accepted it reverently and disappeared for several seconds. Then she returned and Hermione held out her hand for Posy to take.

"Please apparate me to the field just on the other side of the wards at Malfoy Manor. I can take it from there."

Posy nodded and gripped her hand, and a moment later Hermione was shivering a bit in a familiar field in the cool evening air.

“Wish me luck, Posy,” she said, and then she closed her eyes and transformed into Columba.

Hermione began to fly.

The flight to the Malfoy gardens did not take long. Hermione had explored this side of the property enough times to know precisely where she was going. She was Columba tonight, her gray feathers blending well with the evening sky that was turning to dusk.

Hermione approached the gardens cautiously, wanting to stay hidden until she knew how everything was arranged.

She fluttered to a nearby tree and shrank into the shadows as she observed the celebratory dinner coming to an end. Voldemort was seated in the place of honor in the very center. Draco was on his right and Blaise was on his left. Next to them were the witches: Astoria to the other side of Draco and Ginny to the other side of Blaise.

Hermione could see Ginny casting surreptitious looks at Voldemort, as though trying to decide precisely how she would like to cut him up.

Not tonight, Gin, Hermione thought with an internal groan.

As she watched, Blaise placed a comforting hand on the back of Ginny’s neck and seemed to rub it a little. Hermione wondered if she wasn’t the only one who found the gesture soothing.

Draco once again looked to be carved in stone. He was occluding heavily, ignoring every attempt that Astoria was making to get him to talk to her. Just on Astoria’s other side was Narcissa and a witch and wizard Hermione did not recognize, whom she thought must be the Greengrasses.

Nita was on the other side of Ginny. Theo and — to Hermione’s distaste — Daphne Greengrass were next to her on the other end. It was clear Voldemort was publicly pairing Theo and Daphne together in anticipation of their own tie in a couple months.

The other tables were filled with Death Eaters and their families and even some important Ministry officials. Hermione peered around and noted most of the Slytherins who had been in her class and those just ahead and behind her were present. She paid particular attention to Pansy, who was sitting with Marcus Flint and watching Draco and Astoria with a deep frown on her face. As Theo had said there were several hundred people there to watch the festivities once it was time.

Hermione stared at the head table again and saw Theo was looking off into space absently. This was as good of a time as any.

Theo, it's me.

Theo seemed to jump just a little before his face smoothed into a bored expression.

You sound closer.

That's because I'm in the gardens.

His eyes widened at this, and they began to dart around before Hermione chastised him.

Stop it, you won't find me. I'm well-hidden.

Hermione, what are you doing here?

I've decided to come home, Theo.

He relaxed infinitesimally at this.

Draco will be so pleased. I am too. But you shouldn't watch this, Hermione. It might hurt you.

Well that's the thing... I don't intend to watch it.

Theo's relaxed posture suddenly stiffened again.

Hermione, what are you planning?

Something only I can do. I just need you to warn Draco at the last possible moment, alright? He has to play along, but if he knows too soon he'll go off his rocker. You know him.

Hermione, please don't.

Theo, I can fix this. I'm going to. But I need you and Draco to trust me that I know what I'm doing.

Hermione...

Theo, trust me. Please.

There was a long pause.

Fine. I'm standing with Draco during his tying.

Good. You can tell him as soon as Blaise and Ginny are done.

I really hope you know what you're doing.

I do, Theo, don't worry about it.

I'll always worry about you, Sis.

I love you, Theo.

I love you too, Hermione. Please don't fuck this up.

She severed the connection then and settled in to wait.

It wasn't long before Voldemort rose to make a speech, and Hermione spent the time studying the gold serpent clasp on his cloak. He was wearing it again, and something about it made Hermione believe the wizards had been right: it was surely a horcrux. Destroying it would be difficult, if not impossible. It would be...

No. Not right now.

Hermione's little dove heart picked up a bit, and she willed herself to be calm.

You are prepared. You can do this.

The speech went on and on. Voldemort was speaking of ideal matches, pristine bloodlines, future service, and devotion to the cause.

He elevated Blaise's rank yet again, for bringing a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight back into the fold and showing her the path of purist blood. Hermione got the impression that Ginny was struggling not to roll her eyes.

When it was finally done he offered a toast, and all but the two couples rose to mimic him.

And then, with the meal complete, Voldemort ordered the main event take place: the tying ceremonies.

At this, Blaise, Ginny, Draco, and Astoria rose too, and the entire crowd moved to a different section of the gardens, which was set up to resemble a wedding. There were chairs for guests to watch, complete with an aisle for the witch to walk down, and at the front a throne, where Voldemort seated himself. Hermione wondered if he had it moved from place to place because she was certain it was the same one from the execution.

It took several minutes for the guests to seat themselves, and Hermione settled herself into a nearby tree. It was rather slim, but it was at the back of the crowd. In the darkening sky she hoped she could transform behind it without being seen. Ginny and Astoria split off from the rest to wait near Hermione's tree, and Hermione heard a brief exchange.

"I can't believe Blaise is tying to a boon," sneered Astoria.

"I was Draco's boon first," Ginny reminded her without missing a beat. "And now he has a different boon that he is positively devoted to. I wish you luck in drawing his attention away from her."

“I have made it very clear that —”

Ginny just rolled her eyes. “Has he even given you a token yet? What will it be — a rag he’s used to wipe muck off of his shoe? Amalie is living in her own home now, and he has given her everything — gowns, gems, elves, you name it. He’s besotted. He won’t be giving her up, *ever*, I’d wager.”

“Why you little...”

“Gotta run. It’s time to impress Voldy.”

Hermione felt a much-needed bubble of mirth erupt into the softest coo. Ginny froze at the sound, and Hermione internally winced for a moment, but then Ginny’s face broke into a broad grin as she turned back to Astoria.

“Actually, Astoria, let me give you some advice, from one witch to another. Now would be an *excellent* time to abandon this mad plan of yours. If you stick around much longer I suspect things are going to go very poorly for you.”

Ginny then clapped Astoria on the shoulder, her eyes flicking up to the tree, searching quickly until they landed on the small, dark form of Hermione buried in the shadows and clinging to a branch.

“I can’t *wait* for the afterparty,” she added with a smirk for Hermione, and then she released a baffled Astoria and moved to the center of the aisle at the back. Blaise was already at the front with Theo and Draco to one side of him. Nita and — to Hermione’s slight surprise, Luna — were hovering on the other side, awaiting Ginny.

The moment Ginny stepped into the aisle, torches erupted, and some of the guests gasped. Ginny’s hair shown like the flames, and Hermione had to admit that the sight was arresting. She was beautiful and dressed in robes of black, just like Blaise.

Love beyond death.

Columba dulled Hermione’s emotions as always, but she could see the truth of it on Ginny’s face and Blaise’s too. He was looking at her like a goddess, as though every single dream of his was about to come true. Hermione craned her neck to see Draco, and he was watching Blaise’s face as well. His occlumency shields cracked ever so slightly, and Hermione saw wretched bitterness and jealousy peek through for just a moment before he closed his eyes and refocused on his shields. His face fell into the cold mask once more.

When Ginny reached the front, Nita and Luna stepped forward, and Nita put a hand on Ginny’s shoulder. Draco moved to do the same thing to Blaise, and Theo stood behind him. The words recited were ancient and solemn. Blaise presented a watch that Ginny had given to him as a token, and from a distance Hermione thought she recognized it as the same one Harry wore. But that couldn’t be right, it would have burned with his body. Hermione remembered Harry had worn Fabian Prewett’s watch, and Fabian had a twin.

It must have belonged to Gideon Prewett once.

Ginny then presented a lovely brooch Hermione had not noticed her wearing, which Blaise had given as *her* token. The watch and brooch were placed on the small table together, and then Ginny reached forward to untie the ribbon from Blaise's waist, and he did the same to Ginny's.

They clasped hands, and then Draco and Nita moved forward to tie them together, Draco taking Blaise's ribbon and Nita taking Ginny's.

The final spell was uttered, and their hands glowed golden. It started small and then grew brighter as the ritual came to a conclusion before fading back into their skin.

Theirs had been a traditional tying. It promised exactly what their robes intended. They would be bound together in life and after death. They would follow one another forever. They promised marriage in the future and would seek to fulfill their union on an auspicious day, when their tie would become permanent.

At the end, Blaise cupped her cheek and kissed her sweetly, and when Ginny pulled back she was beaming. It was enough to distract Hermione from the thing she was about to do.

With Ginny and Blaise's ritual concluded, Draco and Nita stepped forward to untie their hands. Blaise gave Ginny one last kiss on the cheek and then stepped back toward his friends. Ginny, Luna, and Nita all took a seat, and Daphne and Astoria's mother stepped forward.

Tell him now, Theo, Hermione pressed into their bond. *Blaise too if possible.*

She saw Theo grab Draco and Blaise and pull them both in for what looked like a brotherly group hug in congratulations. Hermione knew the moment Theo said the words, because Draco nearly spasmed and tried to break away. Theo held him tight, and Blaise grabbed him too, both with white knuckles, while Theo muttered quickly into Draco's ear. When Theo finally released him, Draco stepped back, eyes ablaze with life again, but also looking slightly manic.

He's terrified of what you're about to do, but he promised to behave and play along, came Theo's voice through their bond.

That would have to be good enough.

At the front Hermione saw Ginny lean in toward Luna and mutter something into her ear. Luna seemed to straighten up in surprise, but then she settled very still as though waiting. Ginny did the same thing.

Waiting. They were waiting.

They all knew now and were going to let Hermione do this her way.

Her pulse ticked up.

Hermione made them wait a little longer. Astoria had to get out of the way first. Voldemort called Draco forward, and he lined up with Theo and Blaise behind him.

Then Astoria stepped forward and began to walk down the aisle toward him.

She was wearing purple for happiness. Hermione internally snorted at her foolishness and the irony of the selection. If Hermione got her way, there would be no happiness for Astoria at all. *She* would walk away from this night as the lonely one.

Then again, now that Hermione really considered it, perhaps purple was a perfect choice for Astoria.

When Astoria was about halfway down the aisle and the guests' attention was appropriately distracted, Hermione fluttered to the ground behind the slim tree and transformed. She took just a couple seconds to confirm that her camouflage had held, and she had the ring and other things Draco had given to her.

Then she closed her eyes and willed herself to breathe.

Don't panic. You can do this. Remember what Draco told you about him.

Hermione opened her eyes and darted out from behind the tree. Astoria was nearly to the front when Hermione stepped into sight at the end of the aisle too. Her white robes and flowers in her hair gleamed in the torch light, but at first nobody but Draco noticed her.

Their eyes met in that split second when it was just them. His gaze was fixed on Hermione, taking in her white gown and the fact that she was there, dressed to be tied.

Innocent love.

One look at Draco's face told her that he understood her meaning. He had surely imagined this hundreds of times. Had he ever envisioned her in any color but white?

Of course he hadn't.

That innocent love she felt for him – something that was entirely a reflection of his care for her – was the only reason she had come back tonight. She was telling him she loved him too by dressing this way.

He knew it. She didn't even have to say the words, her gown told him everything he needed to know about her feelings. He was ignoring Astoria and looked like every single thing he had ever wanted in the world had just been handed to him. But then his eyes widened as he seemed to realize precisely how she intended to do this, and his face became focused, determined. He gave her the slightest nod, and Hermione exhaled with relief that he wasn't going to try to stop her from doing this.

She had not let Draco or even Theo in on her plan, because they would never have agreed to it. But now they had no choice now but to play along and let Hermione handle this the way she had planned.

Theo and Blaise noticed Hermione next, and then Daphne and Astoria's mother did too. Astoria turned to look behind her when she realized Draco's attention was fixed on something in the distance, and then Voldemort finally saw her.

Hermione was frozen at the end of the aisle, waiting, *waiting*.

Draco's great insight about Voldemort resonated through her mind as she took one last, deep breath.

He likes a spectacle.

He likes a show.

He can be hoodwinked by pageantry and ritual.

This was the reason Hermione had delayed her return. It wouldn't be enough to just come home. She was about to do something incredibly dangerous and arguably very stupid, and she was going to lean on Voldemort's enormous blind spot for it. She needed all of the pageantry that was naturally built in to a ceremony like this to sway him. It was the safest way, possibly the *only* way to pull this off.

Draco had executed a version of Hermione in front of Voldemort that day, and he believed every second of it. Now it was time for her to finish what Draco started by using the disguise he had created for her so she could publicly claim the thing that was already hers. During her weeks at Grimmauld Place she had grappled with her new identity, but she had finally decided to use it while Voldemort was in power. Pureblood or a mudblood, rich or poor, respectable or not – she was still Hermione Granger. Her alternate identity was a means to an end, that was all.

And Hermione knew *precisely* how she wanted it to end.

“What is this?” Voldemort hissed as he stared at Hermione.

It was only when the other guests finally turned to look at the commotion at the back that Hermione began to move.

Unlike Astoria, and to a lesser extent Ginny, Hermione did not walk slowly and demurely to the front.

She strode, her head held high and her shoulders thrown back. She tried to pretend as though she truly had a thousand years of wealth and purity behind her, as she mimicked the confidence she knew ran through all of the Blacks she had met over the years — Sirius, Narcissa, Bellatrix, Andromeda, Tonks, Columba... and of course Draco.

Her dress billowed, and she leveled her gaze on Voldemort, determined not to let her nerves show. She could not flinch.

The whole crowd appeared to be spellbound, and when she got to the front, Voldemort stepped forward to meet her. Astoria scrambled to the side to get out of his way, and Theo reached out to grab Draco's robes and pulled him aside too.

There was no barrier between them as she dropped to her knees. Only then did she lower her eyes in deference to him.

“My lord,” she said in a clear tone with her light French accent. She didn’t think anybody but Draco would hear the slight waver in her voice. “I am a boon. My master is Draco Malfoy.”

She heard a discontented feminine sound come from her right, and she knew that Astoria was protesting, but Hermione did not dare look at her. Her gaze was fixed on the ground, though her spine was still straight, her posture perfect.

“When my master captured me I told him my name was Amalie Beumont,” she added. “But my real name is Columba Aquila Black.”

Chapter 32: Ribbons

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief depiction of blood and animal death. It's not too graphic but skip the text between the *** if you don't wish to read.

There was a beat of silence and then Narcissa's voice rang out. "Impossible!"

Hermione sensed a form in the front row, just on the edge of her peripheral vision, rising in protest.

Hermione did not move.

Voldemort liked to believe he was in control. He thrived on it. And Hermione would give him the illusion of it by staying still before him. He needed to think her proud, but aware and accepting of her proper place.

She sensed Voldemort make some gesture she couldn't properly see — presumably to tell Narcissa to be quiet — because he addressed Hermione next.

"You will explain."

"Of course, my lord," she said, infusing her voice with as much reverence as she could manage.

"My father was Sirius Black. I was conceived during the height of the first war."

There were some gasps around the group, but Hermione pressed on, ready to drop the real bomb that had been the product of hours of research and planning over the past week.

"My mother was Alice Longbottom. She had an affair with my father while they were both members of the Order of the Phoenix."

Now whispers broke out, and Hermione sensed Draco freezing just on Voldemort's other side. She glanced at Theo and saw he was frozen too. This would be as much a surprise to them as to anybody, but Hermione had selected Alice strategically, after offering multiple, whispered apologies to Neville's memory for tainting his mother's reputation in this way. As far as Hermione knew, Alice Longbottom had been devoted to her husband and son. But Hermione also knew that her claim as a pureblood would be stronger if her mother was one too, and Alice was the best choice for several reasons.

As her gaze slid to Theo, she saw that *he* at least understood one of her reasons. She wondered if Draco had picked up on it yet, or if his knowledge of the Longbottom family tree wasn't that extensive.

Neville and his grandmother had both perished in the Battle of Hogwarts. Alice and her husband Frank were practically vegetables in St. Mungo's. Hermione had confirmed there was nobody left from the Longbottom line to dispute the claim, and Alice and Sirius *had* both been members of the Order during the first war, though Alice was several years older than Sirius. Hermione was ten months older than Neville because his birthday was the same day as Harry's. It was conceivable they could have been siblings. And finally, there was that last thing... the thing she had spent so much time studying in the records of old pureblood family trees that made Alice Longbottom not only the best choice, but the *only* choice if Hermione needed to call upon her insurance policy in the form of her big brother.

Hermione glanced at Theo one more time and saw his eyes were starting to gleam a little as she allowed the whispers to die down. He didn't reach out through their bond, but he didn't need to.

He understands why.

It was an enormous relief in case she needed him to back her up. She trusted that he would know what to do.

"I was my mother's biggest secret. When she realized she was pregnant with a Black, she pretended that I was her husband's, and they left their positions as aurors and went into permanent hiding with the Order of the Phoenix, where they left only for missions. Almost nobody knew of me — just my mother, my adopted father and grandmother, and Albus Dumbledore. She did, however, tell my real father what happened, and he knew when I was born. Soon after my birth she became pregnant with my half-brother Neville, and a prophecy was made that could have applied to him. At that point they locked themselves away for good until Samhain night, 1981. When Dumbledore informed them of what happened to *you*, my Lord, they emerged from hiding, and then the very next day Sirius Black was arrested for the murder of thirteen muggles and for betraying the Potters. My mother heard the news and began to fear me. She already knew I was more powerful than my brother. She worried that the same violence and madness that had afflicted my father would find me. She took immediate measures to hide me for good."

"And what were those?" asked Voldemort. She could hear skepticism in his voice, but also a touch of wonder at the tale she was weaving for him. She continued to speak with her eyes on the ground, not wishing to give him the opportunity to search her until she was ready for it.

"She obliviated my adopted father and grandmother so they would have no memory of me. Then she fled to France and hid me with a distant relative. The Beumonts were old and had no other children, so they were happy to have me. Soon after she left me there she returned to England, where she and her husband were captured and tortured by my cousin Bellatrix until they lost their minds. I am certain my cousin knew that my mother was keeping a secret. At the time she believed the Longbottoms knew your location, my Lord. But the great secret my mother was keeping from Bellatrix was not about you. It was about me. My

mother feared what would happen if my cousin discovered that there was another Black daughter hidden away. After my mother lost her mind, the only other person who knew the truth of my existence was Albus Dumbledore.”

Hermione heard a feminine gasp coming from the aisle to her left, near the place she knew Narcissa was standing. It must have been Bellatrix.

“Severus,” said Voldemort.

A dark figure stepped forward from Hermione’s left.

“Yes, my Lord?” came Snape’s voice.

“Tell me. Could this girl’s tale be true? You knew them both.”

There was a pause, and Hermione willed Snape to play along. To her surprise he crouched in front of her and lifted her chin with his hand so that they were staring at each other. Hermione felt Draco’s magic thicken at the touch, but he did not move to intervene while Snape and Hermione had a silent and furious conversation with only their eyes. She could tell that he wondered how on earth she thought she could really pull this off. But she tried to give him a look that said, *trust me*.

Finally, he released her and stood.

“It is possible,” he said, and Hermione felt slightly faint with relief. “Sirius Black was known to be a philanderer. That was no secret. And it is true the Longbottoms both left their jobs and started to work exclusively for the Order a full year before the prophecy was ever made. Her face looks very much like Sirius Black, though her coloring is more like Alice Longbottom. She could be telling the truth.”

“But Dumbledore never told you?” asked Voldemort.

“He did not,” said Snape. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

Wanker.

He wouldn’t contradict her, but he wouldn’t put his neck out for her either. She was on her own.

Fine, I never thought he would really back me up anyway. I just needed him to not deny it.

Voldemort now addressed Hermione again. “Tell me how you learned the truth.”

“Of course, my Lord. As you know, my father escaped from Azkaban. Two years later you rose again, and the Order of the Phoenix was reformed. A year after that my father died. At the time of his death the Order’s headquarters were at Grimmauld Place, my father’s ancestral home. When he died he left the house to Harry Potter, having been informed by Dumbledore himself that I was long dead. Dumbledore told my father that I perished in the attack that took my mother’s mind, and he encouraged my father’s affections for the half-blood instead. Potter’s claim on my father’s house was imperfect. Dumbledore’s own spells

held, but the blood wards did not behave properly once my father died. So Dumbledore decided to find a member of House Black who could control Grimmauld Place for the Order.”

Again, there was breathless silence as Hermione gave them all a moment to absorb this.

“It took Dumbledore many months to find me. He traveled widely that year before his death searching for my mother’s distant relatives to find the one she had placed me with. He did not dare approach Draco for this task, even though he had a competing claim on Grimmauld Place as the eldest male heir. By then Draco had taken your mark, my Lord, and Dumbledore knew he was loyal to you. So Dumbledore sought me out, the only member of House Black who could have had a superior claim to Draco’s. Dumbledore found me just a couple weeks before he died. He told me everything. He told me that my father was imprisoned just after my second birthday and did not escape for thirteen years. He described my father’s talent with certain types of magic. He said my father named me Columba Aquila to honor the stars in accordance with his family tradition, and the name I had been using my whole life was the one my mother selected for me. As proof he gave me the signet ring from House Black that my father had given to my mother when he learned of my birth. She passed it to Dumbledore before she hid me. He told me he had kept me from my father for my protection and for his. But Dumbledore was a liar and was a fool to think I would believe it.”

“You didn’t believe him?” asked Voldemort with a thoughtful tone.

“Of course not, my Lord. Dumbledore was used to manipulating others for his own purposes. He allowed my mother to wash her hands of me and then kept me apart from my father to advance the interests of Harry Potter. My mother did not want me, but he knew that my father did. Sirius Black was searching for me *and* Harry Potter when he escaped from Azkaban, and his search only ceased when Dumbledore told him I was dead. My father would have never stopped looking for me if he knew I was alive. Dumbledore manipulated my father, my Lord. He channeled all of my father’s grief and the love he had for me toward the Potter boy instead. Dumbledore took everything that was rightfully mine: a father who wanted me and my birthright. He gave all of it to Harry Potter and then left me behind to pick up the pieces of my life. Then he had the audacity to ask for my *help* when his plans went astray and my father died too soon. I deeply resented him for it.”

The bitterness in Hermione’s voice was real. She *had* resented Dumbledore for so much, especially after she realized Harry was a horcrux. Dumbledore had manipulated her and Ron and Harry together, and now she really was the last one left behind.

“So you did not help him,” said Voldemort shrewdly.

“I did not,” she declared. “He died a couple of weeks after he told me this, and I stayed in France to finish my education. The Beumonts were both dead by then too, and I was all alone. But I remembered what Dumbledore told me, and I spent my final year at Beauxbatons researching my true parents. I spent months learning everything I could about them, and when I finished my education I came to England to claim my House. I visited my mother first since I knew she was still alive. I wished to have my revenge on her, but when I found her I saw there was nothing left worth taking. I then went out in search of my father’s House. I was only in the country for a few days before I was caught and became a boon.”

There was silence as Voldemort weighed all of this.

“I believe that Draco Malfoy caught you.”

“He did, my Lord. But did he ever tell you how?”

Hermione held her breath now. She *hoped* that Draco never had, and she was relying on his silence for this. The cover story Theo had given her at the execution was that Amalie Beumont was caught smuggling muggleborns out of the country. Nobody had asked her about it, so she had never shared it. She sincerely hoped Draco had glossed over that part too.

“He did not,” said Voldemort, and Hermione forced herself not to smile in triumph.

It was only now that she finally raised her eyes to look at Draco as she said, “He caught me at Grimmauld Place, my Lord. He had claimed it for himself by then with the Potter boy dead, and his wards went awry the moment I placed the signet ring on my finger inside of my father’s house. He arrived minutes later to find me examining the family tapestry where my name had just been added.”

The look on Draco’s face was one of suppressed awe. He was staring at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, but she could tell he was also trying to act like he had heard this story before. Still, she knew him well enough to catch the glimmer of amazement in his eye as he listened. The tale she had taken days to prepare and practice over and over again had just the right amount of mystery and the smallest dose of the truth to be compelling and believable.

Sirius Black *had* loved her in his own way. Hermione *did* resent Dumbledore. She *had* been forced to give up her true family for the sake of Harry and the war. And as she raised her hand to show Voldemort the signet ring Draco had left behind for her, Hermione knew she nearly had him convinced.

“My Lord, this can’t possibly be true!” came Narcissa’s distressed voice. Of course she was distressed. She was an expert in blood magic just like Draco was. She had given Theo a claim to a pureblood House using precisely the same spell that was used on Hermione. She would know exactly what they had done, but she couldn’t reveal the full truth or it would condemn Draco. The best she could hope for was that Hermione would be found a liar.

“Silence,” he said. “I will see for myself.”

Hermione took a deep breath and calmed her racing heart as she raised her eyes to meet Voldemort’s. He pushed *hard*, and Hermione gasped.

Cauldron bottoms.

She envisioned her cauldron and made a show of blocking him out for a few moments. But then she allowed the bottom to crack ever so slightly. He needed to see something to convince him she was telling the truth. He needed to believe he was forcing it out of her, and she wasn’t the one controlling it. She carefully allowed snippets of memories that would

support her story leak through the cracks in her cauldron. It was as though she was creating a potion filled with half-truths and hints.

Her birthday, ten months before Neville's.

Landmarks in Dijon that she had once seen on a family holiday with her parents.

Flashes of a trip to a French castle and cathedral that shared similar stained glass windows and architecture to Beauxbatons.

Memories of standing alone in a dark Grimmauld Place before Draco had improved it for her.

Seeing an older Alice Longbottom at St. Mungo's, with her mind no longer there.

Grief for Sirius Black when she learned that he had died.

Deep, lingering resentment whenever she thought of Dumbledore.

Placing the signet ring on her finger for the first time and the sense of rightness she felt when she did it.

And finally, the image of the Black family tapestry with her name directly below Sirius Black's. This last image she held firm in her mind, and she sensed Voldemort studying it with growing certainty that she was telling him the truth.

He released her and Hermione rocked back with the force of it. Draco seemed to jerk toward her, but something seemed to physically stop him from approaching her.

Theo, surely.

"She tells the truth!" was Voldemort's declaration.

Hermione's stomach unclenched. Nobody would question her story now.

The reaction among the crowd was palpable. She chanced a glance at Draco, and that triumphant expression had returned, as he stared at her hungrily. Behind him Theo had an expression of sheer relief. Narcissa's gasp was mirrored by Bellatrix's. Astoria gave a low groan, as though she knew what was coming next.

"Rise, daughter of House Black," said Voldemort.

Hermione finally rose to her feet, though she kept her gaze lowered in deference.

"Now that we know who you are, you must tell me how you came to be here."

"Of course, my Lord," said Hermione calmly. "As I said, Draco Malfoy caught me a month after your victory at Hogwarts, just before the boons were allotted. He did not know how I had gotten into Grimmauld Place, and I certainly wasn't going to tell him my true name. He tortured me for information, but I did not break, so eventually he decided to throw me in with the other prisoners to become a boon. No doubt he thought the truth would no longer matter

once I was given to a different Death Eater. I was selected by Blaise Zabini at first, which was a coincidence. Zabini didn't know who I was, and Draco had told him nothing about me. I resisted when Zabini tried to exert his rights. I am rather magically gifted, and it made Zabini wary of me and reassess his choice when I did not immediately submit. He told Draco about it of course, and it intrigued him as much as it disturbed him. How was I powerful enough to resist a man of Zabini's considerable talents when I had no wand? Why had I been in Grimmauld Place that day? What secret was I willing to hide under pain of torture? He was ill at ease, my Lord, and he began to request meetings with me."

She looked at Draco who finally spoke up and took over the story for her.

"She speaks the truth, my Lord. I could not make sense of it at first. Nothing added up. And most curiously, the family tapestry had a new addition on it, one attached to a relative I believed to be long dead. For a time I wondered if Sirius Black had *not* died and had been in hiding this whole time. Perhaps he had fathered a child in one of the Order's safe houses. But when I questioned my Aunt Bellatrix about him, she insisted she saw him fall through the veil in the Department of Mysteries. He could not have survived it. So I began to request meetings with Amalie Beumont to learn more about her. She did not trust me at first."

Hermione allowed herself an elegant snort at this. "Of course I did not trust him. I told him very little, especially when I realized that *he* claimed House Black for himself. It was months of meetings, of conversation. While he tried to coax information out of me, he allowed Zabini to use Ginny Weasley. Eventually the switch became permanent."

Draco picked it up again.

"I know you have all wondered *why* we switched. The truth is, we found ourselves doing it naturally as I tried to discover her secrets and Zabini needed a boon to replace the one I was occupying. She was difficult though, at first. As she said, torture did nothing to loosen her tongue, and she could block most of my legilimency attempts, though of course I am not as powerful in that respect as *you* are my Lord. She was talented with her magic and naturally violent – even though she carried no wand she could fashion nearly anything into a knife and attack me whenever I angered her. Eventually I called a truce and decided to learn her secrets by offering her an exchange. She was given a bit more freedom than the other boons. She was given jewels and dresses and my protection. I kept the other Death Eaters away from her and respected the boundaries she wished to set for her body. And before I knew it, I found myself thoroughly enchanted by this woman who was the center of so many personal mysteries."

"I'm certain it was my power that drew him in, my Lord," said Hermione simply. "Power recognizes itself, as I'm sure you know, and Draco and I draw our power from the same source. The Black family magic is strong in this respect. It seeks to unite branches that become separated over generations, and it was bringing us ever closer together. At long last I submitted and confessed everything to him."

"And when you learned of her identity, Draco, why did you not inform me?" asked Voldemort coldly.

Draco opened his mouth, but Hermione jumped in, having anticipated this question.

“Please, my Lord, that was my fault. He learned the truth mere weeks ago. Soon after I confessed I asked to tie with him, but he refused. He knew that you had approved the union with the Greengrass girl, and he is your loyal servant. He thought you would be reluctant to allow a wizard of his pedigree to tie with his boon, regardless of her background, and he believed his fate to be sealed. He was not going to reveal me and have you believe that he was questioning your judgment about his match. Nor would he ask you to change your mind, no matter how much he might have wanted me. I believe he planned to tell you the truth about me after the tying ceremonies tonight, so that you would know he is loyal to you above all others. I’ll confess, my Lord, we fought about it bitterly. I escaped soon after our fight and left for my father’s house once Draco told me he would not appeal to you on my behalf, and this is the first time he has seen me since that day.”

Her eyes met Draco’s, and now they were soft as they looked at her face. Voldemort was looking between them, studying both of their reactions.

“I see,” he said. “Draco thought to sacrifice his own happiness, and yours, for the plan I had already approved.”

“That is correct, my Lord.”

“But you are here, in any event,” he pointed out.

Hermione bowed her head now, as she preemptively buried the feelings of guilt for the thing she was about to do. She wanted Draco above all else. That meant doing terrible things once in a while, and she had known this was coming.

“I am, my Lord. Because during my absence, I followed Astoria Greengrass one day and learned a secret about her – something she has kept very close for fear of discovery. I have been turning it over in my mind for days, my Lord, because I know she is your choice. But I find I cannot keep silent. If Draco Malfoy ties with her tonight, she will be forever tainting two pristine bloodlines with her deceit.”

The crowd tensed, and Hermione sensed Astoria starting to move backwards slowly. She glanced at Draco, who did not bother to hide his look of utter confusion. Voldemort noted it as well.

“And what secret is that?” he asked, as he continued to study Draco for any hint that he might have known about this in advance.

This moment was the biggest reason why Hermione had not told Draco or Theo about Astoria’s curse once she decided to return. Had Draco been honest with her from the beginning, Hermione would never have left, and she probably would have told Draco about Astoria as soon as she learned of it. Perhaps it would have been early enough for Draco to take that information to Voldemort himself. But as it was, by the time Hermione had decided to return the tying date was set. She had intentionally waited until this moment to enhance the drama of her appearance and lure Voldemort into the story she wished to tell. It meant, however, that Draco could not know Astoria’s secret. He could not be complicit.

“Astoria Greengrass has a blood curse, my Lord. Her magic is dwindling. She is little better than a squib.”

Astoria’s gasp was audible, and Draco’s own look of shock was so compelling that Voldemort immediately turned away from him to look at Astoria instead.

“Is this true?” asked Voldemort with fury as he turned his red eyes toward the cowering Astoria.

“N...n...no, my Lord!” she said in a trembling voice. “She lies! She just... she wants to take my place! She’s a boon! But I’m a respectable witch! I have a generous dowry I’m bringing to Draco!”

“As do I,” said Hermione calmly. “I claimed Sirius Black’s entire fortune for myself several weeks ago. The goblins have recognized me as the rightful owner of the ancestral Black family vault from his line.”

“But—” started Astoria, and then to Hermione’s slight surprise, Theo jumped in.

“She will also have a settlement from me if you agree, my Lord,” he said with a touch of arrogance that was entirely unfamiliar to her. “With Neville Longbottom dead, I’m her closest male relative who is tied to her by blood. I’m happy to match Reginald’s offer for Astoria, plus twenty percent.”

There were some gasps at this, and Voldemort now turned on Theo.

“Explain.”

“It’s simple, my lord. Alice Longbottom’s maiden name was Fortescue. My mother was also a Fortescue. They were sisters. Columba is my first cousin through our mothers. Though I’m aware she claims her father’s House and not her mother’s, it is only proper that I provide a settlement upon her as her closest male relative. I have no sisters, and though I was unaware of her true identity until tonight, I know Columba very well. She always felt very much like a sister to me, and now I understand why.”

Hermione glanced at Draco, and she could see that he finally understood the true brilliance of her plan to select Alice Longbottom as her mother. Theo might not be able to be her *brother* while Voldemort was alive, but selecting Alice as her mother enabled Hermione to claim Theo as her first cousin. That would make him her closest male relative in any event. She wanted Draco, but she wanted Theo too. Then again...

Theo, I think he’ll let me have this without a dowry. It’s really not necessary.

Stop protesting. I’m sure you know that Draco and I had a dowry written up for you before you ever learned about the adoption, though we hadn’t worked out the full back story for the Dark Lord. Your explanation was perfect, Sis. With Longbottom dead, it is expected for me to settle funds on you as a first cousin, and I had always intended to do it if I could. That’s the world I was raised in.

Thank you, Theo. I love you.

I love you too, Hermione.

Hermione felt her eyes prick with gratitude, but she fell silent in her head, as Voldemort looked at Theo thoughtfully.

“So she has a living, male relative who will account for her then.”

Theo inclined his head in acknowledgment. “She does, my Lord. I would be honored to serve that role.”

“But... but it’s not *proper!*” came Astoria’s distressed voice. “She’s claiming a Sacred Twenty-Eight House, but she’s French! She doesn’t know our ways! And she’s wearing white!”

Astoria was grasping at straws, but her comment about Hermione’s garb did manage to divert Voldemort briefly.

“She has a point,” he said. “You are a boon and are wearing white.”

Hermione inclined her head. “It is true, my Lord. I wear white because I am indeed still a virgin. I made Zabini wary of me during our very first encounter together, and he never touched me. And as Draco told you, he respected my boundaries and protected me from the others as a way of learning my secrets. I never intended to give him my virginity unless he would tie with me first. By then I knew that my virginity could enhance our union.”

Hermione heard a dismayed gasp from Narcissa, but she only had eyes for Draco now, whose face had turned dark and covetous at her words. He surely understood her meaning. He had studied the Black family grimoire too, and there was a tying spell that had not been performed in generations because it had some very specific prerequisites. But here they were, with everything in place for it. They only needed Voldemort to say yes.

“I believe she speaks the truth, my Lord,” he murmured, in a voice that did little to hide how much he wanted her, “but Nita can confirm.”

Nita floated forward and placed her hands on Hermione’s head. She felt the warm glow that reminded her of that day with Cormac, and inexplicably it made her heart start to race in a way that nothing else had that day. She instinctively sought Theo through their bond, who immediately began to siphon for her. She allowed her eyes to close.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

“She is intact, my Lord,” announced Nita, as she melted back into the crowd.

Hermione’s heart slowed.

“Very well,” said Voldemort, now turning back to Astoria. “With *that* out of the way... do you care to refute Miss Black’s claims about your magic?”

“I... I am *not* a squib!” she insisted.

“It is easy enough to determine, my Lord,” said Hermione softly, “and as a show of good faith, I ask you to test us both. Let us show you what we can do. Ascertain our power. And then allow Draco to tie with the daughter of the Sacred Twenty-Eight House who is most worthy of him.”

Give him a fucking spectacle.

Draco’s eyes were gleaming with approval at her suggestion, and Voldemort sucked in a breath at her words.

“You propose a test,” he said softly, but Hermione could hear the eagerness in his words. “A challenge between two witches, both from ancient Houses, for the hand of my protégé.”

Hermione bowed her head, but not before she saw Voldemort glance at the members of the press who were seated a few rows back. Of course this would hit the morning papers if he allowed it.

“No!” gasped Astoria. “No, that’s not necessary! He agreed to tie with me!”

“I think,” said Voldemort sharply, “that Miss Black’s suggestion has merit. You are a daughter of House Greengrass. You must have strong magic to continue Draco’s line. And Miss Black is offering to participate herself. It will settle the matter of Draco’s future in a fair and impartial way and will resolve her accusations against you.”

Astoria was trembling, and out of the corner of her eye, Hermione could see that Narcissa looked very pale as well. But she was keeping her mouth shut and was no longer objecting. Hermione had not outed her, nor would she if Narcissa behaved herself. Hermione was wary of Narcissa Malfoy, but she was Draco’s mother. Managing her this way would be better than having her suffer too, even though the curse was entirely her fault.

Hermione glanced at Theo, who finally pushed through her bond.

Is she really a squib?

She is. Narcissa cursed her to try to dilute the Black family madness in the next generation.

Fucking hell.

I know. This is going to be easier than Hagrid’s final with the flobberworms.

Theo severed their connection, but he had a small smile on his face now. Voldemort turned to Draco and asked, “I trust that you will abide by the results of the test without any objections?”

Draco gave a low bow. “Of course, my Lord, and I thank you for allowing it. I have only ever wished to tie with the witch who has your approval and who will best enhance my line for your service. It is sensible to allow them to go head to head with their magic so we can resolve this once and for all.”

“Very well,” said Voldemort, motioning that the crowd who had gathered around Hermione should clear a space for the two witches at the front. Theo and Blaise stepped forward to move the small table used for the tying ceremony, to give everyone an unobstructed view.

“Come forward!” Voldemort cried before he turned around and took a seat on his throne to watch.

Hermione turned to face the crowd, who was watching with rapt attention. In an instant she took in the expressions of several people, which were lit by the torches surrounding them. Narcissa looked pale and worried. Bellatrix appeared a bit skeptical, but very intrigued.

Snape looked reluctantly impressed, no doubt certain that Hermione’s magic would far surpass whatever Astoria could come up with, whether she was a squib or not. He had taught them both, after all. Nita’s eyes were twinkling with suppressed mirth and approval. Luna gave her an encouraging smile. And finally, Ginny gave her a comfortable smirk that told Hermione she had no doubt whatsoever in the outcome of this so-called ‘test.’

“Perhaps I should start, my Lord?” asked Hermione demurely. “It is only fair that Miss Greengrass have the opportunity to see what I can do first so that she has a chance to match me.”

Voldemort inclined his head, but then he gave her a sharp look.

“Do you have a wand?”

“I do not, my Lord. I am still a boon, and while Draco has given me some privileges, he has never allowed me a wand. But it is no great matter. I do not require one.”

The anticipation in the crowd thickened with this statement, and Bellatrix in particular sat forward with interest.

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You would challenge a wandless witch with no wand yourself?”

Hermione inclined her head. “I would. I am willing to give Miss Greengrass every advantage, my Lord. She was, after all, the witch Draco’s late father selected for him.”

Voldemort was studying her intently, but gave a wave of his hand. “Very well. If you believe you can beat her.”

“I know I can,” said Hermione, and then she stretched out her palms and gave him the show she had choreographed over the last week in the cellar of Grimmauld Place.

She started with her bluebell flames that she had conjured a hundred times at Hogwarts. It was one of her signature spells. She had frequently performed it for her closest friends, usually scooping the flames into a jar so they could be carried around the castle for warmth. Though she had never conjured her flames for Draco before now, she suspected he had noticed her fondness for them while he watched her from afar. Tonight she stretched and grew them until they formed a circle of fire around her, larger than she had ever made them at Hogwarts. The warmth radiated heat to the first several rows of spectators, and though the

gardens were charmed to be a comfortable temperature already, her flames made the night air nothing short of balmy. In the darkness the flickering blue was enchanting, and sure enough she saw Draco's eyes gleam with pleasure and recognition that these were finally for *him* and they were the best she had ever created.

She held them for a moment in a large circle around her before a flick of her wrist transformed them into pricks of red light, crackling and glowing as they began to move around her rapidly. These were just sparklers – the flashy kind of magic that Fred and George Weasley had always favored and that they taught her those nights in the Gryffindor common room when she questioned them about their inventions. The sparklers didn't really *do* anything, but like so many of Fred and George's inventions they were ostentatious and persistent. Hermione released the spell, and sure enough the red sparkling lights didn't diminish in the slightest, but continued to swirl around her without her needing an active hand to control them.

"I am the daughter of Sirius Black," she announced, with as much drama as she could infuse into her voice. "I have inherited my father's talent for certain kinds of magic. He was an animagus. And so am I."

And with this she took a calculated risk and transformed into Columba, flying high from the middle of the sparklers, which cast something of an upward spotlight upon her, before circling back down into the center again. She saw Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Snape all gaping at her in utter disbelief. Hermione had debated with herself about whether to show this or not, but she finally decided it was safe enough, even though she was unregistered. They would never guess she had a second form too, and *Aquila* was the one she needed for Nott Castle. Besides, the British gave new animagi a year to register, and the French didn't require it at all. It had been one of the last things she looked up before arriving at the Manor that evening, just in case Narcissa or the Greengrasses tried to use it against her.

She transformed back into herself in the circle of red, still crackling merrily as it continued on, with no hint of dying out yet.

The Weasleys' spells were really something else.

"I am Columba, the dove," she said. "My form is a symbol of death and resurrection. My father named me, my mother destroyed the memory of me, and now I have risen again to claim my House. Birds also happen to be a specialty of mine."

Hermione then conjured her infamous wandless canaries – the ones she had made attack Ron nearly two years ago. She sent them into the air and then took a deep breath and fought back her revulsion as she appealed to Voldemort's bloodlust next. She drew the knife from her arm holster and threw it at one of the birds. Hermione used her cheating spell to direct it perfectly, and it spun through the air rapidly, before cutting one of the birds cleanly in half. Blood exploded in a small shower like fireworks. Hermione swallowed hard. It did not matter that the birds were conjured and would disappear on their own within a day. For now they were real enough. No matter how many times she had practiced this at Grimmauld Place she would never get used to it.

But it was all part of the show. She had been described as violent. She had to show Voldemort that it was true. His eyes seemed to gleam greedily as he took it all in.

“*Accio*,” she called to her knife, and it came zooming back to her. She sensed Draco tense in her peripheral vision, because he always insisted it was unsafe to summon a knife. She ignored him. She had practiced this enough at Grimmauld Place that she knew she could do it.

She threw it again, at a different bird. Twice more she summoned it back and then cut them apart, and the ground was now sprayed with blood before she felt she had made her point. She passed her hand over the blade to vanish the blood before sheathing her knife and turning her gaze on Astoria, who was watching her with disgusted terror. Hermione glanced down and saw an unfamiliar wand in her hand.

It must be Daphne's.

“*Expelliarmus*,” said Hermione almost lazily, as she waved a hand toward Astoria. Daphne's wand was wrenched out of Astoria's grip and landed in Hermione's outstretched palm. Hermione twirled it in her fingers for a moment before using it to vanish the red sparklers. Then she tossed it aside carelessly.

“One last thing,” she said, as she stalked toward Astoria. “You are a liar, as everyone will soon learn. You have kept your secret from my master and second cousin, Draco Malfoy. You wish to pollute his line for your own personal gain. House Black takes offense at this.”

Everyone was spellbound as Hermione pointed a finger at her and unleashed one last spell. It was something that was almost impossible to do without a wand, but all the heartache and pain and darkness and resentment she had felt for months had been harnessed over the last few days in the Grimmauld Place cellar, and she had finally managed it.

“*Crucio!*” she cried, gritting her teeth and pushing her magic and pain toward Astoria, who began to scream and writhe. Hermione focused on it with all her might. Without the benefit of a wand it was not nearly as strong as the time she had done it to Cormac, nor did it give Hermione the same sort of catharsis. But that wasn't the point. It was powerful enough to get the job done, and Hermione needed this last trick to make the others fear her. The spell would make the others fear Draco and Theo too, who would be seen as the only wizards who could have any hope of controlling her, other than Voldemort himself. And it would give Voldemort such an excellent finale that he might draw Draco, or even Hermione, closer into his orbit so they could finally take the bastard out.

Hermione released the spell with a gasp and discovered that the entire audience had gone totally silent with shock. She glanced at Draco and saw that he looked ready to devour her at any moment. As always, her use of dark magic had excited him, and she could tell from his face that he had never seen anything like it. She gave him a warning look that said *not yet*.

She turned toward Voldemort and approached him, before kneeling once more.

“My Lord,” she murmured. “I am the last named heir of House Black. I hope I have proven myself to be my father’s daughter.”

Voldemort touched her under her chin and Hermione struggled not to shudder. Her eyes flicked up to meet his red ones, and he actually smiled.

It was terrifying.

“You are truly formidable and an ideal example of the power our ancient bloodlines can produce. I can see why Draco covets you so. Now let us see if your intelligence about Miss Greengrass is as good as your magic.”

He released her and motioned her away. Hermione backed up, toward Draco, with her head bowed, as the enormity of everything she had just done began to hit her all at once. She reached out to Theo and tried to stay calm.

That was amazing, Sis.

Help, Theo... it was a lot.

He started to siphon, and Hermione tried to control her breathing as she let him do it. She then sensed movement behind her, and she felt Draco’s hand on the back of her neck, stroking gently, as he tried to help her calm her racing heart.

“I’m so fucking hard,” he whispered into her ear.

The confession broke through Hermione’s tension just enough, and she allowed herself a small huff of laughter as a trembling Astoria approached with shaky legs to retrieve the wand Hermione had unceremoniously thrown aside.

“You may proceed,” said Voldemort, a clear note of skepticism in his voice.

Astoria pointed the wand at Hermione, who did nothing to try to defend herself. If Narcissa had been telling the truth that day, Astoria would have no magic left by now. And if she hadn’t, Hermione’s necklace would deflect anything that wasn’t dark.

“*Stupefy!*” cried Astoria.

Nothing happened.

“*Expelliarmus!*” she tried again.

There wasn’t even a spark.

She tried three more spells before Voldemort rose to his feet and raised a hand. “Enough!” he bellowed, now turning the full force of his rage on the cowering girl.

“Miss Black was telling the truth! You have sought to deceive my protégé! You have sought to deceive *me!*”

“No,” whispered Astoria, who was backing away slowly, clearly in a panic. “No, I didn’t mean... *please*...”

“Miss Black!” cried Voldemort, now turning to Hermione. “You have proven yourself trustworthy! Now show this useless girl what happens to dirty muggles in my presence!”

Hermione swallowed hard and steeled herself, as Draco silently pressed his wand into her hand.

She had thought this might be coming. She had weighed it, considered it, and asked herself this question over and over again. After choosing Draco, Hermione finally moved off the fence and decided she would do it if Voldemort ordered it. She would not risk herself or Draco by pleading for Astoria’s life.

You can’t save everyone, Hermione.

But Hermione wasn’t trying to save her. Hermione had knowingly condemned her. Hermione was Draco’s match in every conceivable way.

She walked toward Astoria as if in a dream and slowly raised Draco’s wand. She heard Astoria sobbing, crying, and her sister and parents were watching in muted horror as they knew there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Hermione closed her eyes and raised the wand. She sought the death in her heart and said, “*Avada Kedav*—“

“STOP!” cried Draco’s voice.

Hermione blinked and turned to him in surprise. He was walking over to her slowly. “Stop right there, little dove. Let us discuss this a bit more first.”

He turned to Voldemort, who was looking less irritated than Hermione expected and more intrigued.

“She is a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” said Draco, nodding toward Astoria. “It is a crime to murder her, useless though she may be.”

“And?” asked Voldemort.

“And I believe she has learned her lesson about telling nasty lies. I am certain Columba could successfully cast an *Avada*, my Lord. She can manage a wandless *cruciatus*, so an *Avada* should be nothing for her. And you have just seen her willingness to follow both your orders and mine, regardless of what the law may say about it. There is no need to test her loyalties any longer.”

Voldemort inclined his head thoughtfully.

Testing her loyalties? Was that what it had been?

Hermione felt slightly faint.

“Astoria can still carry a magical child, even if her own magic has dwindled. I propose you match her to a lesser House. Give her to a wizard who would take a squib wife for the dowry and status her name provides. It will be a fitting punishment for the lies she has told, and nobody will be able to claim that Columba has done anything wrong. Indeed, Columba has been truly noble by revealing the truth.”

Voldemort seemed to weigh this, but then waved a dismissive hand. “Very well, if that is what you wish.”

Hermione was shocked, and she could see others in the audience were too. But as she looked at Draco she understood the brilliance of what he had just done. He was known to be one of Voldemort’s favorites, but much of that favor was granted behind closed doors and in whispered conversations. This was a blatant showing of that favoritism. Draco Malfoy could request clemency for a woman like Astoria Greengrass. He also could and *would* protect Hermione at the same time.

Between Hermione’s raw power and Draco’s positioning within the Death Eater ranks, they would be nearly untouchable. And their mutual violent streaks and obvious loyalty to each other would make the other Death Eaters pause before trying to topple them.

“Come along, my darling,” he said, reaching for his wand. “Let us unite House Black.”

Hermione smiled and handed Draco his wand. He pocketed it before gripping her hand and pulling her back toward the small table, which Blaise and Theo were returning to its rightful place.

“Who shall stand for Miss Black?” called Voldemort.

“I will, my Lord,” came Bellatrix’s voice, much to Hermione’s surprise.

“As will I,” said Ginny, who darted in front of Bellatrix to reach Hermione first.

“Thanks Gin,” she whispered, incredibly relieved that Bellatrix would not be the one touching her.

Ginny just reached up to grip her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Theo positioned himself behind Draco with his hand on Draco’s shoulder, as Blaise fell in line behind him. Theo caught Hermione’s eye and gave her a small smile.

I’m so glad you’re here.

Me too, Theo.

Draco cupped her cheek and said in a low voice. “You do know this is permanent?”

“Yes,” whispered Hermione. “Let’s do the one on page 384.”

He flashed a brilliant smile at this and released her face, before turning to Voldemort.

“My Lord, if it pleases you, we shall tie with a traditional ritual from the Black family.”

Voldemort nodded and waved a hand for them to proceed.

Draco began to recite the words effortlessly. And as Hermione listened, she knew her suspicion about this had been correct. He had found this spell in the grimoire just like she did. He had memorized it and probably fantasized about it. It required a mutual exchange: Hermione would give her virginity to him and Draco would give fidelity to her. He would never be able to stray after he finally had her, not that Hermione believed he would ever want to. Both parties had to be from the same House, and at least one of them had to be the last surviving member of their respective lines. It was one of the rare ties in which the color of their robes actually mattered. They had to unite with each other under power on one side and innocent love on the other. Red and white. Just as Hermione had hoped.

And when all was done correctly, it would allow them to share their power. He would be able to take it from her, and she would be able to take it from him. They could hand it off to each other in an instant and share each other's magic.

It wasn't a bond like she shared with Theo. They wouldn't be able to talk in each other's heads. But shared magic almost felt more intimate than a twin bond, according to the very few records she found describing it.

When she read about it she wondered if it was one of the reasons Draco had gone so slow with her. He knew she needed him to do it that way for her own comfort, but he had never seemed to be in any great rush. And why would he be? If he could adopt her as Sirius Black's daughter and then convince her to tie with him as a virgin, they would fulfill the prerequisites for this very rare spell. It would have been worth months, if not years, of patience.

When it came time for the tokens Hermione produced his signet ring from the Black family for Draco. She then began to unsheath her blade from the Malfoys to represent her token, when he put out a hand to stop her.

“I have something else,” he announced. “A true Malfoy treasure, just for you. I'll confess I hoped you would come home, little dove, but I had no notion you would do it in such a spectacular fashion.”

He pulled out a ring for her, featuring a large sapphire, nestled into a band dotted with diamonds.

“The sapphire is your birthstone,” he whispered. “I picked it out for you. And it's enchanted with calming spells. It should help you relax whenever you wear it.”

Hermione smiled softly at this as he placed it on the table with his ring.

She then reached across and untied his ribbon from his waist. Draco's eyes darkened as he reached for her throat to retrieve hers.

“I can’t wait to fucking wreck you tonight,” he whispered as he pulled it loose with one gentle tug.

Then they clasped hands, Draco’s thumb swirling tiny circles on hers.

Theo and Ginny both stepped forward and tied them together, and then the last spell was cast. Blaise and Ginny’s final spell had been wreathed in golden light. But this... this was a kaleidoscope of colors that circled from one to the next as the magic recognized two members of House Black and pulled their magic together to merge two lines into one.

Hermione gasped as Draco’s magic touched hers for a split second. It was intoxicating, addicting. She thought she could probably manage a wandless *Avada* with Draco’s experience and power in addition to her own.

It continued to grow until it bathed them both in a rainbow of light. In the surrounding darkness of Samhain night, Hermione felt the tug of the second life, anchoring them together on both sides of the veil.

They had done it. They picked the strongest spell on the strongest night with the strongest tokens. They would never be free of each other now, but Hermione no longer wished it.

Hermione saw the audience look on in wonder. Only Narcissa appeared resigned. When the magic sank back down into their hands, Ginny and Theo stepped forward and untied them, and Draco gripped her face and pulled her in for a deep, almost inappropriate kiss. Hermione sighed into it and allowed her eyes to flutter closed. She had missed this so much. She knew in that moment that her soul must have cracked further by staying away from Draco for as long as she did, because his kiss felt like a balm that was healing her. His mouth teased hers open, and his tongue caressed her own, somehow both soft and bold. She had the strangest thought that it reminded her of her two animagus forms.

It felt like coming home.

Her magic was thrumming to feel Draco so close, and she could scarcely believe she was snogging him like this in front of everyone, including Voldemort, but nobody said a word as Draco took his fill. When he finally pulled back, Hermione was entirely breathless and feeling slightly drunk as Draco grabbed her hand, placed the rings on each of their fingers, and then pulled her away from the table.

“Now let us celebrate!” announced Voldemort, as he rose and clapped his hands. The guests rose too, and everyone moved on to a third part of the gardens to mingle and toast the new couples.

It was done. They were tied.

Draco gave it precisely one hour at the after party before he decided it was time to reunite with his sweet girl. The last few weeks had been torturous, both literally and figuratively. Draco had never suffered so much, nor had the prisoners who had the unfortunate luck to encounter him in that state. Other than spending time in his pensieve and deep occlumency for the rare social occasions he couldn't avoid, torturing prisoners and coating himself in their blood was the only thing that helped him cope with Hermione's absence.

He had become distraught, unbalanced, and violent. He had spiraled so badly that Theo, his mother, and Snape had staged a second and then a third intervention. But they hadn't worked. Of course they hadn't worked, because the only thing that could settle his mind was getting Hermione back. Draco had to direct every ounce of self-control that he had toward respecting the boundaries she set for him, and he had no self-control to spare for the prisoners or anyone else he was interrogating.

That night at the Ministry had done nothing but make him want her more than ever. Draco's brief excitement that she might be preparing to come back to him had quickly waned in the face of his tying with Astoria. She had given him no timeline, and he knew she wouldn't accept being his mistress. He was afraid that 'a little more time' meant weeks or even months while he prepared to kill the Dark Lord.

But she *had* come back. His darling girl had come back to him, dressed for the ceremony just as he had always imagined. He had fully given up any real hope of ever having her like this in that second letter he wrote. And yet, she still appeared and did it of her own accord.

It made Draco feel truly alive for the first time in weeks. It was like coming up for air after nearly drowning in his grief. Then she took it a step further and wove a tale for the Dark Lord that was so utterly perfect Draco fell in love with her all over again. Her magical challenge had been inspired, spectacular. He had never seen anything like it.

He even got to tie with his Hermione using the ceremony he had fantasized about ever since learning of it. Never in his wildest dreams did he believe she would actually do it, let alone suggest it. But she had, and now it was done. She was irrevocably his. They were engaged, and eventually he would marry her and make it unbreakable.

Draco would never give her the chance to leave him again. She was his fiancée. She was his entire world.

Their union tonight had wrought a clear change in the other Death Eaters' behavior toward her. While they had been wary of her after her encounter with McNair, they were now treating her with almost as much deference as Bellatrix received.

The interactions with Bellatrix were even more bizarre. She appeared to be thrilled by Hermione, and she dogged their footsteps to ensure her 'cousin' was given all the respect that House Black deserved. The fact that Hermione's supposed parents had been blood traitors or that Hermione herself had been a boon did not seem to matter to Bellatrix in the slightest. According to her tale, Hermione had been raised without her parents' influence, and she had so much raw power that Bellatrix was positively enamored by her.

Draco was intrigued by these changes, but wary nonetheless. In a single night Hermione catapulted them to the very top, and that would surely present opportunities they could exploit. But it also meant the targets on their backs were larger than ever.

Draco didn't let her leave his side while he forced himself to mingle during the count-down to his *personal* after party. He caught Hermione twisting her ring a few times, and he hoped it was helping her stay calm. Theoretically it should work much like the bond with Theo, but it was persistent and would require no effort on her part.

"The ring wasn't for Astoria?" she asked him. "You were carrying it anyway?"

Draco reached for her hand and touched it fondly.

"I had a handkerchief for her, that's all. I picked this out for you ages ago, my darling. I regretted not giving it to you before you left, and I've carried it around with me ever since that day. I swore I would give it to you as soon as you came home."

It was true. He had discovered the ring in the Malfoy vault soon after he found her daggers. It was part of a set, and he had been drawn in by the blue stone and perfectly cut diamonds. He knew that Hermione favored blue, and sapphires had become his favorite gem ever since learning about her birthstone. The goblins were experts at identifying magical artifacts, and once they confirmed the enchantments for him, he knew the ring had to be hers. Theo had once told him that muggle men usually gave rings as tokens when getting engaged, and then a second band would be added to the set for the marriage. Draco thought it was a charming tradition, and Hermione deserved to have that as a nod to her muggle heritage. No doubt she was raised with the custom.

"Thank you," she said blushing. "It's stunning. You know I love blue."

"I'm glad you like it," he said, raising her hand to kiss it. "It's perfect for you."

Draco looked up to see Astoria slipping away with her parents and Daphne, and he snorted a little. He knew it was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord interrogated the rest of the Greengrass family about her affliction, and he suspected that Astoria's father would ultimately be held responsible.

Draco had no concern for them. He had saved Astoria simply because he promised Hermione that night at the Ministry that he would never let her take Astoria's life. Astoria wasn't like McLaggen. It would damage Hermione more than she realized to go through with it. Casting an *Avada* on a woman was always harder than doing it to a man. Hermione would have had to inflict some other, physically traumatic injury upon Astoria to accomplish it without the aftereffects, and Draco didn't want to put Hermione through that either. He knew how much she hated blood.

Draco himself had only killed two women with an *Avada Kedavra* — the first was a young witch he didn't know, who he killed immediately after getting Hermione to safety during the Battle of Hogwarts. Much like Lucius and Tiberius, the witch had discovered all three wizards squirreling their witches away into the dungeons. She found them before they had cast any wards or notice-me-not charms to keep others away from the cell. Draco didn't

know which side the witch was on, but he couldn't risk her alerting the Death Eaters *or* the Order, and he had reacted and just killed her without any hesitation. The second woman he killed with an *Avada* was Lavender Brown. Both times the magic required was utterly draining and the after-effects had been longer, harsher, and more gut-wrenching.

He knew Hermione was powerful enough to do it, but he did not want his sweet girl to ever know what that was like.

If Astoria ever crossed him again he would not hesitate to punish her. But it would not be by Hermione's hand.

After several more minutes of forced mingling, Draco called Poppy and gave her terse instructions to prepare his room for the things he had in mind. He left Hermione in the care of the others for a few moments to inform the Dark Lord that he was taking Columba back to the Manor for a private celebration. The Dark Lord just waved him off, with something that almost looked like fondness on his face. Draco caught Hermione watching them, and her expression was gobsmacked to see the Dark Lord looking so approving. Draco just smirked.

Draco quickly rejoined her and laced their fingers together before tugging on her hand. The crowd seemed to part for them as he pulled her away with determination. He could tell that Hermione wasn't exactly sure what to expect tonight. It had been nearly a month since they had really been together, and they didn't *have* to have sex for the magic to work. The exchange they had promised in their ceremony could be completed at any time before they wed. But just like their tying, it would be stronger on Samhain night, and Draco knew what he wanted if Hermione was agreeable to it. He was practically vibrating with anticipation, and he didn't bother to hide his eagerness for her.

He caught Hermione twisting her ring a little.

Good. She needs to relax.

Then again, he wondered if he would be able to coax her to take it off before they got started. She was so beautiful when she gave him her fear. It made him feel capable, *powerful* whenever she looked at him with her enormous eyes and trusted him to take care of her in that way. It made him ache for her, it made him hard.

In fact, he was so hard it was becoming painful.

The Manor was dark as he pulled her through the winding hallways and staircases. They finally approached their wing, and Draco felt a sense of coming home as they crossed the wards together. His beautiful girl was back where she belonged, in the wing of the Manor that was *theirs*. It hadn't felt right since the day she left.

The moment it was safe, Draco turned to her and muttered a *finite incantatem* to reverse her disguise so she was herself again. Draco felt himself choke up a little as he stared at those hazel eyes and curls he had missed so much. He couldn't help himself. He reached up and touched one before threading his fingers into her hair and pulling her close to him.

“I’ve dreamed about this,” he said. “I have thought about it so many times, and I know exactly how I want it to go. Will you let me do it, Hermione?”

Hermione nodded, and he squeezed her hand, as he led them both into *his* room. He had finally invited her in for the first time. This was right. This was how it was always meant to be.

He looked around and saw that Poppy and Posy had been hard at work preparing the space for them. The fire was lit in the grate, casting the room in a flickering glow. There was champagne on his bar cart. The closet door was open to prove that he had removed his small shrine to her just as she requested, and the bed was already turned down for them. One of Posy’s flower arrangements was even on the nightstand on Hermione’s side of the bed.

“Please... let me...” he said, as he pulled the Black marital ribbon from his pocket and gently removed the flower crown from Hermione’s hair. He gathered a few locks that framed her face and tied them back with the ribbon before stepping away and looking down at her. It was precisely how he had always imagined her.

“There...” he said. “Hermione Jean Granger. Columba Aquila Black. You can be both, my darling.”

And then he began to untie the rest of her.

Hermione’s robes were adorned with ribbons and the whole thing was held together with laces and ties. There were no zippers, no buttons, no clasps. It was like unwrapping an enormous gift, and the gift was her. Every new glimpse of skin felt like an offering. Draco allowed himself the pleasure of the lightest touch as he began unknotting the ribbons one by one to release them. Something about this felt ritualistic in itself. The tying gowns had been in the same style for centuries, and it wasn’t until this very moment that Draco understood why. Taking it apart was sensual and utterly perfect. When the corset finally loosened, Hermione let out a great exhale, and Draco trailed his fingers along her bare spine.

“It’s so pretty,” he murmured as he continued to take his time unlacing her skirt bit by bit. “I always envisioned you choosing the white. You looked every bit the dove tonight.”

When the last tie was released, the whole gown fell away to finally reveal what was underneath, and Draco inhaled as he stared at her.

“Fuck... if I had known you were wearing this...”

He had never seen anything so perfect in his life. She had finally donned some of that lingerie that had been waiting so patiently at the bottom of her dresser. It was exactly as Draco had always imagined: sheer, delicate lace pushing her breasts up. The faintest outlines of her nipples were visible beneath the cups that were barely there. The matching knickers were dainty and sat low on her hips. Even in the dim light he could see the slight stain of her arousal creeping through them. His darling girl was wet already.

And the whole ensemble was white, just like her gown.

He *adored* seeing her in white. It was so sexy, but also so sweet. He had never been this hard in his life.

“You’re perfect,” he said, because what else could he say in the face of all this? She had taken it upon herself to prepare for him, and now he was certain he was finally going to have her tonight.

He pulled her in for a deep kiss, and his fingers started to skate across her skin. He walked her back toward the bed and nudged her down until she was sitting on the edge of it, and he stepped back to admire her while he undressed himself. He didn’t even blink as he studied her, taking in every single thing. He wanted his memory of this to be perfect. He would watch it again in his pensieve later.

“I promised you something in my first letter,” he said, as he stripped down to his pants. He caught Hermione glancing at his erection, and she turned a faint pink. Draco couldn’t help but smile to see it. “Do you remember?”

Hermione bit her lip and nodded.

“I intend to make good on it,” he said as he approached her and then sank to his knees in front of her.

It was time. It was time to finally say the things he meant to say, without anger or fear or any threats looming over them. He needed her to know how much she meant to him.

“Thank you, Hermione. Thank you for choosing me. I’m dark and twisted and you are everything that is light and good. I’ll never deserve you, but I would bathe the world in blood to protect you and keep you here with me. I love you so much. Will that be enough for you, my darling girl? Can you accept me as I am?”

Hermione looked stricken as she just nodded. Draco’s stomach unknotted with relief. He knew she must have accepted these parts of him to come home, but he had to be sure. He didn’t believe he was capable of being generous to the world. He could only be generous to *her*. But she seemed to accept that, and Draco no longer had to fear pushing her away because of it.

Now it was time to ease her own fears about what was coming, and he knew just how to do it. She always responded so well to his words.

“Good. And now... I know it’s been a long time since we’ve been together, but you’re so good to me, aren’t you? You came home. You manipulated the Dark Lord in the most masterful way I have *ever* witnessed. You performed a fucking wandless *cruciatus*, which I didn’t even know was possible. You bound your virginity and even your magic to me. And now you’re sitting here on the edge of my bed, blushing so prettily for me. I want you to tell me, little dove... are you getting excited?”

“Yes,” Hermione breathed, as she let her eyes close to hear his words. Draco’s cock twitched. She was turning herself over to him, just like he wanted.

“Nervous?”

“I –”

“Yes?”

“The ring is helping.”

“Is that good? Or do you want to take it off?”

Draco held his breath to see how she would react to this. The offer made her pause, and she looked a bit surprised. He was sure she believed he had given the ring to her to ease what was coming tonight, but he hadn't. He simply wanted to give her a way to cope when he couldn't be so obvious with his help. Tonight though, *now*... it was just the two of them.

“Let me take it off, Draco, so you can have my fear.”

Draco's heart leapt. She understood, then. They were finally on the same page.

“Gods you're perfect,” he sighed. “Hand it to me, sweet girl. If you need it for what I'm about to do to you, do not hesitate to ask for it back.”

She took a deep breath and removed it, and he could tell that her nerves that had been held at bay since their tying suddenly hit her.

“Oh,” she said softly, closing her eyes again and swaying a little.

“Shhh...” he whispered, gently prying the ring from her hand. “I've got you. You know I'll never hurt you. Let me make you feel *so* good.”

“Okay,” she breathed, and she seemed to lean in to him. It was everything Draco wanted from her. He wanted to be the one to calm her. He wanted to guide her. He wanted to take her anxiety and manage it for her.

It was what they did. It was the thing that made her need him just as much as he needed her.

And Draco was very good at it.

“Can I tell you what I've fantasized about?”

“Mmmm,” she said, keeping her eyes closed to enjoy his voice. This was one of Draco's favorite parts. He loved to weave a fantasy for her. It made her relax and grow sodden for him. She always calmed down and opened for him so perfectly this way.

“I've dreamed of having you naked in my bed. It's going to make you nervous, I know that. But you're so lovely, and you'll let me have you like that, won't you? You'll let me spread your legs wide so I can get a view of your pretty little cunt. And then I'm going to kiss your knee and put my head on it to beg for your forgiveness one more time. It's going to drive me mad, being so close to the thing I want, but I won't let myself taste you until you forgive me one more time. And you will forgive me, won't you? You always do. I love that about you.

My sweet, darling girl. And when you tell me you love me, I'll kiss up your thigh and then find that special place with my tongue. You're going to gasp and groan and be so wet for me. I want you to grind on my face. I want you to punish me for what I did to you. Don't you dare hold back on me, Hermione. I want you to suffocate me with your cunt. And then you're going to come so hard you beg me to fuck you because you need my cock to fill you. I want you so free you don't feel any pain when I finally take the thing you promised me tonight. It won't last long – I'll come too fast, I just know it. I've wanted to be inside of you for years."

It was so crude, so vivid, but Draco wanted every part of it. Hermione was staring at him with breathless wonder as he finished telling her what was in store for them tonight.

"Yes," she whispered. "Please, Draco. All of it."

Fuck me.

Draco wondered if he would actually die from happiness before he was finished with her tonight.

"Perfect girl," he murmured. "Tell me if you need me to stop or if you want your ring back, alright?"

"Alright," she breathed.

But Draco knew his witch didn't want him to stop. She didn't want her feelings dulled at all by the ring. She wanted to experience every moment of nerves, anxiety, and fear and then give it all to Draco so he could take it from her.

Draco couldn't fucking wait.

Hermione's knives and Columba pendant were still on her, and Draco decided to leave them. He wanted to fuck her while she was wearing both.

He reached around her and unclasped her bra in a deft motion. It fell forward to reveal her stunning tits. They were heaving, and Draco knew her nerves were spiking so he covered her breasts gently with his free hand to calm them.

"That was so lovely," he said. "And now your knickers, yes? The pair of knickers I got from you the last time we were together were just as drenched as these. I kept them, you know. I never even cleaned them. I told myself I would have to give you up, but whenever I was feeling weak I would pull them out again. And now here you are, fulfilling every single fantasy for me."

This time he eased her knickers down, and Hermione lifted her hips just a little. He coaxed them all the way off her leg, and he gripped them for a moment before sliding open the drawer to his nightstand and placing them inside for safe keeping. Then he turned back to her and placed one hand on each of her knees to open her fully and present the cunt he had been dreaming about for years.

“Gods, it’s even prettier than I imagined,” he said with a sigh. He trailed his finger against her slit. “The loveliest little cunt in the world, and it’s all mine.”

As she arched into him, he sensed her heart starting to race as she realized she was properly naked for a wizard for the first time *ever*, but he whispered, “I’ve got you,” and stroked her gently to ease her into it.

He would hold her, guide her, help her every step along the way. He would cherish every moment.

He was still kneeling before her. He leaned forward to kiss one knee just like he promised before he laid his head on it in supplication, his face toward her center, while he inhaled heavily. He could smell her arousal, and it was dreamy. He had never wanted this so badly in his life.

“My Hermione,” he sighed. “I hurt you, my sweet girl. I don’t believe that I’ll end up in Hell for all the people I’ve killed, but I do know there is a special circle for hurting somebody you love. I’m so sorry. I want you to always tell me when I hurt you, alright? I don’t think about the world the way most people do, and sometimes I don’t know that I’m causing you pain. Always tell me whenever I do it so I can fix it and then beg for your forgiveness.”

Hermione ran her fingers through his hair, and the gesture felt so intimate he sighed contentedly into her leg and nestled her a little with his nose.

“Draco,” she said. “You *did* hurt me, it’s true. But I forgive you, and I accept you. Because I *do* love you. I love you enough to torture. I love you enough to kill. I love you enough to overcome my fears and hesitation. I am always going to love you, and I want you to know it.”

Draco was shocked by her words. Up until the moment she appeared in the gardens, he had been so afraid he had ruined it and he would never hear her say those words to him. He became emotional as relief and happiness warred inside of him. Hermione *always* brought his feelings to the surface. She was the only one who could do it. Draco started to shake as tears welled up. He found himself weeping before he knew it. He, Draco Malfoy, was actually crying on her knee, having finally experienced the full cycle of hurt and remorse and forgiveness and acceptance for what might have been the first time in his life.

He took a shuddering breath and then kissed the part of her leg that was closest to his lips.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “Thank you so much. I love you, Hermione. I always have.”

Then he began to kiss her inner thighs, circling around her knife holster and moving his head ever closer to that special place. He could feel her tense again as he moved toward his goal, so he began to murmur pretty words to her. Soon she started to relax and open for him.

“You have such lovely thighs. Is that a beauty mark? Gods, I’m going to kiss it every single day. I love all your beauty marks. Did you know I once drew a diagram of them to see if I could remember where every single one was located? But now I need to taste you, Hermione. I’ve only had a preview. I can see how wet you are already. I know you’re

thinking about my mouth on your hot little cunt, and it's going to be better than you've ever imagined. Did you know I've never done this before? We're both trying something new tonight, my darling, but I've wanted to eat you out for years. Just like kissing, this is something I saved only for you."

When his mouth finally found her center, and his tongue touched her for the first time, Hermione cried out in surprise and instinctively pressed her hips toward him.

Fucking yes.

Salazar help him, but she tasted delicious. She was so warm and wet, and now she was *thrusting...*

Draco couldn't help but groan in approval, and he settled in to bury his entire face right between her thighs. He closed his eyes to enjoy this delicacy she was giving him tonight. He could die a happy man, right here.

He lavished her with his tongue, and he used it to part her folds until he found her clit. He twirled it around his tongue like a lolly, coating it for her until she began to shake.

"*Draco,*" she groaned, and she pressed her hips further toward him. She was starting to grind her cunt into his mouth, and he fucking loved it.

"More," he said against her clit as his tongue then moved to penetrate her.

She started to tremble in earnest and release delicious little moans that Draco knew meant she was getting very close.

But no. He had to check something first.

He backed away for a brief moment, and Hermione groaned in dismay.

"Did you come while you were away at Grimmauld Place?" he asked. "Did you try touching yourself and finding your special place on your own?"

"No," she breathed, unconsciously thrusting her hips back toward him.

Draco relaxed at her answer and leaned forward to give her another small lick as a reward.

"Why not?"

"Because you told me not to. I'm supposed to find you if I want it to be touched."

Had any witch ever been this perfect? Of course not, it was only his Hermione who would ever behave like this for him. Even when she was cross with him, even when she considered leaving him for good, she still followed the rules he gave her. She denied herself pleasure until she felt ready to return to him.

"That's exactly right... such a good fucking girl for me," he groaned, and then he began to feast in earnest.

Hermione cried out, her tension quickly building again as she seemed to lose all sense of herself. Gone was her embarrassment, her shame, her nerves. Her entire attention was focused in Draco, as she squeezed her thighs around his face and started to suffocate him just as he dreamed of.

Then he found her clit again and pulled it between his lips to *suck*, and Hermione exploded all around him. He felt a gush of wetness dribble down his chin, and Draco ducked to capture it. It was so decadent that he barely realized she was talking to him.

“Please...” she was saying, “*please* Draco.”

“Please what?”

“Please, I need... I need more, Draco... I need... *please*.”

Draco moved back, and stared at her. She was totally open, spread wide for him and hardly aware of the picture she was presenting to him. He could take her tonight, he just knew it.

“Do you want me to fuck you, sweet girl? Do you want to learn what that feels like? I will make you feel so good, so complete. You’re so lonely and empty right now, aren’t you? You want me in there, I know you do. It’s the only thing that will help you, isn’t it? And I’m going to come inside of you when I do it. I’m not pulling out. I’ve never come inside of a witch before. I’ve never wanted to do that with anybody but you. It will be hot, and I’m going to put my cum so far up inside of you that you’ll never get it all out.”

Draco knew he was rambling, but he couldn’t help it. He just knew she was going to let him do this. He was almost shaking with anticipation, thrilled that the moment was finally here.

Hermione groaned, but nodded, and Draco wanted to shout with triumph. She opened a bleary eye and seemed to slump back a bit, already spent.

That was perfect. It meant Draco could lead her in this too.

He reached down and physically lifted her to position her back on the pillows before laying her down and settling his weight on top of her. He forced himself to slow down to make this good for her. He had once promised her he would take her gently the first time, and he swore to himself that he would do it.

“I love you, Hermione.”

“I love you too,” she breathed.

He beamed at this and then said, “vanish my pants.”

She gave a careless wave of her hand, and then he was naked on top of her. The feeling of her skin underneath his was heavenly.

He felt her tense a little, and despite her words to him earlier he knew that she was dreading this just as much as she wanted it. But Draco had told her it would fit. He wouldn’t hurt her

the same way McLaggen did. He tucked another pillow behind her to protect her head, and then teased her legs open.

“Slow, yes? And I’m going to touch your little clit to make you happy while I go all the way in.”

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. He leaned down for one more kiss, and then he felt her legs open, and he pressed forward.

He kept one hand on her wrist to gauge her reaction, and sure enough her pulse shot through the roof nearly the moment he started to intrude. He saw her eyes squeezing shut, and her face went pale, as she turned her head to the side as though trying to get away. Draco immediately paused.

“Shhhh,” he whispered. “Are you alright? Do you want me to stop or get the ring?”

“No...” she said as she took steadying breaths. “I want to do this, I just...”

She couldn’t seem to say it. Her mouth shut of its own accord, and she suddenly looked miserable. Draco’s heart broke for her all over again, and he stroked her wrist.

“It’s alright Hermione.”

“I want to!” she blurted out. “I do, *so much*, but I’m just worried it’s not going to fit and...” Her face fell as she trailed off.

Draco studied her for a moment. She *did* want it, he was sure of it. And Merlin knew he did too. Perhaps if she could focus on something else while they started...

“I have an idea,” he said cautiously. “If it makes it worse, I’ll stop immediately. But I’ve trained your anxiety to recede a little bit when I do something. Can I try it?”

Hermione looked a bit confused, but she nodded. Draco could tell she didn’t want McLaggen to ruin this for her. He sensed she just needed to get past that initial moment of intrusion. Perhaps then she could enjoy it.

He propped himself up slightly, and then he gently placed his hand around her throat.

It should have made things worse. Draco knew that. He was certain that *she* knew it too. But it didn’t make things worse, because he had been training her to accept this precise kind of touch for months now. He started the very night she told him about the fear she felt when McLaggen choked her. He never wanted her to freeze like that again, and soon it became a spot that was just his because it was such a delicate part of her. He could feel every gasp and tick of her pulse. Draco loved touching her there, and she melted for him every time he did it. Soon her body started to ease and her pulse slowed down.

She sank back into the mattress.

“You’re doing so well,” he murmured, now stroking her neck with his thumb. He kept it gentle, but firm, and he sensed her focusing on the feel of the hand around her neck instead of

his cock as he pressed it into her. He was seeking her entrance, and this time she let him touch her with it and then stretch her and then...

"Fuck you feel amazing," he gasped. She was so tight, so snug. He was only halfway in as he felt her body encasing him, but she was no longer panicking.

He was doing it. *Hermione* was doing it. She opened her eyes to meet his, and she finally relaxed completely.

He felt her go limp under his hand, and then he slowly moved it away from her neck, to cup her cheek and brush her lips with his thumb as he pressed further. He was trembling slightly to maintain control. He needed to know she was ready before he tried to move in earnest.

"I'm alright," she said.

"Yes you are," he agreed.

He shifted slightly to open her legs further, and then brushed her clit with his thumb. He clenched his jaw to hold back from pounding her like he wanted to, as he allowed her to adjust first. He felt her relax a little more and then began to move with very shallow thrusts as he pressed into her clit a bit harder.

"Oh!" said *Hermione*, now preoccupied by the sensations he was giving her. Just as her eyes rolled back he pressed her clit again, hard enough to elicit a little spasm. He couldn't wait any longer, and he pushed forward with purpose, and she gasped a little at the feeling of him breaching her fully for the first time.

Draco forced himself to pause for an instant, but soon her hips were moving, and he began to move too with relief.

"Good girl," he breathed. "That was it. It's done, *Hermione*. This will never hurt you again... oh *fuck* you're still so tight..."

Satisfied that she was okay now, he nearly collapsed back on top of her as he began to move with harder and stronger thrusts. She started to arch and shake and...

"Fuck me, I want you to come... I want to feel it so badly, *please*..."

He moved his mouth down to her breasts, not taking the time to tease her, but pulling one nipple into his mouth to coax that release out of her before he could no longer hold back himself.

"Draco, I..." she gasped.

"Do it. Give this to me, *please*..."

Hermione was so close, and then something told him to cant his hips a little bit, and Draco hit her in some new spot inside of her that finally pushed her over. She arched and broke with a cry, and Draco buried his face in her neck at the feeling of the flutters all up and down his cock.

This was utter perfection.

“Oh gods...” he gasped. “*Fuck...* you’re just... *I’m gonna...*”

He was incoherent as his hips shuddered, and he tried to bury himself in her as high as he could go while he jerked and emptied himself inside of her.

He was in a state of wondrous disbelief as he sat back and stared down at her.

“My sweetest girl. Thank you.”

He bent down to give her a deep, languid kiss, and then he slid out. He reached over to grab a small cloth the elves had left on his nightstand. Hermione gave him a questioning look, but he chose to ignore it as he gently swiped between her legs to clean her.

She turned a bit pink. “We can always just vanish it.”

“I’m not vanishing this,” he said firmly.

“Don’t tell me you’re collecting it to *keep* it....”

He said nothing, and Hermione looked at him askance. He just gave her a stern look and placed a finger on her lips to quiet her protests. He quickly thought of something he could say to her so she would let him keep it.

“Hermione. This has your virgin’s blood on it. We only get it once. The protective magic and enhancements I can do for you with this makes it *absolutely* worth saving. That’s especially true since we released it on Samhain in fulfillment of a vow we made during a tying ceremony. It’s incredibly powerful, and didn’t we *just* do a ritual to enhance our mutual power? We obviously didn’t talk about it first, but I assume the ritual was meant to help us take down the Dark Lord, was it not? That’s all well and good, but this...” he waved the soiled rag streaked pink in her face. “This could mean *world domination*.”

All of it was technically true, of course, because he had thought about these things in some of his more optimistic moments before she left. Draco would never *lie* to her.

Hermione rolled her eyes at his dramatic speech. “Are you sure you don’t just want a trophy?”

Dammit, why is she so smart?

“Well there’s that too,” he admitted with some reluctance.

“Eww, that is so *weird*!”

Draco glanced at her and saw her nose wrinkling, but she wasn’t trying to take it away from him. He exhaled with relief and relaxed into a grin.

“I’m creepy and twisty, little dove. You’ve said it yourself, and I gave you proper notice in my letter. It’s far too late to change your mind.”

He said this with relish as he contemplated the fact that she was never getting away from him now.

“Where are you going to keep it then?” she asked, frowning at it as though it wasn’t one of the most incredible things Draco had ever collected.

Well I did promise her I wouldn’t keep secrets any longer.

“It will have the place of honor in my shrine to you.”

She gave him a disapproving look.

“Draco, the shrine is gone. That was one of my conditions.”

“No, actually, the condition was that the shrine in the closet be removed. That did not mean the shrine *disappeared*. It was just relocated so that you don’t find it again. It took me years to build it, my darling. Surely you must know I could never part with it.”

Hermione paused as she absorbed this. “Where is it then?”

“Do you really want to know the answer to that?”

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed again and gave a deep sigh. “No. No, I really don’t.”

“Precisely,” he said, kissing her on the nose and then grabbing her ring from the nightstand and slipping it back on her finger.

Just in case.

“I don’t want you to worry your beautiful, brilliant head about it. There’s no need to have any anxiety whatsoever about my little collection. Nobody but me will ever see it again. Besides, it’s not that different than blokes who collect quidditch memorabilia, which is practically everybody.”

Hermione groaned in slight disbelief, but the ring seemed to be working, because she relaxed a little as she did it. Draco held his breath, hoping she wouldn’t object any further and then...

“Fine. Just don’t let me see it.”

“Never again,” he agreed, grinning with relief as he rolled out of bed to collect a nightgown and fresh knickers the elves had laid out for Hermione on one of the chairs.

“Here you go, it’s bedtime. You need your rest.”

She let him dress her before he pulled on his standard athletic shorts and then climbed into bed with her. He reached into his nightstand for one more thing.

“Take this,” he said. “It’s a contraceptive, even though you don’t really need it. But I know you well enough to know you will worry without it, and I won’t have that.”

“Why don’t I need it?” she asked as she took the bottle and tilted it back to drink.

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her, a bit surprised he was aware of this and she wasn’t.

“Because you’re not fertile right now. Your period is due in three days.”

“Oh my *God* Draco!” she said in mortification. “How on earth do you know that?”

“How do you think?” he retorted, as he pulled her in close and nestled next to her. “I have studied you for years and have made it my business to know everything about you, Hermione. I’m determined not to keep secrets from you anymore. You’d best get used to it.”

She rolled her eyes and sank into him, muttering something about personal boundaries and pathologically observant fiancés.

Draco just smiled with satisfaction. His Hermione, his *fiancée*, was here now. Every dream had finally come true.

Chapter 33: Narcissa

A blonde head was drifting between her legs. Her heart was pounding as grey eyes flicked up, watching her so intently she felt completely bare. Then again, she was bare. She was naked with a man for the first time, and she didn't think anything would relax her except...

Oh...

Oh, that was nice. His tongue was licking her, and his lips were kissing her, and holy mother of God this felt so good she wanted more.

She arched her back and pushed her hips into his face while he groaned in satisfaction. He pulled away and started questioning her about whether she had done this on her own while she was away from him. What a thoroughly ridiculous question, of course she hadn't. She pushed her hips back toward him, and soon he was satisfied because now he was gripping her thighs roughly and twisting his face against her core to achieve some perfect angle, and then he sucked in her clit and...

Wet. There was so much wet, and Hermione cried out in relief and also a little frustration.

She wanted more, but now he was talking to her again.

"I'm going to come inside of you when I fuck you. I'm not pulling out. It will be hot, and I'm going to put my cum so far up inside of you that you'll never get it all out."

Hermione wondered if she should be worried about getting pregnant, but she really wasn't. She could always ask for a potion, and she secretly thought he would be pleased if she told him she was pregnant. He wouldn't leave her if there was an accident. A tiny, wholly irrational part of her was even curious about it. Would he look at her like she was some kind of goddess? Would he wrap her in silk and pamper her for nine months? It was just an idle curiosity, truly. She had no interest in children any time soon. Still, there was a part of her that always wanted to please him when they were like this, even when he hurt her or made her angry. She craved his praise and filthy words. She shouldn't want him to come inside of her, but she did. She really really did. Maybe it would make her feel complete just like he promised.

Surely she wouldn't get pregnant from just one time.

She nodded her acceptance, and he looked triumphant. She knew she had just made him happy. And because he was so happy, now he was being gentle and caring as he pulled her up on the bed and carefully placed several pillows behind her head just so. Her virginity was about to be sacrificed for their vow, and she knew Draco was keenly aware of it. He was taking his time to make sure everything was exactly right for such a monumental event in their lives. When he pulled back to stare down at her she wondered if it was everything he had imagined. She certainly hoped it was. She was naked, wearing only a necklace, her

knives, and a ribbon. They were all things he had given to her. Every part of her was about to be his: her bravery, her sweetness, her innocence, even her magic. She could tell he was thinking about it and relishing it.

"I love you, Hermione."

"I love you too."

Then he was instructing her to vanish his clothing, and now his naked skin was on top of hers. He was so hot he burned, and Hermione found herself leaning into his warmth. She loved the size of him, the feel of him. Skin on skin was sensual in a way she had never experienced before. Everything was perfect until...

She froze, feeling his hardness in between her legs. It made her breathless, but not in a good way. She was gasping for air, she needed help, she needed...

"Shhh.... I've trained your anxiety to recede a little bit when I do something. Can I try it?"

Of course he could try it. He could try anything if it meant she could finally do this with him. She might be terrified in that moment, but Draco always took her fear away from her. It might have been the thing about him that she loved the most.

A large, firm hand closed around her throat, and Hermione's pulse jumped for a split second, before settling.

There. There it was. That was the touch she knew, and now she could focus on his fingers tracing her neck and the heat from his body enveloping her, and the softness of the pillows he had tucked reverantly behind her curls. That hand anchored her, guided her. If it had been anybody else it would have been debilitating, but this was Draco so it gave her peace. He might be a murderer, but he murdered for her, and that made the hand on her throat feel safe instead of scary. Her body relaxed, and before she knew it he was gasping.

"Fuck you feel amazing," he said. It was only now that she realized he had penetrated her, and it didn't hurt. It didn't hurt at all, even though he was moving a little. Hermione's entire body relaxed ever so slightly as his hand crept down between them and began to circle her clit again.

Oh that was terribly distracting and lovely and now she was wriggling to feel more... For some reason Draco's teeth were clenching, but she couldn't pay attention to that now. He was stretching her a bit more, but her attention was on the wonderful things he was doing between her legs. He flicked her clit hard, and there was that familiar jolt of electricity and then...

"Oh!"

She flinched. She didn't realize he hadn't made it the whole way earlier, but now he certainly had. That sharp pain was surprising and unpleasant, but now it was settling into a dull and oddly satisfying ache.

“Good girl,” he breathed. “That was it. It’s done, Hermione. This will never hurt you again... oh fuck you’re still so tight...”

This was different. How could she have thought he was all the way in before? He hadn't been then, but now he was, and he was starting to lose his self control. She sensed him teetering, and it was building to something even bigger for her than when he touched her with his hands or tongue.

“Fuck me, I want you to come... I want to feel it so badly, please...”

He was begging her, and that did something to her. It made her feel powerful to know that she had him at her mercy like this. She might be the one on the bottom. He might be the one leading it. But his desire for her never failed to make her feel wanted, needed.

She wanted that moment they were both chasing for herself, but she wanted it for him too.

Without further ado he leaned down, and now he was sucking her nipples and oh goodness that felt wonderful. It was so much sensation, so much build-up.

“Draco, I...” she gasped.

“Do it. Give this to me, please....”

She was clenching now, so very close to that moment, and then he shifted slightly and hit some part of her deeper, harder than he had ever reached with his hands, and now she was coming and so was he. It was hot and went on and on and on and...

Hermione's eyes fluttered open to find her nightgown hitched over her hips, her knickers gone, and Draco's hand closing over one breast while his cock was rubbing on her leg. He had just started to spurt hot all over her thigh.

"Draco?" she asked in confusion.

"Fuck," he hissed, and then to her surprise the hand that was on her breast released her and swiped at his spunk to push it inside of her.

"Oh!" she cried out, as she instinctively arched back toward him.

"Take it," he demanded as he swiped more to push it inside of her a second time. "Take all of it. I'm never wasting it again. I'll come on you or in you for the rest of my life. It's never going anywhere else, not ever again."

Hermione groaned, and then he did too, as he leaned down and began to suck her neck.

"What's gotten into you?" she breathed.

"You," he said simply. "I woke up and discovered you were having a very nice dream without me. I couldn't help but join you."

"Join me?"

"Mmmm. Hopefully I didn't give you a headache this time."

She furrowed her brow in confusion and then finally turned back to look at him.

"You did leilimency on me?"

"I just wanted to see what you were dreaming about that was making you moan like that. And my darling, it was a *fantastic* dream. I got to see our first time together from your perspective. And I even learned something very, *very* interesting."

"What's that?" she groaned, because now his fingers were teasing her clit and rubbing his sticky remnants into it as well.

"You're not as worried about potential *consequences* from this sort of thing as I thought you would be. So with that said..."

He collected some that had leaked out and pushed it inside of her for a third time.

"*Draco*," she groaned.

"You want it inside of you, my darling. You can't deny it, I just saw every dirty thought in your head. You're desperate to hold it inside of you, and I am more than happy to oblige."

"You're ridiculous," she tried to say, but the effect was slightly ruined as she began to moan.

"There she is," he murmured. "Come for me one more time, little dove. Then I'm going to lick you clean."

It was too much. His words, his hands, the thing he kept doing to her...

She broke again, and then before she knew it he was making good on his promise as his head dipped between her legs, and he began to eat her out with gratuitous use of his tongue.

"Isn't that weird?" she breathed, but her eyes were rolling back at the feeling. He was licking her with lazy strokes. It wasn't enough to make her lose control yet again, but it did feel awfully good, and she wiggled her hips in appreciation.

Draco didn't even lift his head. "You'll eat it someday too. It probably has protein in it. We could make it part of our regular breakfast if you wanted."

Hermione was torn between humor and dismay at the things he was saying to her, and she just gave a weak groan as Draco continued his ministrations until he declared her to be all cleaned up.

When he finally lifted himself to meet her lips, she sank into the kiss. It was far lazier than anything they had done last night, but it was truly lovely.

At long last he pulled back and propped his head in his hand, staring down at her with a small smile on his face.

"I should probably take another potion," she said wryly. "They only last a few hours."

"You can call Posy or Poppy for one whenever you wish," he said blithely. "We are well-stocked."

"You don't have another in your nightstand?"

He smirked. "I wasn't expecting you to be up for another round this morning."

"In my defense, I had very little to do with it. You're the one who decided to take care of things against my leg while I was asleep and then push it back inside of me."

A satisfied smile flashed on his face briefly before he settled in and started twirling her curls around his fingers. "I've wanked next to you in bed more times than I can count. You just caught me this time. You know you liked it."

Hermione's eyebrows flew up at this news, but she supposed it wasn't *that* surprising. This was Draco, after all.

"Mmm," she said noncommittally as she settled in too. She would call Posy for a potion in a few minutes. Draco had been right the night before that her period was due soon, so it wasn't urgent.

They were silent for a long while as Draco's eyes traced her face and hair, noting the ribbon once more. He couldn't seem to look away, and Hermione found herself growing a little shy under his gaze.

"You're always looking at me," she said quietly.

"Always," he agreed seriously before running his hand under her nightgown so he was gripping her arse and pulling her in once more. "Merlin, I missed you," he whispered.

Hermione curled into him, feeling fully relaxed for the first time in weeks. It was a bit different by the light of day, and they still had not really *talked* to each other besides the things they said in the middle of their coupling the previous night. But Hermione found she had no words for this. Her wizard – dark and twisted though he was – was hers. She had done it. They were tied. She had barely had time to even *think* about what she was doing, but now that it was over she found she had no regrets. Their relationship wasn't perfect, and it probably never would be. But Nita's advice from all those months ago floated through her brain.

Reclaim that control. Take it for yourself and know that only you can relinquish it. You are a beautiful, brilliant young woman. That makes you far more powerful than any man.

Nita had been talking about sex, but Hermione realized it applied to the rest of their relationship too. Draco was controlling, violent toward others, and intently observant. If she ever left again he would not stop until he brought her home. He had promised it, and she

believed him. But that didn't mean he had all the power. She was one of just a few people who could make him feel guilt. She could withhold her favor, and he would crumble. His obsession meant he needed her, *craved* her, and she finally understood just how much leverage that gave her. It meant she could stop his revenge if she wanted to. She could demand that he keep no more secrets from her.

That was why she had come back. It wasn't just that she loved him, it was that she finally recognized how they fit together.

"I really missed you too," she said. "Grimmauld was lonely."

"You met Columba? And I suppose Aquila was talking to you, since she wasn't talking to me?"

"Yes, but it's not the same."

"No," he agreed.

"I do love the house," she said, looking back up at him. "I love what you did to it. I never liked it while it was Sirius's or Harry's."

He looked pleased. "I'm glad. I like taking care of you."

A smile crossed her face. "Yes, I know you do."

He leaned down and gave her a languid kiss before pulling back and tugging on the marital ribbon she was still wearing.

"Yesterday was everything to me," he murmured, staring at it. "I've been dreaming about it for ages. And even when things were going well between us, I never really believed..."

She smiled again. "Well I can't imagine your dreams went exactly like *that*."

He gave her a wolfish grin. "No, I never imagined a one-sided duel for my hand in front of the Dark Lord. But I enjoyed every moment of that part. You were so perfect and fierce. I have never seen anything like it."

Hermione flushed at the praise.

"I might have choreographed it," she confessed.

He gave a shout of laughter. "I should have known. Well it was utterly brilliant, and then being willing to do that tie with me... do you feel any stronger?"

Hermione furrowed her brow as she felt it, and *yes*. There was that well of Draco's power. When she focused on it she could find it. Something about it reminded her of mercury – it was slippery and smooth and dangerous. She instinctively tugged on it a little, and he gasped.

"Too much?" she asked curiously.

He just shook his head no, but his eyes were getting dark. “It’s... intimate.”

Hermione released it back to him and said, “Try it on me, then.”

He seemed to focus, and then Hermione felt something seem to wrap around inside of her and pull. It was like fingers snaking around her heart, but it didn’t hurt. It felt familiar, *right*, and she found herself reaching toward him as he did it. He released it a moment later, eyes huge.

“Bloody hell, your magic,” he whispered.

“What about it?” asked Hermione.

“It’s like... it reminds me of *felix felicis*. It’s light, bubbly, golden, *powerful*. You are *so* powerful, sweet girl.”

She raised an eyebrow. “It could be useful for taking him out.”

He nodded. “It will be. And now that you’re back, we’ll all go to Nott Castle for the next hunt so you can learn the castle and terrain. That’s where we’ll have to do it.”

“You’re with me then?” she asked. “You’re going to help me do it? Even though you’re not at risk of being tied to Astoria any longer?”

He sighed, but nodded. “Yes. I don’t want you there, but... yes.”

“Why?” she asked. She knew that he and the others were working to subvert Voldemort, but they had never really talked about this.

“It’s the world we both want,” he said simply. “And it’s the only way for me to be with Hermione Granger in public. You know how I feel about that now.”

Hermione felt a rush of warm pleasure at this and leaned forward to kiss him again.

“It won’t be easy,” she warned, as she pulled back.

He snorted. “You don’t have to tell me that. I’ve spent a lot of time with him.”

“But...” she prompted.

“But, he can be fooled. He can be manipulated. Both of us have done it now. The mistake Potter made was in failing to plan. He exposed you all at Gringotts, and then the Dark Lord found him at Hogwarts. His numbers were superior, and the Order could do nothing but react. We’ll bide our time a little longer, and this time when the Order comes out from hiding it will be on *our* terms and not his.”

“And you think we can do it?”

“I think if we put our minds to it, we can do anything.”

Hermione and Draco's lazy morning was interrupted a half hour later by Posy, who came into Draco's room with a *POP!* and a squeak when she saw the state of them together. Her long fingers flew to her face to cover her eyes.

"Pardon me, Mistress, but the Dark Lord is requesting breakfast with you and Master Draco!"

Hermione blinked. "He's... what?"

"He is staying last night, Mistress," she said. "And he is asking to see you both for breakfast."

Hermione looked at Draco nervously who was frowning a little. "It will be alright. I've dined with him any number of times. Let's get you back into your disguise. Wear something long-sleeved so you can keep your wand on you too, just in case."

Hermione swallowed hard, but nodded, and followed Posy into her room to dress. Twenty minutes later she was adorned in traditional robes and transfigured as Columba. Her pendant, knives, and wand were fastened to her, and she slipped on her new ring for good measure.

Instantly, she relaxed.

"Is this why you gave it to me?" she asked Draco, as he grabbed her hand to lead her through the wards in the wing.

"Yes," he said. "I think it's good to allow yourself to feel your fear when you are in a safe place. It helps you work through it and process it. And you know I will always take it from you whenever you give it to me. But around other Death Eaters or the Dark Lord..."

"I have to stay calm, no matter what."

"That's right. The bond with Theo works well, but it distracts you both whenever one of you siphons from the other."

She twirled the ring on her finger just a little and gripped his hand harder. "Thank you. Last night I thought you gave it to me so I would be more willing to accept you.... and shag you... at least until you took it off."

He stopped in the middle of the corridor and tilted her chin up.

"I knew you accepted me in some way the moment you stepped into that aisle, Hermione. You would have been a fool to think I was changed, and you're no fool."

Hermione felt that familiar shudder go through her.

“No,” she said. “I’m no fool. I knew you wouldn’t be different.”

“I don’t plan to keep secrets from you any longer,” he clarified. “I suppose that *will* be a little different. But you know the darkest parts of me now, and those won’t change. I have nothing left to hide from you. I didn’t have any ulterior motive by giving this to you. I just wanted to help you manage your anxiety when it’s not safe to do it openly. You should wear that ring whenever you’re in the presence of Death Eaters who aren’t me, Theo, or Blaise.”

Hermione nodded in agreement with this. He was right, of course. After her performance the night before, her persona as Columba required confidence. She could not allow fear to take over.

He led her through the corridors and down the stairs. “Now that we are tied I suppose I can let you out to explore the rest of the Manor,” he commented. “Though it’s best to be disguised whenever you are out of our wing.”

Hermione perked up at this. “I would love that.”

Draco smiled a little and tugged her hand harder. “It can be arranged. Not today, though. We need to see what he wants, and then I know you’re eager to see your friends.”

Hermione squeezed his hand back to let him know she was pleased. Before long they were turning the corner to a large gallery, and Draco was pushing open doors to an enormous dining room. Voldemort was at the head of the table. Narcissa, Bellatrix, Blaise, Ginny, and Theo were also there. She took a deep breath and followed Draco, who moved to sit at Voldemort’s right side. Hermione sat next to him.

“Draco,” said Voldemort. “And Columba. I’m pleased you could join us.”

Hermione met Ginny’s eyes across the table, and she knew they were thinking exactly the same thing.

We’re having breakfast with Voldemort. How did we find ourselves here?

“Of course, my Lord,” said Draco smoothly. “I’m most pleased you decided to stay the night.”

Voldemort nodded and waited until the elves had served everyone before looking between Draco and Blaise thoughtfully. “It strikes me that both of you have found superior witches with your boons. Both members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Both reportedly powerful. Columba, in particular, had impressive magic that was undiscovered until very recently.”

Hermione and Ginny both stayed silent. Draco affected a sincere look, as did Blaise. Voldemort then turned to Theo.

“You, Theodore, have a pureblood boon too, do you not?”

“I do, my Lord,” said Theo deferentially.

“And have you evaluated her magic?”

“I have, my Lord. She is exceptional, especially her mind magic.”

Voldemort cocked his head and studied Theo. “Explain.”

Theo shrugged. “She’s a natural occlumens, my Lord. I’m no legilimens, but Draco has searched her for me and says he has never seen a mind like hers.”

“It’s true, my Lord,” said Draco, jumping in. “Luna Lovegood’s mind is a fascinating place. I’d wager it would take a skilled legilimens years to learn her organization and extract anything meaningful from her. She occludes without intent, it is simply the natural state of her. Even Columba’s occlumency can be cracked. I’ve never been able to do it very well, but I know you saw enough of her secrets last night to know she spoke the truth. Columba uses standard techniques though, always visualizing that wretched cauldron bottom. Her occlumency is strong, but it’s clearly a learned skill, as is mine and most others who practice it. That is not the case for Miss Lovegood.”

Voldemort sat back and seemed to contemplate this. “I would like to evaluate her mind magic myself,” he said. “If what you say is true then it is a rare gift indeed. I was speaking with Bellatrix about this last night, and she raised an excellent point that if Columba’s extraordinary magic went unnoticed due to her position as a boon, what if others have too? And now you tell me that there is at least one more boon who is magically gifted. I confess that it... disturbs me.”

A slight frisson of fear went through Hermione at this, before her ring rid her of the strongest emotions. Her mind could still think, though, even if she was calm while she did it. Would he see them as threats? Would he try to quash their magic? She glanced at Draco, and to her surprise he seemed to have a knowing gleam in his eye. She relaxed infinitesimally.

“Yes,” agreed Draco. “I’m afraid there was so much to do right after the Battle of Hogwarts that there was no time to sufficiently evaluate the boons before they were allotted. There is no question that all three of us have been lucky to acquire boons who were magically powerful. In my case, Columba is *far* more powerful than the witch I was planning to tie with.”

Voldemort inclined his head. “Yes. The Greengrass girl was a severe disappointment. Theodore is meant to tie with the sister, is he not?”

“I am, my Lord,” said Theo.

Voldemort frowned. “She could be evaluated I suppose, but I do not think she will be sufficiently powerful for your line. The Notts are an old family, and as you are the only one left we must ensure a powerful heir. It may be better for you to tie with your boon, just as Draco and Blaise have done.”

Theo inclined his head, and Hermione thought she caught the ghost of a smile on his face. “If that is what you wish, my Lord.”

Voldemort nodded, his red eyes narrowed in thought. “Yes, I will confirm her mind magic is as you say, but if so then that is what I wish. A talent like that should be passed down

through a noble line. I wish to raise the most loyal and magical families of England. You know that has always been my desire. You are the future. Your bloodlines must be filled with extraordinary magic to position yourselves at the helm of my vision. I fear that some families have feigned loyalty to hide their inadequacies and weak blood from me. I wish that all boons be evaluated for their power, and those who are worthy should have their family histories examined as well. We can only use the purebloods for family lines like your own, of course, but there are loyal servants who are not as pure who may be able to settle with a half-blood, if that witch is sufficiently powerful herself.”

Hermione’s heart started to pound, and she reached out to Theo.

Offer to let us girls evaluate them. Tell him the boons will trust us.

“You have the right of it, my Lord,” said Theo immediately. “And I believe that Columba, Ginny, and Luna could be put to good use for this task. They have been boons themselves, though they will be elevated to wives at some point. Still, the other boons are likely to trust them enough to show their true abilities. We may find yet more hidden gems among their ranks.”

“I agree,” added Blaise quickly. “Some of the boons have been traded so often I doubt their masters even realize what treasures they possess. They are not likely to perform their best if it’s a wizard who evaluates them.”

Voldemort inclined his head. “Very well. It will be arranged.”

“And if any boons are found to be magically superior?” asked Narcissa for the first time. She looked like she had swallowed a lemon. “The other wives and daughters may feel threatened, my Lord. They already find the boons’ existence distasteful.”

Voldemort turned a harsh stare at her. “If they are threatened it is only because *they* are no better than the Greengrasses – trying to pass off a squib as a witch. Any boons who are tied to one of my followers will not be replaced until we find more traitors who are weak and can fill those spots. We will not be releasing them all, you know. And those boons who are not talented will remain as they are, and they can be reallocated among my most loyal servants. Anyone who does not have a boon who wishes for one can present challenges for them as they have been doing. In fact, having fewer boons may be preferable because it will give my men something to aspire to.”

Narcissa fell silent and straightened up. “Of course, my Lord,” she said quietly.

“Good,” said Voldemort coldly. “Then it will be arranged. Miss Black, Miss Weasley, and Miss Lovegood will evaluate them after I have had a chance to examine Miss Lovegood’s mind magic myself.”

There were murmurings of agreement to this plan, and breakfast soon wrapped up with Theo leaving to fetch Luna.

Draco and Hermione rose to hurry out, but they were stopped by Narcissa’s voice in the gallery.

“Draco,” she said sharply.

Hermione and Draco turned to find Narcissa staring at them, a mixture of disappointment, fear, and anger on her face. “Come with me,” she said. “We have family business to discuss.”

Hermione slipped her hand into Draco’s and squeezed. He hadn’t yet asked how she knew about Astoria, having been too wrapped up in everything else. But Hermione had a feeling this conversation would finally put all of their cards on the table.

They followed Narcissa to a small parlor that Hermione did not recognize. She noticed there were no portraits, and when they walked in Narcissa waved her wand to seal it and silence it. Then she turned to them both.

“I need a Vow that you will not have children,” she said bluntly.

Draco blinked in surprise, but Hermione just pursed her lips.

“Mother,” he said.

“No, Draco, I must insist. This is... this is too dangerous,” she said, gesturing between them. “I know you care for the girl, and I do too. She is Theo’s sister and the witch who has fascinated you for years. I do not wish any harm to befall her, truly. But I will not have a choice if you insist upon reproducing with her!”

Draco’s magic went cold, and Hermione stiffened.

“And why is that?” he asked quietly in a dangerous voice.

“Because your children will be even more mad and dangerous than you are!” she exclaimed. She was starting to shout. “I love you Draco! And I would not wish to deprive you of the witch you care about! But *surely* you must understand just how dangerous this is! And if you won’t Vow it, then I will take matters into my own hands! I’m aware that she is a Black now, but I don’t care about the consequences!”

She looked slightly deranged, and Draco made a move to step in front of Hermione, but she put a hand on his arm.

“Wait,” she said calmly. “Let me say something please.”

He was tense, much like that night they confronted Snape. But Hermione knew she needed to step in before either one of them did or said something they couldn’t take back. Narcissa was being driven by her own fears and paranoia, Hermione understood that now. She didn’t hate *Hermione*. It was a larger thing, a more insidious thing, that made her afraid. It wasn’t entirely her fault.

Hermione found herself pitying the woman.

“Narcissa,” she said, stepping forward as she slipped the ring off of her finger. “Please put this on for a moment so we can discuss this rationally.”

Narcissa frowned at the ring Hermione was holding out. She heard Draco inhale behind her.

“Please,” she added. “I know what it is like to be afraid. I understand you were under the thumb of a man who hurt you for years. You have *every right* to fear the violence Draco has exhibited toward others, but right now you are letting that fear of Lucius taint the way you see your son. This ring will help. I have... I have a lot of anxiety of my own. Some of it is rational, some of it is not. This ring helps calm my mind so I am not a victim of my own fear. That is all.”

She glanced back at Draco, and saw that he looked dumbfounded, as though he had never realized that something as simple as a piece of enchanted jewelry could help her. He then looked almost sad as he stared at Narcissa and nodded in agreement that she should take the ring.

“That ring is Hermione’s, but it’s from a set, Mother,” he said. “The rest of the pieces are in our vault at Gringotts. I’m sure Father never let you near them because he wanted you to be afraid. If the ring helps you, I can collect something else from the set that is just yours. She’s right though... you should put it on right now so we can discuss this rationally.”

Narcissa was still looking at them suspiciously, but eventually she plucked the ring from Hermione and slipped it on. A moment later her expression cleared, and she almost slumped with a soft, “*Oh.*”

Hermione exchanged a glance at Draco, who nodded gratefully.

“There,” said Hermione, now feeling her *own* nerves prickle. “Now we can talk about this without flinging hexes toward one another. And I have quite a lot to say about it. The first thing I’d like to say is that I know who Draco is. I know that his mind is... not always right. You’re correct that he’s obsessed with me, and some would claim it is madness. But the thing you must understand is that I’m not only the reason for his madness. I’m also his cure.”

She turned toward Draco and placed her hand on his cheek. He sighed into it, and closed his eyes for a moment.

“See?” she said, looking back at Narcissa, who was now studying them intently. “I am both. He says I make him feel, but I know I’m not the only one who can do that. He cares for you and Theo and Blaise and Nita. He has even come to care for Ginny and Luna in recent months. He is not violent toward me the way Lucius was toward you – quite the opposite in fact. His worst tendencies come out when there is something or someone trying to keep us apart. But when we are together, he feels and he cares, and he can be the best version of himself.”

Narcissa’s eyes were filling with tears as Hermione kissed him, and Draco nuzzled his face into the top of her head.

“We need to be together to keep him from spiraling, just like you once told me,” she said simply. “And efforts to keep us apart will not work, as I proved last night. As for children, I don’t foresee that happening any time soon, but if we ever do then I know to be wary of obsessive tendencies or violent behaviors. But the Black madness is not always a bad thing,

you know. Columba Black Thackery says she was mad because she continued to forgive her family for treating her poorly. How is forgiveness and kindness in the face of hostility a bad thing?"

Narcissa was looking torn, but Hermione sensed her wavering.

"I will not give a Vow to you, but you will give a Vow to me," continued Hermione. Privately she couldn't believe she was about to do this yet *again*, but she knew it was the best way forward.

Narcissa's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"I said you will give a Vow to me," said Hermione in the gentlest voice she could manage. "You will Vow not to interfere in our ability to have children, nor will you harm either one of us or any children we may have. You will also Vow not to exact revenge on our friends."

"And why would I do that?" she demanded.

"Because you owe me a life debt, and this is how you're going to repay it."

Narcissa went still, and her face paled.

"What's this?" asked Draco, and Hermione turned to find him frowning.

Hermione sighed. "Narcissa was the one who cast the spell on Astoria that caused her to lose her magic. She thought the Black madness would be diluted if you reproduced with a squib instead of a powerful witch. The spell was buried in the Black family grimoire. She owes me a life debt because I did not out her to You-Know-Who last night, and I allowed Astoria to take the fall instead."

Draco's eyes widened, and he turned to look at Narcissa for confirmation. The grim look on her face was all he needed.

"You did that because you think I'm *that mad*?" he demanded.

Hermione held up a hand to stop him. "Hush, Draco. It's done, and nobody you care about has been harmed by it. Narcissa has been hurt over and over again, and it is no wonder she feared your violence. But the fact of the matter is she does owe me a life debt, and this is how I wish to discharge it. And then as soon as you are able, I want you to find the rest of the jewelry from this set and give her a piece from it to wear. That sort of fear, Draco... it's debilitating, as you very well know."

Draco swallowed hard, but nodded.

"Are you in agreement?" asked Hermione, now turning to Narcissa.

She looked upset, but no longer hysterical. She was twirling the ring around her finger. "If Draco agrees to give me another piece from the vault that has these... calming effects... then yes. I do not think you leave me any choice."

“I’ll do it as soon as you give Hermione her Vow,” said Draco firmly.

“Good,” said Hermione. “Draco, please be our binder.”

She walked forward toward Narcissa and clasped her hand. “I’ll take care of him and any children we have,” she whispered. “I promise.”

Narcissa looked at her, and in that instant her facade fell, and Hermione saw the years of pain, fear and worry as she watched Draco turn into some version of his father and aunt. It broke her heart.

“Thank you,” said Narcissa, as a single tear fell.

Draco placed his wand on their joined hands, and Hermione began.

“Do you, Narcissa Black Malfoy, agree that you shall never seek to harm, and shall never ask any other person or magical being to harm, the following people: Hermione Jean Granger, Columba Aquila Black, Amalie Beumont, David Michael Granger, Helen Jean Granger, Wendell Damien Wilkins, Monica Renee Wilkins, William Patrick Granger, William Theodore Granger, Andromeda Black Tonks, Theodore Remus Lupin, any current or future member of House Malfoy, any current or future member of House Nott, any current or future member of House Weasley, any current or future member of House Zabini, any current or future member of House Lovegood, any current or future member of the Order of the Phoenix, or any woman who is now or becomes in the future a boon for the Dark Lord or his Death Eaters?”

Narcissa stared at her in amazement, but Hermione looked at her sternly. It was the list of every single person she or Draco had any affection for – all of their names, all of their aliases, all of their family members. Narcissa was not beyond help, Hermione was sure of it. But if Narcissa’s mind deteriorated any further, Hermione wanted every person they cared about to be protected. She glanced at Draco and saw him giving her a shrewd look, but he did not try to stop it.

“I do,” said Narcissa.

“And do you, Narcissa Black Malfoy, agree that you will never seek to separate Hermione Jean Granger, also known as Columba Aquila Black, from her intended Draco Lucius Malfoy, nor will you seek to separate him from her?”

Narcissa slumped a little more.

“I do,” she said.

“And do you, Narcissa Black Malfoy, agree that you will never seek to prevent Hermione Jean Granger, also known as Columba Aquila Black, however she is known in the future, from becoming pregnant or bearing children, nor will you seek to prevent Draco Lucius Malfoy from siring children?”

Draco's magic seemed to thicken at this, and Hermione could practically feel his eyes boring into her, but she ignored him, her entire attention on Narcissa.

"I do," she said, gritting her teeth.

"And finally, do you, Narcissa Black Malfoy, agree that you will not seek to influence or separate any child of Hermione Jean Granger or Columba Aquila Black, however she is known in the future, from her or from Draco Lucius Malfoy?"

"I do," said Narcissa, looking thoroughly defeated.

"Then I, Hermione Jean Granger, also known as Columba Aquila Black, do hereby release you from the life debt that you owe me. So may it be."

The gold threads sunk into their hands, and Hermione released her.

"It will be alright, Narcissa," she said. "Truly."

"I sincerely hope so, Miss Granger," she said quietly as she pulled out her wand and waved it to release the locking and silencing charms on the room. She walked out without another word.

"Hermione," came Draco's voice. He sounded surprisingly emotional.

She turned to him and fell into his arms. "I know, Draco. But you must forgive her. She has been hurt so much."

He nodded into the top of her head and sighed deeply. "Yes. I was... not as sensitive to it as I ought to have been. I'm sorry."

Hermione shook her head. "Don't be sorry. Just help her. Take me back to our wing, and then go to Gringotts for her. I think... I think she might need that magic even more than I do. She never had anybody to help her with it, and she lived with it far longer than I did."

Draco pulled back a little and tilted her chin up. "You're my sweetest girl, you know that," he murmured, leaning down to give her a light kiss. "And brilliant too. I think you closed every single loophole she could possibly exploit."

Hermione smiled a little at this. "I was always known for being thorough at Hogwarts. Snape used to mark me down for it."

Draco snorted in amusement as he grabbed her hand and started pulling her out of the parlor.

"Personally, I'm grateful for it. I don't wish to send Mother away."

"And now you won't have to," said Hermione simply. "But help her, Draco. Help her in the way that only you can."

Draco returned within a few hours with Hermione's ring and reported that he had given his mother a necklace that did the same thing. She seemed more at peace while wearing it, and Hermione was grateful for it. With the man who had hurt her so much dead and her son under better control around Hermione, perhaps the necklace would finally give her the mental clarity she needed to begin healing. Hermione promised herself that she would continue to check in with Narcissa.

The afternoon was spent catching up with her friends, after Luna returned from her examination with Voldemort.

"He said my mind is like a prism," she commented. "He couldn't find a thing. He did give me a terrible headache though, while he tried."

Luna was reclined on Hermione's chaise lounge with her eyes closed while the other two girls chatted with her.

"Read them out loud to me," said Luna. "And call Theo for another pain potion, will you, Hermione? My head feels like it's being split open."

Hermione did so, and after Theo brought the pain potion by and kissed both Luna and Hermione on the forehead, Ginny and Hermione took turns reading the paper.

"The reporters are properly terrified of you," commented Ginny, after they made it through the very long article about the night before.

"Yes, Hermione, that might have been the best press you've ever received" agreed Luna. "You-Know-Who is so thrilled he's going to let me tie with Theo. Daphne Greengrass is officially out of the picture."

It was excellent news indeed, and it wasn't something Hermione had even taken very much time to consider when planning her own tie with Draco. But it was certainly a nice byproduct of casting the entire Greengrass family into doubt.

"This boon examination, though... what should we do about it?" asked Ginny. "Do you really think we can get some of them out this way?"

"We can certainly try," said Hermione, "and it gave me an idea..."

Hermione explained the outlines of a plan at a very high level.

"It's dangerous," warned Ginny, "but I'll admit you might be onto something."

Voldemort, now eager to get the examination underway, made it clear that he would be ordering all Death Eaters to Nott Castle for revelry and examination of their boons in the near future. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna would not have to be smuggled in, at least not at the beginning.

“I still want to bring you out for one of the hunts, though,” said Draco seriously a few days later. “The boons are only supposed to be there for the examination day, but the Death Eaters will be there the entire weekend.”

“What will happen to the boons we say are magically superior?”

“I’ve offered to house them temporarily at Malfoy Manor while their fates are being determined. We have the space. The Dark Lord has agreed to release them to the Manor as soon as the examination is concluded. He’s aware that it may not be a popular move at first.”

It was, Hermione thought, an enormous break, and she was so pleased by it that she didn’t even mind Draco’s insistence that she needed to practice hunting with him in the days leading up to their trip.

“I’m not going to kill anything today,” she insisted, as he began to transfigure her into Columba. “But you can teach me the signals I’m supposed to be following so I can play along.”

Soon they were heading down to some fields near the Manor, on the outskirts of the property. Hermione had flown over it before, but she had never stopped to take a close look. Draco was looking far too handsome in a dragon leather vest and gauntlet – it was thick enough that her claws wouldn’t pierce him.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” he said. “You start to fly when I launch you, and after you make a kill you bring it back to me for a treat.”

“My treat had better be cooked,” was all she said as she transformed into Aquila and hopped to Draco’s outstretched arm.

“Merlin, you’re heavy,” he muttered, and she bent down and nipped at his unprotected arm in offense.

“Ouch! Shit, fine, you’re light as a feather. Now go find a stick or something and bring it back.”

He gave his arm a bit of a toss, and Hermione spread her wings, soaring high in the air. In the distance she could see Blaise in a riding paddock, astride a chestnut Arabian that was jumping fences. She was clearing them easily — jumping far higher than was necessary — and the horse kept shaking her head as she worried the bit in her mouth. Hermione chuckled to herself, imagining what Ginny would have to say about wearing a saddle and bridle.

She circled the kennel and saw Theo introducing a beautiful dog to the others. Hermione knew it was Luna. They seemed cautious, but it was going rather well.

Then Hermione looked down and spotted a stick she could retrieve. She tucked in her wings and dropped like a rock. In the distance she could hear Draco whooping at her speed, and she internally grinned to herself. She would never enjoy flying as a human, but this was *fun*.

She spread her enormous wings at the last moment to flip upright, and her talons closed around the stick. A few great flaps later, and she dropped the stick in front of Draco before landing on his outstretched arm. He had a piece of raw meat in his glove, and she turned her beak up at it. He just chuckled and tossed it aside.

“Fine, I’ll make sure it’s cooked when it’s time to do this for real. That was brilliant though. You’re going to be faster than anything else out there. Let’s go again.”

Twice more he sent her to the sky, and they practiced his commands and summons. Hermione realized he was right that it *was* quite simple, since she could make Aquila follow his orders. Ginny, and to a lesser extent Luna, had much more difficult tasks.

When she finally turned back into Hermione, Draco conjured a blanket and pulled her down onto the field with him.

“I think the other raptors will stay away from you,” he said. “They’re all fairly antisocial, and you’ll be the largest by far. I know you’ll do great.”

“Other than the killing part,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“You can though, right?” he asked with some concern.

Hermione sighed and nodded. “Yes. I still don’t like blood, but... well, I killed a lot of conjured birds in the Grimmauld Place cellar to practice that routine for You-Know-Who. It will be easier shielded behind Aquila’s instincts. She saw a couple rabbits up in the sky and wanted to go for them. I had to stop her.”

Draco nodded and pulled her in. “Three kills, sweet girl, and I’ll take Arthur off my list.”

“You should take him off anyway,” she admonished. “I did come back for you.”

“You did, that’s true, but I’m still me, remember? And we had a bargain.”

“Fine,” she said, with an eye roll. “Three kills for Arthur. But only because I love you.”

He gave her a pleased grin. “I love you too, fierce girl. Just give me three, and he’s all yours.”

Chapter 34: Hunt

Chapter Notes

TW: Depiction of animal abuse and animal on animal death. Skip the section between the *** if you don't wish to read.

Nott Castle, Hermione soon learned, was located in Northumberland and was large, drafty, and cold. It did not contain the colorful paintings and tapestries of Hogwarts, nor the charming sense of magic that used to fill its halls. There was something about it that reminded Hermione of decay and neglect. It could have been an extraordinary place, but it was in desperate need of an infusion of galleons and of *light*. The exterior reminded Hermione a bit of its neighbor Alnwick Castle, which she had visited once as a child. It had the traditional battlements and towers and outer stone walls that were so reminiscent of those castles that featured heavily in muggle fairy tales. But the inside had none of the rich woodwork or moldings or wall coverings and art of Alnwick. It had been stripped bare, leaving behind stone upon stone, with just a few threadbare rugs thrown about for warmth.

The best thing Hermione could say about it was that the magical portraiture was severely lacking too. There was at least one portrait in most rooms, but not in all – and much to Hermione's relief, Draco, Theo, and Blaise had all secured bedrooms without one. There was quite a large advantage to being so trusted by Voldemort, not to mention being the former owner of the monstrosity that was Nott Castle. Draco told her that their rooms were smaller than those commanded by other members of Voldemort's inner circle, but they were entirely private. Hermione didn't find them all that small, and Draco's was slightly larger than the other two, being on the end of one corridor. It was still large enough that it felt drafty.

Decrepit stonework aside, Hermione had to admit that the larger estate was spectacular. There was a cleared field that Draco said was used for falconry and other recreation, but the larger property stretched into a forested area and abutted the border with Scotland. It was wooded and remote, and Hermione could both understand the appeal of owning a piece of land like this and also the loneliness that Theo must have felt growing up here.

She probably would have given it up too.

The arrival day was a scramble, having been tasked to evaluate the boons with no more than two weeks' notice. Hermione had worried over this extensively, feeling both guilty and resigned for what was coming.

You can't save everyone, Hermione.

She knew she couldn't, and she had finally come around to that way of thinking. But it still rankled that there would be choices made – and *she* would be the one choosing. She almost regretted telling Theo to suggest it.

Almost.

But she couldn't let this opportunity to pass her by, and so after floo'ing to a dank arrival area and gathering with the other Death Eaters and boons in some approximation of a great hall, she held her head high and worked to occlude her feelings away, while twisting her ring on her finger.

“Miss Black will be evaluating the boons for exceptional magic,” hissed Voldemort. “Those of you deemed worthy will be raised from your positions and considered for alliances with my followers who are untied.”

And with that, he dismissed them en masse, and Hermione led a group of nearly fifty shell-shocked women out of the hall and toward the bedroom she would be sharing with Draco. He had set it aside temporarily for this due to the privacy it would afford her. She could hear unhappy male muttering from the Death Eaters behind them. Evidently the purpose of this visit had not been disclosed to most of them in advance.

When she shut the door to the bedroom behind her, she glanced at Ginny and Luna who followed her to the front. They faced the others, all of whom were huddled together and watching the three witches with skepticism and fear.

“Right,” said Hermione. “There's not a great way to do this. Let's start by asking a question that will probably be unbelievable to most of you: are there any of you who actually like your Death Eaters and aren't horribly mistreated?”

There was a slightly shocked silence, but then four girls tentatively raised their hands. Hermione recognized none of them.

“Great,” said Hermione with relief. “Can you tell me who they are?”

The Death Eaters were all young – Derrick Boles, John Fawley, Terrance Higgs, and William Vaisey.

“In that case,” Hermione asked hesitantly. “Would you mind terribly if you all remain as boons? I'll tell You-Know-Who that you should remain with your chosen Death Eaters so you don't get traded away. That will free up spots for those who are mistreated.”

The girls blinked in surprise, but all four agreed, before Hannah Abbott spoke up.

“You don't call him the Dark Lord.”

“No,” said Hermione.

“But I thought you were loyal. And I heard that Ginny Weasley turned.”

Hannah scowled at Ginny, who rolled her eyes.

“Let’s just say that it’s complicated,” said Hermione. She was feeling tense. “Also, these four aren’t the only ones who aren’t mistreated by their Death Eaters. This situation isn’t easy, but we need you to do what we ask so we can evaluate you.”

Hannah narrowed her eyes.

“How can we trust you?”

“You can’t,” said Hermione honestly. “You’re going to have to take it on faith that I’m doing the best I can with this. I can only pick a few to be raised, and those few will have sanctuary... somewhere secure... for at least several weeks. I wish I could save all of you the indignity of what has been happening to you, but I can’t.”

Hermione watched them exchange glances with each other, and then they slumped a little.

“Right. Then my next question... is anybody here an occlumens?”

She looked around, *hoping* and then...

Susan Bones raised her hand. Hermione’s heart leapt.

“Luna,” she said, “evaluate her please.”

The others watched curiously as Luna stepped forward and placed a hand on Susan’s shoulder. Luna’s talents in mind magic went beyond occlumency. She was a proficient legilimens too, and after several minutes, she stepped back and smiled broadly.

“Flawless,” announced Luna.

Hermione gave a sigh of relief. “Perfect. Susan, you’re raised.”

“How did you know my name?” she asked curiously.

Hermione internally winced. “I just do. Now the rest of you... is anybody proficient with wandless magic?”

This time seven witches raised their hands, and Hermione’s heart was pounding a little. At least half of them were former D.A. members. “Alright. I can only take five of you. And I’m so very sorry, but the rest of you will be remaining as a boon, for now.”

She tried to ignore the haunted looks on their faces. There was nothing Hermione could do about it, though. She and the others had agreed that they could select no more than six without drawing Voldemort’s suspicion, and she had to prioritize those with some existing skills due to the rough plan that was just starting to take shape.

“I hope.... I *sincerely* hope... that you won’t have to live this way for much longer. I will be speaking with You-Know-Who about it further. Ginny, Luna, you can take this group back to the hall while I evaluate these seven for their wandless magic. Susan, hang back please.”

Susan moved forward and sat down near Hermione, studying her intently.

Hermione then turned to the others and said, "I need to ask... are any of you muggleborn?"

She was somewhat relieved when they all shook their heads no.

"Alright... good. That's good. Unfortunately I think that would disqualify you for what You-Know-Who has in mind."

"And what is it then?" asked a girl who looked to be several years older than Hermione. She thought she remembered seeing her in a Ravenclaw uniform at Hogwarts.

"It's exactly what he told you – those who are selected will be raised from a boon to tie with one of his younger followers. You may or may not have heard that I intervened in a tie for Draco Malfoy a couple weeks ago, and as part of it I gave You-Know-Who a demonstration of my magic. He came to realize that there is talent in the pool of boons that may exceed those of the pureblood witches who are supposedly loyal to him. He wishes to keep the magic strong in the bloodlines of his followers."

"I'm not keen on tying with a Death Eater," said a girl Hermione recognized but couldn't quite place.

"No, I don't suppose you are," admitted Hermione. "But it won't be for several weeks yet, and a lot can happen in that time."

They all narrowed their eyes at her, but Hermione couldn't say the things she wanted to say. She didn't think any of their minds would be searched, but if they were she couldn't appear to be anything but sympathetic. Voldemort had selected her to evaluate them so that the boons wouldn't be afraid to show what they could do. That meant she could empathize a little to make them trust her. But she couldn't say anything blatantly traitorous.

"Alright then," she said, "if there are no other questions, please step forward and show me the most advanced wandless magic you can do."

Two girls had nothing more than basic levitation charms. Three of them had wandless shields or stinging hexes. One could produce a wandless stunner, and Hannah Abbott announced that she had mastered wandless obliviation, much to Hermione's disbelief.

"You're absolutely certain?" she asked.

Hannah nodded. "I've been obviating the men I'm sold to since almost the beginning so that they think we did more than we really did. I got a lot of practice on the Carrows last year before the Battle of Hogwarts, and I figured out how to do it wandlessly pretty quickly after I was given away. I'm quite good at it. My target just has to let me place my hands on his head."

"Do you have any other wandless spells?"

"I can manage a tripping jinx, too, and a light stunner."

"Right then. Hannah, you can join Susan."

“How do you know my name?”

“Nevermind how. That’s seriously advanced magic, though. Besides, you’re Sacred Twenty-Eight. He will want you to be raised for that alone. And as for the rest of you... Cho and Katie, you two are in. No, don’t ask me how I know who you are. And also you two...” she added, looking at the last two girls who had done more than levitation. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know your names, but you are in as well.”

“I’m Sally Anne Perks,” said one.

“I’m Margaret Belgrave,” said another.

“Fabulous,” said Hermione, just as Ginny and Luna were returning. “Luna, can you take these two back to the great hall as well? Gin and I need to talk to the others.”

Luna nodded and pulled the two girls who were being returned as boons aside. Hermione turned away from their faces, which were falling again.

“Now you six, tell me who your Death Eaters are.”

She already knew that Hannah and Susan belonged to Yaxley and Dolohov. But she learned that Cho belonged to Mulciber and Katie belonged to Rabastan Lestrangle. Only Sally Anne and Margaret belonged to lower-ranked Death Eaters.

“God, this is going to be a shitshow,” muttered Hermione nervously. “Alright, hang on.”

Theo, she said, reaching out through her bond.

You’ve got them?

Yes, but I need you and Draco to come here so we can talk about what to do next.

Coming now.

There was an awkward silence for a couple minutes until Theo and Draco opened the door and walked in. All six of the former boons shrank away from them and Draco in particular.

“You have nothing to worry about,” said Hermione, gesturing toward him. “They’re not going to hurt you. But we do have a bit of a complication,” she added, looking at the wizards now. “Their Death Eaters include Dolohov, Yaxley, Mulciber, and Rabastan Lestrangle.”

“Fuck,” muttered Draco, as he swiped a hand over his face.

“Yes, and I also need you to keep Derrick Boles, John Fawley, Terrance Higgs, and William Vaisey paired with their current boons if at all possible. Those four girls said that they liked their Death Eaters and aren’t mistreated. They volunteered to stay as boons to free up spots for the others.”

Draco gave her an exasperated look.

“I’m sorry!” she said, throwing up her hands. “But it’s the best I could do, and it’s only fair to keep them where they are since they volunteered! Make it happen, Draco, I don’t care what you have to do or say.”

She sensed the six boons watching their exchange in shock, but they were silent as Draco walked over and cupped her face for a deep kiss.

“So demanding,” he said fondly. “I always knew I’d be in over my head with you, darling girl.”

She smirked at him, and now she could see confusion on the faces of the others out of the corner of her eye.

“Oh please, you knew *exactly* what you were getting into with me, you prat. Now go break the news for me, alright?”

He raised one eyebrow, but inclined his head. “Fine. But you owe me.”

“I do not, you owe *me*, as you very well know. Now these six...” she gestured at the girls behind her, “should probably not go back to the hall. I think it would be better to take them straight to Malfoy Manor without stopping to say goodbye.”

She heard some fearful gasps behind her and she turned to give them an encouraging look.

“You’ll be safe there, I promise. And I think it’s good to go *now* before Dolohov or Yaxley can change You-Know-Who’s mind.”

Draco and Theo exchanged a glance, and Theo said, “You go sweet talk the Dark Lord, Draco. Her – I mean, Columba is right. We should get them out before he has a chance to change his mind. I can take them to the Manor.”

Draco swept an eye over them, and Hermione could see he recognized most of them.

“Fine. I’ll go kiss his arse and see what I can do about the ones who volunteered to stay.”

He turned and swept out of the room, then Hermione looked at Theo.

“Theo, take all but Susan right now, and then come back for her. She’s already an occlumens. Ginny and I have a few things to tell her.”

He gave her a knowing look, and then motioned for the others to follow him. They cast curious glances back at the three left behind, but Hermione said nothing until the door shut.

Then she turned to face Susan squarely.

“I have a suspicion,” said Susan slowly. “And I really want it to be true.”

Hermione gave her a soft smile and pulled out her wand and pointed it to herself. “*Finite incantatem*,” she muttered, and a moment later her features returned to normal.

Susan gasped and flung herself into Hermione's arms. Hermione – who had always been cordial to Susan, but never close – was surprised, but gratified by this reaction.

"I knew it," Susan muttered. "I just knew it had to be you!"

"How?" asked Hermione, pulling back with a grin.

"The tying ceremony with Malfoy," she said. "Dolohov was there, you know. He told me all about it. And he's been saying for months that Malfoy was obsessed with his boon. That bugger always stared at you at Hogwarts, didn't he? I thought it was so odd that he was able to just *murder* you that day. He was always cold and kind of evil, but most of Hufflepuff house was still convinced he was secretly in love with you somewhere deep down. It just didn't add up. And then when Dolohov told me about the magic you showed You-Know-Who... well, I hoped."

Hermione's face relaxed into a true smile. "You were right. And Draco's not a bad sort, really. I mean, yes, he's rather violent toward other people and he can be a bit stalkerish, but you're also right he's in love with me. And Blaise is in love with Ginny and Theo with Luna. All of us are still working with the Order... err... rather distantly."

Susan's eyes widened with something that looked like hope.

"How can I help?"

Hermione smiled. "You'll know soon. We need to get you out of here as soon as Theo returns, but since you're already an occlumens I wanted to go ahead and tell you my identity. Obviously it's a deep secret that I'm alive – not even the Order is aware of it, yet – and it needs to stay that way for now. But believe me, there is a plan brewing. I'm hoping that none of you will have to be tied for very long. But this was the only opportunity we had to get at least a few of you out. You-Know-Who has decided he trusts me and Ginny and to a lesser extent Luna. He's leaving it up to us."

Susan looked amazed by this.

"I know, I couldn't let the opportunity pass."

"No, of course not," Susan murmured, but then she got a perturbed look on her face.

"What is it?" asked Hermione in concern.

She hesitated. "It's just that... well, I discovered something about Dolohov not that long ago, and I was hoping to see if it was true and maybe steal it from him. But if I disappear now then I can't—"

"What is it?" asked Ginny, cutting her off.

Susan glanced between them. "I'm not sure if he was telling the truth about it, mind you, but he claims to have an invisibility cloak. I overheard him telling Bellatrix that it was Harry's."

Hermione froze, her heart racing. "Have you seen it?"

Susan shook her head. “No. He was drunk at a revel and talking about it though. It was a night when he didn’t sell me. He was boasting that You-Know-Who gave it to him as a favor, and he’s been using it to watch me... with others.”

She turned red as she said this but then hurried on. “Anyway, I’m not sure if it’s true or if Harry even *had* one, but—”

“He did,” said Hermione. “And it’s very, *very* important we find it.”

Ginny cast her a questioning look, but Hermione ignored her, as her mind started to race. “What are the chances Dolohov brought it here?”

“Decent,” said Susan. “He was under the impression that the boons would be here all day and sent home tomorrow morning. I know he was planning on selling me at the revel tonight. It wouldn’t surprise me if he brought it along so he could watch.”

Hermione exhaled, and nodded. “If it’s here, I will find it.”

“But you aren’t a boon anymore so surely you aren’t staying...” started Susan, but Hermione just grinned.

“Didn’t Dolohov tell you? I’m an animagus now. A gray dove. It’s very discreet. I plan to be here all weekend to see what I can learn. I ought to blend in with the stone walls quite well.”

She exchanged a look with Ginny, who took the hint to stay quiet, but Susan didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes shone.

“Alright. Well I don’t know exactly which room is his, but when we arrived he gave the elves our bags and said to take them to his room in the North Tower on the fourth floor. It sounded like he’s used it before.”

Hermione grinned and pulled Susan in for another hug. “Thank you,” she said into her ear. “Seriously, the boys have been looking for that bloody cloak for weeks.”

Susan put a hand on her shoulder. “I hope you find it then.”

A moment later Theo strode back in the room. “Draco is managing to prevent a mutiny downstairs over the boon reshuffle, but he could use some backup. Come on Susan, let’s go so I can get back and help him smooth things over.”

Susan nodded and gave Hermione and Ginny one last look before following. Ginny turned to Hermione with a single raised eyebrow.

“We have to find it, Gin,” said Hermione.

“Are you going to tell Draco?”

Hermione hesitated. “We’ll see,” she finally said. “But I might go tomorrow while all the rest of you are out on the hunt, and you know he’s not going to like that. It’s a good time to

do it, though. The castle should be nearly empty.”

“It’s that important?”

“It’s that important. And not just because it was Harry’s but because it’s a unique magical artifact that could help make You-Know-Who immortal if he ever realizes what it is.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Ginny, with eyes wide. “Then you definitely need to find it.”

“Yes,” agreed Hermione. “I’m tempted to go now, but...”

Ginny was shaking her head. “No, there’s no telling how long they will be downstairs. Go during the mounted hunt tomorrow so you have plenty of time. You know Dolohov is going to get a new boon this afternoon in the reshuffle, so he would have no reason to send the cloak home today.”

“That’s my thinking.”

“I won’t say a word,” said Ginny.

Hermione just smiled and began to transfigure herself back into Columba, mentally crafting the story she was going to tell Voldemort to justify her selections.

She just hoped the other Death Eaters didn’t try to retaliate for being six boons down.

Hermione’s report to Voldemort was short, confident, and then she was released to return to Malfoy Manor while several Death Eaters glared balefully at her. None dared contradict Voldemort, however, who blessed Hermione’s selections after she explained their talents with only a little embellishment and editing.

It was a role reversal Hermione didn’t think she would ever adjust to: receiving implicit protection from Voldemort through his favor and not just by virtue of being Draco’s boon. It was apparent that she and Draco together had risen above most of the others, even if there were still a few Death Eaters officially ahead of him in rank. They were the new golden couple of darkness.

Untouchable.

Hermione could not have planned it better if she had tried.

Draco made a point to ensure the others saw her leave as he escorted her back to the Manor via the main floo at Nott Castle before turning around and floo’ing back. Hermione then met up with Ginny and Luna, and all three of them moved to one of the apparition points at the edge of the Malfoy estate before apparating back to the perimeter of Nott Castle. All three

were armed and prepared to fight if they had to — but the weekend was really intended to be nothing more than reconnaissance so the girls could learn the castle and grounds.

After arriving at the edge of the wards, Hermione reached out to Theo, who tested his ability to create a door in the wards for a few seconds in order for the three girls to sneak back in. To everyone's relief it worked flawlessly, and Voldemort was entirely unaware that the wards had been breached.

Once they were through, Hermione and Luna transformed into their forms while Ginny disillusioned herself. All three hurried toward their rooms, which had their windows unlatched. Luna and Ginny were on the ground floor with Theo and Blaise so they could sneak in and out, and Draco's window was already cracked on the third floor for Hermione to fly through it.

Hermione watched her friends disappear into their rooms before flying to her own, and then she alerted Theo that all three had returned. Once he sealed the wards she set off for a flight to learn the lay of the land, returning only to the castle when Theo said the boon reallocation was complete. Once back at the castle, Hermione spent time going from window ledge to window ledge as Columba until she finally saw Dolohov's form enter one of the rooms with a young girl in the same collar and chain Susan used to wear. Even as a bird Hermione's stomach turned, and she immediately flew off, having found the information she needed that day just as her Columba mark began to tingle. She arrived back in their room to find Draco with arms crossed, waiting for her irritably, but she ignored his scowl.

“What is the point of being here for reconnaissance if we don't do it?” she said airily.

After giving her a terse report, confirming that the four boons who volunteered were able to stay with their original Death Eaters, he sent her into the loo to hide while he called an elf for some dinner for her. Then he left soon after for the revel with the remaining boons.

Hermione knew Luna was planning on going as a hound — evidently it was common for the Death Eaters' favorite dogs to follow them around Nott Castle — but Hermione and Ginny wouldn't be there. Now that they were tied or near so, Draco, Blaise, and Theo were positioning their witches to be more than just boons. Voldemort would not expect them to attend.

Hermione fell asleep early, only rousing a little when she felt Draco slip into bed next to her, smelling of alcohol and smoke.

At least it's not perfume, she thought.

The following morning she rose, and he looked a bit tense as he called for breakfast in preparation for the hunt. Once again Hermione hid in the loo while the elves arrived, and she took her time transfiguring her face just in case some emergency required her to transform back into a human today. They would be doing birds in the morning and then horses and hounds through the afternoon, which was when Hermione intended to slip away to search Dolohov's room.

“I want three kills,” Draco reminded her. Hermione just rolled her eyes.

“Yes, I’m aware. Though why you insist...”

“Because nobody has ever done more than two.”

She paused and stared at him. “You’re just now telling me this?” she asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “You can do it. I know you can. You are the biggest and fastest thing out there. But...”

“But?”

“But it’s a bit of a race to prey sometimes. There are a lot of hawks out at once.”

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. “You are taking Arthur off your list once this is over, regardless of how well I do.”

“No. We had an agreement.”

“And *once again* it involved keeping some critical piece of information from me. I will do my best, but you aren’t going to punish me if I can’t do something that literally no other Death Eater’s bird has ever done.”

He looked at her seriously. “It will secure my position further if you do well. And you need some incentive for it.”

Hermione threw her arms in the air. “I’d say your position is pretty damn secure! You’re his darling right now! So am I for that matter!”

He strode forward and gripped her shoulder. “That may be true for *now*, but we pulled boons from four highly ranked Death Eaters yesterday.”

“So? They were replaced!”

“Yes, but there’s a breaking in period. It is starting all over for them, and they aren’t thrilled about it.”

Hermione recoiled in disgust. “A *breaking in* period?”

His mouth thinned. “You know what I mean. All I’m saying is that there is a target on my back from the others. There always has been due to my position and age, but it’s bigger than ever now that we’ve revealed you as Columba too. He already calls me his protégé, his Knife. They are afraid he’s going to name me his heir, just as Bellatrix has.” Hermione’s eyes widened at this. He hadn’t shared that with her yet.

“Oh don’t look so surprised,” he added. “I’m the eldest male Black from her side of the family, and she’s barren after killing Sirius. I was always going to inherit from her. But for some asinine reason she felt the need to remind the others of this last night, and only now have they realized that the entirety of the Black and Malfoy fortunes will be united under my line for the first time ever, not to mention the dowry from Theo, which is very generous. Thank Merlin they don’t know about Potter’s contribution too. Blaise says that there are now

rumors the Dark Lord is going to name me his successor and pass over the others who served him during the first war and are more senior than me. You and I both know he won't be around long enough for that to matter, but the others don't know that. There are bound to be plots to dismantle me, some of which will be coming from Death Eaters who are far more shrewd than Rodolphus. But none of those plots will get any momentum as long as I keep his favor for the next couple of months. My performance — *our* performance — has to be perfect until we get to the end."

She stilled, irritation coursing through her, but she knew that he was right. The higher the climb, the farther the fall, she had always known that. She had lived with targets on her back too, though never as deadly as the ones Draco managed. But hadn't her academic rivals – and even occasionally her friends – always watched her, waiting for that one moment she would capitulate and leave an opening for someone else to claim the top spot?

Yes, she had to be perfect.

"Fine," she grumbled. "I'll do my best."

He looked relieved and gave her a quick kiss. "I know you can do it. Just let Aquila's instincts lead you. Now then, we'll be assembling down at the field within the hour. Go ahead and fly to the edge of the forest before you become Aquila. You know what to do from there."

"I'll give him a show."

"Yes. *We* will give him a fucking show. And once again you will be the star. This is about a lot more than just cheating at falconry."

She sighed before transforming into Columba and Draco opened the window for her. She gave him one last, baleful look before spreading her wings and launching herself into the air. She would be safe enough near the castle, but her instincts were on edge as she approached the forest. Draco's warnings about the abundance of raptors in the area were coming back to her. She landed behind a tree at the edge of the treeline and transformed back into herself and then immediately to Aquila, her nerves easing once more. She was on top of the food chain in this form. Absolutely nothing could harm her.

She flew to the top of a tree and waited, making sure to settle herself into a thicket so she wouldn't be noticed, while still giving herself a clear line of sight toward the field, where the Death Eaters would be lining up soon. There was a tent with that same bloody throne, where she knew Voldemort would be observing, and there were a dozen or so perches in a row at the far edge. She knew the Death Eaters' house elves had brought in animals the previous day while the boons were being evaluated. During her flight around the castle she had seen a large, outdoor aviary complex where most of the birds of prey were kept separate from one another. She also found the stables where Ginny would surely be dwelling at that very moment. Sure enough, after a half an hour the Death Eaters began to arrive, heading down a short hill from the direction of where the aviary was kept.

Even though she was a couple thousand meters away from them, she could see every detail. Her eyesight and hearing were excellent. She knew to wait until everyone – but especially

Voldemort – had arrived.

Draco always *did* relish a dramatic entrance.

Before long she saw his blonde head striding out, chatting with Theo, while Luna trotted next to him. He was dressed in his leathers, though empty-handed and just carrying his gloves for now. Hermione caught more than a few curious looks. She couldn't hear their exchanges from this far away, but Draco's characteristic smirk was unmistakable.

It seemed that there were fifteen or so Death Eaters dressed in leathers and quite a few more who had come to watch. Voldemort arrived at the end, moving down the line to observe everyone's animals, until he reached Draco.

Hermione watched as Voldemort's face seemed to take on an expression of skepticism and then intrigue, as the bystanders gathered around to hear what Draco had to say. Then Draco turned and faced the field and put two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

That was her cue. Hermione spread her wings and flew to him, across the open field as he donned his gloves to receive her. The looks of shock on the faces of the others when they saw her size was more gratifying that she cared to admit. Draco was grinning broadly at her, his eyes twinkling as he held out his arm and she settled onto it.

"No hood or jess?" asked Voldemort in surprise, taking in her appearance critically.

"No, my Lord. I have trained her to submit to me without either one. I don't even cage her. She was released into the woods by my elf last night."

"But she still hunts?" he asked, sounding impressed.

"Oh yes, she's a fierce thing. It took a long time for us to understand each other, but she hunts beautifully now... though only for me."

"It's true," chimed Theo. "I tried hunting her at the Manor not long ago, and she took offense and went for my face. Draco had to stun her or she would have blinded me. He's the only one she answers to."

There was a ripple of tension at these words, and several of the Death Eaters backed up a couple of steps.

Hermione looked around imperiously and saw the other birds of prey nearby. They were largely ignoring her but then again, they all were hooded. As soon as their hoods were off, they would surely see her. She was impossible to miss and much larger than even the second largest raptor there.

"Her equipment is impressive," said Voldemort, staring at her claws.

"Yes," said Draco. "Her talons will pierce standard leathers. I have to wear dragonhide."

"And her name?" he inquired.

Draco smiled a little. “I named her after my intended – her middle name of course. Aquila. It seemed fitting.”

“Indeed,” said Voldemort, with a cold smile. “If she has half the firepower as Miss Black she will no doubt prove to be a success in the field.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Draco deferentially.

“Then let us see what she can do!” he cried, clapping his hands and opening them again to gesture that everyone should take their places. Draco carried Hermione to a perch in the middle, right in front of Voldemort, which she had learned the previous day he had been granted as one of the Death Eaters who was more skilled in the sport.

“Stay above the others,” he said quietly. “Focus on the prey and let the others take each other out. Three kills, fierce girl. And I’ll count the other birds if it comes to it.”

Hermione felt a sudden thrill of fear as she realized what was about to happen. Only now did she understand why he hadn’t told her about this in advance, though he had alluded to it that morning.

A race to the prey.

This wasn’t how falconry worked. They were supposed to go out one by one unless they were trained to hunt together — and each of these birds was owned by a different Death Eater so they certainly would not be trained to accept one another. Most raptors were incredibly territorial, and even at a standstill Hermione could feel Aquila’s instincts telling her that these other birds did not belong. No doubt the real birds were aware that there were intruders too, and it was only their hoods and jesses that were keeping them still.

Oh God...

With a shout from Voldemort, the other Death Eaters unhooded their birds all at once, and they cast them into the air.

Hermione spread her enormous wings and flew like her life depended on it, trying desperately to ignore Aquila’s instincts to *attack* the others. Within seconds she had made it high into the sky, and below her she could see aerial fights taking place between the others. They weren’t fighting to kill — raptors rarely killed each other — but they were attacking each other aggressively as each one tried to claim the territory for itself. Before long several capitulated, fluttering weakly back toward their Death Eaters, who grabbed them with disappointment. Those that could be healed were immediately sent back out, and those that couldn’t stayed behind.

Hermione’s stomach rolled at the horror of it. As if it wasn’t bad enough that they were hunting to kill prey, they were turning the predators against one another too for sport.

Three kills. Just three kills, and I can be done.

She soared over the carnage, noting that Draco's eyes hadn't left her for a moment, and then she spotted it: a hare, cowering under a large rock, clearly terrified of the number of raptors above it.

She tried to turn Aquila's instincts onto the hare, but she was too distracted by the other birds. Hermione would have to dive near them, and Aquila wanted to defend her territory *first* before going for prey.

She reached out to Theo in frustration because she hadn't been this angry with Draco since the day she left.

Tell Draco he owes me and had better take Arthur off the list right this minute! I'm going to have to kill the poor things and be totally conscious I'm doing it or else Aquila is going to jump in with the others! She wants to defend her territory more than she wants to hunt, so I can't let her instincts go! I cannot believe he didn't warn me about this!

She wrenched her mind away from Theo and saw Theo's face darken as he whispered something in Draco's ear. Draco turned pale and bit his lip, casting her an almost apologetic look, but she didn't have time for it. She *was* bigger and stronger than the other birds around her, and she was the only one with a human mind. She could do this.

But she was royally pissed off too.

She tried to channel her anger to push aside her distaste at the thing she was about to do. Then she tucked her wings in, diving straight for the hare. It bolted at the last minute, but Hermione was too fast. She was traveling at over a hundred miles per hour, and she caught a glimpse of the other Death Eaters watching her in shock while the remaining hawks continued to fight for dominance. Hermione's wings flared at the last moment, grabbing the hare by the head and crushing its skull.

She tried to ignore the feeling of her talons sinking into its flesh. Only now did Aquila seem pleased, with prey in her claws and an inclination to feast. The part of Hermione that was still her was sick, and she stayed low to the ground as she flew over and deposited it at Draco's feet before flying back up on the perch and turning her beak up at the cooked chicken he offered her.

"You have to eat it or the others will suspect," he hissed.

She glared at him, but consented to eat one piece of chicken before opening her wings again and cuffing him around the head with it as she rose back into the air.

The remaining number of hawks were dwindling rapidly, now down to just four that were still fighting it out below her. The second bit of prey took considerably longer to find, and now Hermione knew why nobody had ever managed three kills before. The fight among the birds took long enough that most rabbits and other small creatures like them had time to flee.

But the thing she had just seen was not a rabbit. It was a fox, and it was large.

Theo, is the fox they plan to use this afternoon caged?

Yes. Why?

Nothing. Wish me luck.

She took a deep breath and flew a bit higher, while she kept her eye on it. Unlike a hare, a fox could fight back. She would have to take it out quickly, brutally, and that meant she needed height for speed.

Higher and higher she flew, and she saw Draco's face furrow in confusion. But she couldn't worry about him. She was eyeing that glint of red pelt darting through the field, making a clear path toward the woods. She flew out in front of it and then dropped like a rock.

This was a speed she had never experienced before in her life, either as a bird or human. Her reading about golden eagles told her they could hit speeds of up to two hundred miles per hour when diving from great heights, and Hermione thought she might have clocked something close to it. Within moments she was hurtling toward the fox, and her wings wrenched open to break the dive, before sinking her talons into the back of its neck. It was large, heavy, and it thrashed for a moment, but it could not get its teeth into Hermione before she squeezed, and it died.

She opened her wings to fly back toward Draco, who was looking at her with surprise written all over his face. She just glared at him and deposited the fox at his feet, while the others murmured at her skills. Evidently it was the largest thing any of their birds had ever retrieved in front of Voldemort.

She fluttered to the perch and accepted another piece of chicken as she eyed the other hawks. There was only one left now, clearly exhausted, but flying circles around the field that Hermione was certain was practically devoid of prey.

"It's Dolohov's," whispered Draco.

Hermione pushed into Theo's mind.

Tell Draco I said fuck Dolohov. And also fuck him because there's only one animal left. The field won't have anything noteworthy at this point.

Theo whispered in Draco's ear, and to her consternation Draco leaned in and whispered again, "You know I'm always happy to fuck you, fierce girl. Give me one more, and then you can have whatever you want from me tonight."

Hermione hated this, but she didn't want Draco to have any chance to say she hadn't fulfilled her end of the bargain. And she knew – she just knew – that if she did this, he would be secure in his position after the boon reshuffle the previous day.

He launched her, and she flew, high again, the much smaller hawk circling below her. It was aggressive, she knew that. The other Death Eaters had eventually allowed their hawks to capitulate so it was the last hawk in the air. But it was tired, beaten, and it seemed wary of her size and weight. It was not going for her, evidently content to let her ride the thermals above it.

For her part, Hermione pretended to ignore it, once again circling higher and higher. She could tell by the looks on the Death Eaters' faces that they expected her to find another fox, or some other small mammal quivering in fear.

But no. There was no prey left, and she needed three kills. This one would be the most challenging one yet because it was almost as fast as she was and just as vicious.

Almost.

Hermione dropped again, this time aiming for the strip of body between the wings. When she sank her claws into it, the poor thing screeched with a deafening sound, and she heard Dolohov shouting below in dismay. He was asking Draco to call her off, but she heard Voldemort's orders loud and clear.

"Let's see what she can do."

Well fuck.

She hadn't killed it instantly, some tiny part of her hoping that Dolohov or Voldemort would successfully intervene. None of the other raptors were dead, just beaten and wounded. But no. Voldemort wanted to see what she could do. And Draco wanted three kills.

He would get them.

She squeezed, finally allowing her instincts from Aquila to take over and losing herself for a moment into the bird's mind. Aquila didn't mind this. Aquila wasn't bothered by the shrieking and spasming and the eventual stillness as the hawk shuddered and died. Aquila didn't care at all about the poor animal that had been horribly abused by its master right before she killed it.

Hermione resisted the strong temptation to drop the dead hawk at Dolohov's feet and instead flew dutifully over to Draco, depositing it in front of him in the same heap as the hare and fox.

She flew back up to the perch and accepted her reward with a kind of detachment before Draco instructed her to fly back to his glove and turned to face Voldemort once more.

"Extraordinary," was Voldemort's pronouncement. "A true apex predator. You should be proud, Draco. I don't believe we've ever had three kills from the same raptor before."

Draco inclined his head. "She is as fierce as her namesake."

"There is no doubt. Your ability to tame wild creatures like your Columba and now this Aquila is a credit to you."

"Thank you, my Lord," he murmured.

“Take them away,” said Voldemort, now speaking to the others. “The Knife has won this round handily. I’ll expect you all to be mounted for the hunt directly after lunch. We have another fox to kill.”

Hermione ruffled her feathers with revulsion, but at least her part in this farce was over. As the other Death Eaters carried their injured animals back to the aviary, Draco launched Hermione into the air one last time to fly back into the forest.

She distantly wondered why Aquila could not shed tears.

Chapter 35: Invisible

Chapter Notes

TW: Graphic depiction of torture and gore. Skip the *** if you don't wish to read.

Hermione was not speaking to Draco by the time she flew back to their room as Columba. She knew why he hadn't told her about the format of the hunt. She also knew that with a human brain and eagle body her advantage was so large compared to the other birds that she was in no serious danger from it. Draco would never have put her in a situation where he thought she might actually be hurt.

But she had to be fully mentally present for her first two kills. She couldn't rely on Aquila's instincts for them, and she could still feel the blood and soft organs collapsing under her claws as she moved to the loo to clean up. She needed a shower, desperately.

Draco was acting like a kicked puppy, and it did not improve her mood.

"I'm sorry, my darling. I didn't realize you would be fully aware..."

She said nothing, but glared at him before slamming the door shut in his face.

She would forgive him, she knew, no doubt faster than she wished. She always did. But for now she could be cross with him.

When she finally emerged, she found a lovely lunch spread out with all of her favorites, and an apologetic Draco preparing a plate for her.

She looked at him squarely. "You said no more secrets."

"It wasn't a secret, truly, I just --" he started, but she glared at him. He sighed.

"Fine, perhaps I should have told you before this morning. But I knew you would manage it once you were out in the field, and I didn't want you to be frightened or dread it any more than you already did. I've watched the hawks have a go at each other several times now, and it's always in the air but not that high. I knew you would be fine if you just stayed above it."

"Is that why I'm an eagle then?" she demanded. "Because of the horrible way he treats those poor animals? Just in case it goes wrong?"

Draco shook his head. "No, truly, it was all for show because eagles are notoriously hard to train. I told you the truth, and I didn't realize he would treat them this way when I picked

your form.”

“But...” she prompted.

“*But*, like I said, I’ve watched it a few times now. I knew you would be fine. I just didn’t want you to worry, and I also didn’t realize Aquila would want you to join the fight so badly you wouldn’t be able to use her instincts for your kills.”

Hermione pursed her lips, looking away, but feeling herself softening already.

Bugger.

“Please, sweet girl,” he murmured as he approached her and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. “You know I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Arthur is off the list,” she said, not answering him.

“Yes, of course.”

“And next time you tell me *everything*, Draco, whether you think it will frighten me or not. I was not emotionally prepared for that. I think I hate killing animals even more than people.”

The fact that Hermione knew this about herself made her wince a little.

Draco’s eyes softened. “That doesn’t surprise me. No animal deserves it, not really. They aren’t capable of being evil like men are. And for what it’s worth, none of us likes the way he asks us to hunt our hawks. All of us who do it learned the skill in a particular way, and it never would have occurred to any of us to do a group casting without training our birds together. There’s no purpose in it whatsoever except for bloodshed, and it wrecks the trust between master and hawk. Some species are easier to train than others, but they all require a fairly serious time commitment. Most of us are on our second or third birds in only a few months because of his methods. There’s nothing we can do about it though.”

Hermione slumped and looked away. She was still cross, but as usual Draco was worming his way back into her good graces.

“Take the afternoon to relax,” he murmured. “I’ll keep the wards off your window if you want to go for a fly, but don’t worry about watching the fox hunt this afternoon. We can wait until tomorrow to visit Nagini’s prison. Theo knows where it is, and it would probably be best if all six of us go anyway.”

She said nothing to this because she knew there was a *very* important task she needed to do during the hunt, but she just nodded, and he looked relieved as he gave her another kiss on the temple.

“Good. Now I must prepare for the next thing, but *please* sweet girl... take some time for yourself.”

Please take the time to forgive me, was the thing that went unsaid, but Hermione heard it loud and clear.

He left not long after that, and Hermione gave it twenty more minutes before she got to work to make sure the castle was as empty as it would be. Nearly all the Death Eaters took part in the mounted hunt, even those who knew nothing about birds. And the wizards had told them that the few who did not ride always hung back with Voldemort in that same tent, entertaining him and waiting for the others to return. The castle would be practically empty except for the house elves.

Still, Hermione made sure she was geared up with her knives, wand, and necklace before cracking open her window and transforming into Columba. She would have to fly out and get in another way. Draco was paranoid the other Death Eaters would find her and had blood warded her into their room, much like the wards used in their wing at Malfoy Manor.

It's just a small complication, she assured herself as she fluttered to the ground near a wooden door with thick iron hinges that was as close to Dolohov's fourth floor room as she could get. Hermione wished she could go in through his window too, but the ledge was too narrow. She would never be able to balance there as a human to cast the spells she needed, so she would have to approach from the ground floor up.

Seeing that the small courtyard where she was standing was deserted, Hermione transformed back into herself and quickly cast a disillusionment charm over her head. It wasn't flawless. Anybody who looked closely would be able to see a noticeable ripple as she moved. But as long as she was cautious she would stay hidden enough for this task, or so she told herself.

Luckily, the door opened with a simple *Alohamora*, and Hermione found herself climbing a narrow stone staircase up several stories until she reached the fourth floor landing. She had counted the windows on her previous reconnaissance trip around the exterior, and she knew that his room should be the fifth one down this hall on the left. She crept toward it, and then froze as a door opened ahead of her. Her heart was pounding, but she stayed utterly still as Derrick Boles and Terrance Higgs came stumbling out into the hallway, kissing each other aggressively.

"We have to go," breathed Boles.

"Fuck the Dark Lord," said Higgs.

Boles laughed. "Better not let him hear you say that."

Higgs rolled his eyes. "And why not? This whole thing is madness. I can't *stand* it Der."

"I know, but we have to maintain a low profile. We'll get Meredith and Vanessa out eventually, and then we can escape together too. I just need a few more months to –"

"*Fine*," groaned Higgs. "I know, I know... just stay out of sight and out of mind until the spring, and then we're gone. The girls too."

Boles leaned in for one more kiss. "That's the spirit. Now let's go kiss his arse, and maybe we can skip the prostitution party tonight. Meredith promised she'd make a special pudding for you tomorrow for dinner."

Higgs grinned, and stepped away, walking down the hall with Boles following behind.

“I need to get her to teach me her secrets before she and Vanessa are gone...”

Hermione stared in amazement at their retreating backs, having never imagined *that* turn of events. But now she knew why their boons were happy to stay with them, and Hermione muttered a prayer of thanks that she was able to keep those girls paired with them.

Shaking herself out of it, Hermione approached Dolohov’s door and stood back to study it. She cast a few detection spells at it, and sure enough it was warded. She sighed to herself. It wasn’t terribly surprising. Dolohov was no fool. But it would still delay things.

She got to work, mentally running through her list of common wards. After about fifteen minutes, it shimmered and fell, and Hermione’s heart leapt. Dolohov was an exceptional duelist and adept in dark magic, but evidently he had not studied warding with the same fervor as Draco or even Hermione had.

She cast an unlocking charm on the door, and then eased it open, wincing slightly as the hinges groaned. And then she came to a sudden halt as she saw what he had inside.

It was his new boon. She was still there. And Hermione could have sworn they had been in Gryffindor together for at least a year, though she couldn’t be certain.

Hermione glanced around the room and saw there were no portraits in here either. Evidently Dolohov had *not* sent her home like he was instructed, and Hermione’s heart broke as she stared at the poor thing. She was young, wearing very little, and chained to the wall by the collar around her neck.

The girl stared in Hermione’s direction in confusion, and Hermione gritted her teeth.

You can’t save everyone.

She knew that. She *knew* it. And not only that, but she had already killed Dolohov’s hawk that morning, which was sure to make him angry. Now she was in his room preparing to steal the invisibility cloak from him if she could find it. If she stole his boon too, there would be hell to pay.

She should just obliviate the girl. It would be far simpler and safer.

But no. Hermione couldn’t just leave her there, and besides she was still not feeling terribly charitable toward Draco or *any* Death Eater at the moment. All of Draco’s lectures about not being reckless seemed to evaporate as she stared at the young girl, and that part of Hermione’s mind that she had tried to quash over the previous months — the Gryffindor part, no doubt — made her want Dolohov to suffer the indignity of losing his second boon in two days.

“Fuck it,” she whispered as she reversed the disillusionment charm. The girl’s eyes widened, and she scooted back a little.

“Look,” said Hermione, “I’m not going to hurt you, and I’m even going to try to get you out of here. But I need you to stay still and be quiet while I look for something first.”

The girl swallowed hard, but nodded, and Hermione gave her a tight smile as she began to search as quickly as she could. With a missing boon there would be no question that something had gone wrong in his room, so she didn’t take the time to put things back where she found them. In fact, perhaps she could stage it so that it looked like the girl just escaped on her own...

It took her nearly twenty minutes of searching before Hermione spotted it: a spot of silver glinting through a knot hole in the back of the wardrobe. She stepped back and allowed her eyes to rove over the entire wardrobe and realized the inside was shallower than the outside. It must have a false back.

“*Aha!*” she said in quiet triumph as she looped her finger into it and pulled. Immediately a panel fell away, and there it was: Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. She felt her eyes prick as she stared at it. She would know it anywhere.

She shook herself out of it and snatched it, before turning back to the girl.

“Tell me your name,” she said.

“Mary Walsh,” said the girl a bit fearfully, though Hermione could also see the hope on her face. Hermione thought quickly and then had it. Mary Walsh *had* been in Gryffindor. She had been a first year when Hermione was in sixth year. She should be in her third year right now. Hermione’s stomach rolled.

“How old are you?” she asked, as she yanked open the drawer to the small desk in the room and fumbled around for quill and ink.

“I just turned fourteen.”

Hermione stilled and closed her eyes.

“*Fourteen?*” she asked softly.

Mary just nodded and looked down.

“God, I’m so sorry. I just... look, we’re going to get you out of here and to a very secure place, but it would be best if he thinks you escaped on your own and didn’t have help.”

Mary nodded. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as her eyes landed on a key that looked like it would fit a lock in the collar around her neck.

“Here,” said Hermione. “Take this and see if it works. I’m going to steal a bag and some gold to make it look like you ran.”

Mary nodded and caught the key that Hermione tossed to her, and moments later she heard the sound of the collar unlocking and a groan of relief.

“Leave the key on the floor nearby. With any luck he’ll just think he didn’t secure it properly. Now come over here and write the rudest farewell note you can think of.”

A fierce look lit Mary’s face, and she marched over to the parchment and quill Hermione was holding out for her and started scratching out a note while Hermione found the bag that must have been for Susan and grabbed it, filling it with some products from the loo and the small bag of gold she found in the nightstand. She was relieved to find a broom under the bed, which she grabbed as well. When she was done, she opened the window wide to make it look like Mary had simply flown out. Then she approached Mary again and glanced at the note, grinning a bit at what she read.

Dear “Tony,”

You’re a bastard, and I hope you and all of you Death Eater scum die a horrible death. You’re going to go to Hell and burn for an eternity, I just know it.

I hate you all.

Mary

“Perfect,” commented Hermione. “Now come on, let’s go.”

She grabbed Mary’s arm, who flinched a little. Instinctively Hermione released her. “I’m so sorry, I should have thought better than to grab you like that. Please. Do you mind getting close to me so we can both wear this? It’s Harry Potter’s Invisibility Cloak.”

Mary’s eyes widened in disbelief at the silvery piece of fabric Hermione was holding, but she just nodded, and Hermione gave her a small smile.

“Great. I know from experience it will cover two people, and it’s absolutely perfect. We just have to walk slowly and stay quiet. Now come along, and we’ll get you to safety. Unfortunately, it doesn’t stay put that well on a broom, so it’s best if we walk.”

Mary nodded and moved in front of Hermione, who gave her the bag and broom to hold. Then she threw the Cloak over them both, silenced their feet, and let them out of the door, pausing only to replace the wards behind her. They were making slow progress, but the hunt was still on, and Hermione was sure they had a little time to spare before anybody returned.

She just hoped she wouldn’t make Theo fall off his horse when she finally reached out to him.

“The edge of the wards are straight ahead of you, through that archway,” she whispered into Mary’s ear as they let themselves back out into the courtyard. Mary nodded, and they picked up their pace a little as they got to the same place Hermione and the others had snuck through the day before.

“Hang on, let me see if I can get these open.”

She reached out to Theo.

I need you to open the wards in the same place you did it yesterday.

She felt him jolt in surprise in her mind.

Fuck, Hermione, I was just going over a jump. Why?

Nevermind why, I just need you to do it please. Now.

You will explain later.

Sure, whatever. Just help me, please. Keep it open for ten seconds, and then I'll reach out when I need to be let back in. It won't be long.

Fine, he said curtly.

A moment later the edge of the perimeter shimmered just a little, and Mary gasped to see a hole emerge.

“Good, right?” said Hermione as she nudged her forward and through the edge of the wards. “Now then, I need to touch you to side-along apparate you to a safe place. I have to get back here, so you may be there for a few days before I can return to you, but you’ll be very comfortable with your own elf and books and things. Absolutely nobody can get in through the wards unless I want them to, and the house is empty at the moment. Is that alright?”

Mary nodded hesitantly, and Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

“Good. This might feel weird the first time, but you’ll be okay. Just hang tight.”

Hermione gripped her around the arm and visualized the front of Grimmauld Place. A moment later she was staring up at it. Mary gasped and stumbled, but Hermione held her upright. “You’re okay,” she said. “It’s very disorienting until you get used to it. Now then, the house is under a new fidelius charm, in addition to some advanced blood wards. Think about this phrase, and you should be able to see it. ‘Hermione Granger’s address is 12 Grimmauld Place, London.’”

Mary gasped again, and she spun around to find Hermione grinning at her. “Surprise?” said Hermione, and Mary just beamed and squealed a little before looking back at the house eagerly. Hermione knew the moment she could see it, because she took a couple steps back in surprise. Hermione closed her eyes and communicated with the wards to let Mary through and keep everyone but Hermione, Mary, and Posy out, and then she nudged Mary a little.

“In you get. I changed the wards to permit only you, me, and my elf through. Draco’s locked out at the moment.”

“Draco Malfoy?” Mary asked hesitantly as she climbed the front steps.

“Yes. It’s a long story, but let’s just say he’s been in love with me for years and used polyjuice to kill somebody in my place at that execution. He *is* a Death Eater, but he’s been working both sides for quite a while. It took some time for me to warm up to him, but here we are. I’d trust him with my life, but I still think it’s a better idea if he doesn’t find you here if Dolohov sends out a search... at least not until I have a chance to explain. I don't *think* they'll search beyond Nott Castle to start, because we made it look like you flew out the window and the grounds are enormous. They will think the wards kept you in the perimeter. But eventually Dolohov might conclude that you snuck back inside the castle and used the floo to escape that way. You-Know-Who's floo is not monitored for obvious reasons.”

She opened the door, and once they were through slipped the Invisibility Cloak off as Mary looked around in amazement.

“Please make yourself at home. You aren’t a prisoner, but please don’t leave until I can return and we can come up with a plan to get you somewhere safe. It will probably be Monday or Tuesday before I am back. If you need something urgently you can ask my elf Posy to fetch me or else communicate with me through the portrait of Aquila in the sitting room. Posy can show you which one it is. She has a portrait in my bedroom at Malfoy Manor as well.”

Mary seemed slightly stunned, but just nodded mutely.

“Posy!” called Hermione, and the little elf appeared with a *POP!*

“Yes, Mistress?”

“Posy, this is Mary. She’s been through a terrible ordeal, and I just got her away from Nott Castle and Dolohov. Please take care of her while she’s here and do not tell anybody else where she is. I need to return back to the castle.”

Posy turned a sympathetic eye on Mary, who gave her a weak smile.

“Of course, Mistress. I is taking excellent care of Miss Mary.”

“Great,” said Hermione. “Mary, please don’t hesitate to ask for anything you want. Posy can get it for you. I do need to be getting back before Draco returns and wonders where I am.”

She nodded and as Hermione turned to leave she said, “Hermione... thank you. This is just... thanks.”

Hermione shot a grin back at her and then threw the cloak back around her before slipping out the door and down the stairs. Moments later she was standing in front of the wards, asking Theo to let her back in.

Do I want to know?

No, you don't. It's all fine, but I need to get back through please.

Theo grumbled through their connection but opened the portal. Hermione stepped through it, whipped the Cloak off of her, and transformed into Columba once more before flying back to

her room with Draco. She turned back into a human and hid the Cloak at the bottom of her bag, a plan beginning to formulate as she waited for Draco to return.

Within an hour he was back, sweaty but energetic, as he told Hermione excitedly that Blaise and Ginny had outridden all the others. He didn't notice her eyes sliding guiltily to her bag while he told her how brilliant Ginny had been. And he was in the shower and didn't hear the scream of rage that came from the fourth floor just minutes after he turned the water on.

Hermione found herself smiling broadly at the sound of Dolohov's discovery and settled herself into bed. She laced her fingers together as she placed them behind her head and then leaned back against the headboard. Her foul mood from the morning had completely disappeared.

Just like Mary and the Invisibility Cloak.

The plan Hermione came up with for that evening was slightly reckless, there was no question about it. But she also knew she would never get a better opportunity than this.

To her surprise, Dolohov had not called a search for Mary. Hermione didn't know if it was because he had kept her at Nott Castle after he was supposed to send her away or if it was because he believed he had been bested by a fourteen-year-old. Regardless of his motivations, she heard nothing more about it after that single scream, and Draco and the others were perfectly oblivious that they were another boon down. That meant the party was still on tonight, and it would give Hermione a chance she might never have again.

This time the party was Death Eaters only and no boons. As Higgs and Boles both intimated, there would surely be prostitutes there and possibly a prisoner given away to be tortured and killed. There would be drinks and potions and plenty of distractions. Draco had told her enough about these revels for Hermione to know what to expect. And for once she was in the same place as the Death Eaters, though almost none of them were aware of it. She had her wand this time. And of course she had her secret weapon back.

Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

She supposed it was hers now. She had always thought of it as Harry's, but there was little doubt in her mind that he would have handed it down to her if he had known that she would be the only member of their trio left. She had used it so many times that she was comfortable taking risks under it. It was far safer than a disillusionment charm because it was perfect. It was immune to summoning charms. And it took just a tiny crack in the fabric to cast a spell from it.

So yes, she was going to attend the party tonight, along with Luna who would be there once again in her dog form. But she would be there to cast some spells – or rather, one very

special spell.

Hermione knew that a year ago she never would have considered it. She was about to cast a very Dark spell over and over again on every single Death Eater she could manage. Harry would never have condoned it, because there was nothing about it that was honorable or good. But the part of her that belonged to Draco knew she had to take this opportunity and run with it. There was every possibility that it would be the thing that tipped the scales when the Order reemerged.

Besides, her moral compass was no longer fixed due north. Just like Draco's, it now spun to point at whatever it needed to in order to give her the biggest advantage in this war. That meant she could get on board with torture when she had to. She could kill, even if she didn't like it. And she could do this.

She didn't breathe a word of her plan to Draco, who gave her a deep kiss after dinner and promised her he wouldn't look at the prostitutes. Her stomach clenched, but there was nothing either one of them could do about it. He had to be there; he had no choice. She knew she owned his heart, and she told herself that a bevy of nearly-naked women would not change that. Besides, the prostitutes would serve as a perfect distraction for what she had in mind tonight. For once, she was a bit grateful that they would be there.

Again, she gave herself about twenty minutes after he left before gearing up, refreshing her transfiguration, and then grabbing the Invisibility Cloak. She cracked the window and transformed into Columba as she flittered out and into the same courtyard she had used earlier that day. This time it wasn't empty. There were Death Eaters already drinking, laughing, and pulling prostitutes. If Hermione had the ability to gape, she would have. She couldn't believe how many there were, milling about and starting to head through a different door toward what she knew was the same hall where the boons had been reallocated.

She scanned around to find a tree just outside the courtyard that had nobody near it, and she flew behind it, transformed quickly and then threw the cloak over herself, exhaling in relief. She silenced her feet and then moved forward, trying to select her first victim.

There. Marcus Flint.

He had his pants down and was already fucking a woman against a wall in a dark corner of the courtyard. Most of the other Death Eaters were giving him space, so he was effectively alone. She knew from Draco that he was fully loyal and committed to Voldemort.

And then there was the situation with Pansy Parkinson.

Hermione had no great love for Pansy Parkinson, but she knew that Draco cared about her in his own way. He had told her that Pansy's alliance with Flint was one of convenience and largely arranged. Still, Pansy desperately wanted Flint to be faithful to her. His acquisition of a new boon had deeply hurt her, so much so that she was considering breaking her tie with him if she could get him to agree to it. As Hermione stared at Flint's naked arse and watched him fuck yet another woman, she was a bit surprised to find herself thoroughly outraged on Pansy's behalf and concluded that Flint would be an excellent test subject for the first time

she cast this spell. If it went very poorly she felt confident she would be able to subdue him, hopefully without drawing the attention of the others.

And if it went well, then she would start at the top of her list and work her way down.

She approached him silently. The things she had read about this spell in the Black family grimoire indicated that there should be a very small flash of purple light. She should feel the magic puncture, and then like a balloon with a very slow leak, it would drain out of the victim over the course of eight to twelve weeks.

Slowly they would lose power. The amount of magical energy it took to cast the killing curse would be depleted within ten days. A couple weeks more and they wouldn't be able to stun. And on and on until their power waned back to almost nothing and they became a squib.

It was the same spell Narcissa had cast on Astoria of course, the one Hermione had spent days searching for and then studying. Hermione knew it by heart now.

The only thing the grimoire hadn't described was how it would feel for the victim. Hermione wasn't sure if they would notice it right away or if it would be something that didn't become obvious until their power began to wane in earnest. She desperately hoped it was the latter and rather thought it worked that way since Astoria didn't seem to realize she had been actively cursed; but Hermione needed to test it one time first, just in case they felt the puncture.

The only Death Eater she wouldn't be able to cast it upon was Bellatrix, because she was a member of House Black just like Hermione. But the others? Hermione fully intended to make sure that none of them would have the power to kill by the time the Order showed themselves, assuming this test run went the way she hoped it would.

Hermione parted the Invisibility Cloak so that only the tip of her wand was showing, and she placed it as close to his back as she dared while he was thrusting.

"Magicae ruinae ex aedibus Flint," she said in a barely audible whisper.

There was a small flash of violet light, and Hermione felt a rush of her own power traveling down the wand, connecting with Flint's back. She felt something swell and pop inside of her, and she pulled back in surprise, gasping at the sensation of bursting his magic.

But Flint? To Hermione's surprise and utter delight, he just flinched a little as though stung by a small insect, but evidently it wasn't painful enough to bother him. He reached around behind himself and slapped his back as though swatting a fly, but he didn't pause what he was doing. He kept fucking the prostitute, totally unaware that he had just been cursed.

"Brilliant," she whispered. She could do this. She could take their magic. She just needed to be careful and wait until they were distracted like Flint had been to overlook the small sting of the spell. She would prioritize the most dangerous Death Eaters, because it was a draining spell and required more power to cast than she had initially realized.

She crossed through a door and entered the great hall like a ghost, looking around to find her next victim. She smirked when she saw him. Dolohov was sulking in a corner, looking around at the party with a sneer on his face. He was sitting on what must have been a piece of conjured furniture, darkly sipping a drink. It was obvious to Hermione he was brooding over Mary and had no interest in being there. His expression and posture, however, were keeping the others well away from him.

Hermione crept behind him and slipped the tip of her wand through the cloak and whispered, “*Magicae ruinae ex aedibus Dolohov.*”

Again, there was a tiny flash of purple, but nobody seemed to notice it. After seeing Flint's reaction, she had intentionally aimed for the back of his neck. Dolohov twitched when the spell connected and then reached back to rub his neck as though he had a crick in it, but he seemed to shrug it off a moment later. He continued to sip his drink, and Hermione silently congratulated herself for taking the power from one of Voldemort's most deadly followers.

On and on she went.

She found Yaxley shoveling food into his face. Rowle was receiving a lap dance. Rookwood was in a group disparaging Draco in one corner. She stopped to listen for a few minutes but eventually cursed him once she concluded he had no concrete plans brewing – he was just complaining.

After her seventh cast she began to feel a bit fatigued and paused for a moment to scan the crowd. She had hit the Death Eaters' very best duelists, all except for Bellatrix. She wondered if the spell was unique to the Blacks. Some magic was, she knew. But other spells were simply obscure, passed down within families as closely guarded secrets. The adoption spell was one of those, as it had been used on Theo to tie him to the Notts instead of the Blacks. Perhaps she should ask Ginny or Luna to try cursing Bellatrix. Then again, what if Bellatrix recognized the spell once her magic began to drain? She hadn't recognized it by proximity when it came to Astoria, but other things had happened that night to distract her. Hermione was certain the other Death Eaters would keep their afflictions quiet for as long as possible and Bellatrix would not learn of the curse from them until it was too late. But if *she* was cursed with it directly would she realize that there was a leak among the Blacks who guarded that magic? Would she then remember other spells from the grimoire and become suspicious that Hermione had simply been adopted in?

Would it even matter if she could no longer cast an *Avada Kedavra*?

Hermione mulled this over as she waited to gather some strength. Her eyes drifted to Draco, who was playing cards with Theo, Blaise, and a few others. He was looking bored, while Luna lounged on the floor near his feet. He really *wasn't* looking at the nearly naked women floating about, or at least not very much. She wondered how much longer he would stay and knew she needed to keep on with it because he would be frantic if she wasn't in their room when he returned.

She had a brainwave and closed her eyes, focusing on that slippery, mercury-like magic of his. She located it and pulled some of it toward her, instantly feeling better as his magic

replenished hers. She opened her eyes to find Draco blinking in surprise. He leaned toward Theo and whispered something in his ear. A moment later Theo tapped on their bond.

Draco wants to know why you're tugging on his magic.

I'm just reminding him of his promise not to look at the prostitutes.

She felt Theo chuckle in her head as he severed their connection, and he whispered something back to Draco. She watched a smile flit across his face, and then he folded and stood, grabbing another drink from a nearby tray and settling down on a makeshift sofa. Theo and Blaise both wandered over to him a moment later, and Theo broke in again.

He says you should keep reminding him.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief to know she could use his magic to get through her list. This was precisely the sort of thing their shared magic was good for. Draco didn't need it right now, but she did.

She continued on, targeting Crabbe Senior, both Goyles, Avery, and Jugson. Then she moved on to the younger ones: Pucey, Adams, Campbell, and Burton. On and on she cast, tugging on Draco's magic after every fourth or fifth victim, until she had done it more than twenty times. As she watched him, he lounged back and closed his eyes as though savoring every tug.

She left the four Death Eaters whose boons had volunteered to stay alone, along with her own friends and Severus Snape, of course.

As the list was dwindling, she reached out to Theo again.

Are there any Death Eaters at the castle tonight who probably wouldn't fight the Order?

Why?

Just curious.

Possibly. Most of the recruits Draco brought in after Potter died wouldn't bother. Some of the younger ones probably wouldn't either.

She debated hypotheticals with him and concluded there were another twenty she needed to hit before the night was over. The rest were no real threat and would probably run the moment they sensed a true battle emerging.

She was moving over to her next target when the doors to the hall were flung open. She stiffened under the cloak as Fenrir Grayback strode in, along with a small group of fierce looking men that Hermione immediately recognized as werewolves. Suspended between them, black and blue, was the figure of Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Hermione froze, and she clutched her ring hard, willing its magic to help her stay calm.

You can't save everyone, Hermione.

No, she couldn't. And unlike Mary, trying to save Justin from whatever was about to come would be fruitless and would do nothing more than expose her and perhaps the others as well. She swallowed hard as Grayback threw him into the middle of the room. A crowd was gathering around them.

"The Dark Lord has given us this prisoner for tonight's celebrations!" he announced. Several of the Death Eaters cheered, and Hermione's stomach turned. Voldemort wasn't even here. He was famously aloof when it came to his own revels, but Draco had told her he still liked to do this. The prisoner "entertainment" always took place at Nott Castle because it was his stronghold. The farce of a government he had installed at the Ministry of Magic would never dream of looking too closely at anything that happened here.

Hermione saw Luna perking up, and Theo immediately placed a hand on her head in warning.

"Who wants a go with him?" called Grayback. "He's promised to my pack, but you all can get your jollies off first."

Dolohov stepped forward, and without saying a word to the others, he immediately hit Justin with a *cruciatus*. Justin began to scream, and Hermione felt a tear roll down her cheek as she listened to it. If only she had been able to cast the curse on Dolohov before tonight. It had only been an hour, and his magic had not been drained enough to prevent this.

When he lifted his wand, Bellatrix walked forward and took her turn.

Hermione made herself tune out the screams.

Use the distraction. Finish what you came here to do.

She tried to tell herself that Grayback and his pack were a bonus. She never imagined she would get close enough to curse him. But werewolves had an excellent sense of smell. He would be able to catch a trace of orange blossom under the cloak if she didn't time it perfectly, even as her stomach protested the thought of what would have to happen first.

No, she would have to bide her time for a few more minutes and would curse the others while she waited.

She moved through the crowd, finding the other Death Eaters she needed to curse and tugging on Draco's magic a few more times. He seemed pleased by what he was seeing as Justin was tortured in front of them, but Hermione *hoped* it was really the pull on his magic that was giving him that self-satisfied smile.

But then he stood to take his own turn, and Hermione froze.

"Finch-Fletchley," he said in that drawling tone, as he pulled his knife from his arm holster. "You once tried to take something that's mine."

Justin's dull eyes looked at Draco in confusion, and for a moment Hermione was perplexed too, until she suddenly remembered: Justin had asked her out to Hogsmeade a few times. She

had gone with him, once in third year and another time in fifth year and then sixth year. They had never *dated* exactly, and she had only snogged him one time before telling him she only wanted to be friends. It was so casual she doubted Ron and Harry even knew about it.

But Draco would have known. Of *course* he would have known. He had stalked her and had probably spent *years* stewing in his own jealousy over the few innocent dates she had given to Justin.

“Oh no,” she whispered, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from it. She took a deep breath to compose herself as Draco began.

Draco plunged his knife into the top of Justin’s thigh and then twisted, red spurting out, as he screamed.

“You don’t remember?” he asked casually, as the werewolves edged closer. The smell of blood would excite them, Hermione knew. “Maybe you’ll remember if I cut off your balls and feed them to Grayback here.”

He wrenched the knife out and then plunged it into Justin’s crotch and began to maneuver his wrist in a way that told Hermione he was severing something, and now Justin was making inhuman sounds. Hermione stared in shocked horror at the brutality of the torture. It wasn’t necessary. She and Justin had never done *anything* serious. But Draco didn’t seem to care at all. He was inciting the bloodlust of the werewolves, who were practically panting now, and the other Death Eaters around him were watching him warily.

She realized that this was yet another show to keep himself on top. He had access to a prisoner he didn’t care about *at all* – one he had been jealous of and who had probably angered him for years — and he was taking full advantage of it. Perhaps if this encounter hadn’t been in front of every other Death Eater he would have just killed Justin with an *Avada*. But here? Draco was asserting himself once again.

He could train eagles and make them hunt for him without any need for restraints.

He had tied with the most powerful boon.

He was uniting ancient fortunes to become the wealthiest among them.

His favor with Voldemort was nearly unmatched.

He was called the Knife, and he could torture and maim without any hesitation.

Hermione knew he was capable of it. How many times had come home with the faint trace of copper underlying that cedar and spice scent she so loved? How often had he told her that he had removed somebody’s body parts? But she had never seen it before because he had never allowed it. And almost just as bad were the bored looks on Theo and Blaise’s faces. They had seen him do this before, so many times that it no longer interested them. It was

only now that Hermione realized Luna was missing – evidently Theo had sent her away before Draco got started.

None of the wizards had *ever* told the witches just how awful this could be. It wasn't a secret that Draco liked to use his knives. He had never once lied to her about this. But how could Hermione and her friends really appreciate this sort of pain and suffering unless they saw it firsthand?

Hermione was utterly sick with the sights and sounds and smells of Justin being taken apart piece by piece, but she understood the intention behind it. And just as Draco was using it to secure his position firmly at the top, Hermione would use it for her own purposes too. She was no better than Draco anymore, and this was the perfect opportunity to cripple Grayback.

There was so much blood now he wouldn't be able to smell her.

She approached the werewolves, carefully, cautiously, wary of even taking a breath near them and their heightened senses. But the smell of Justin's blood filled their noses and the sounds of his screams deafened them. It was the only thing that might distract them enough for her to get away with this.

She forced herself to ignore what was happening to Justin just a few meters from her and started with Grayback first.

"Magicae ruinae ex aedibus Grayback," she whispered.

The spell connected, and he barely even flinched, so distracted was he by the entertainment Draco was giving him.

The other werewolves she hadn't known by name, but she heard them talking to each other with excitement. As she caught their surnames she moved to each one and cast against them too, until all of them had their magic stolen.

Then Hermione heard Draco say, in an almost lazy voice, "You bore me, Finch-Fletchley. *Avada Kedavra.*"

His screams immediately halted, and Hermione was grateful for it as the pack pounced. They began to eat what was left of him while some of the others looked on in disgust.

"Filthy animals," she heard a Death Eater sniff, as he cast a silencing charm over the werewolves. He was a bit green, and the others looked at him gratefully.

Hermione moved away, unwilling to look at the body of her former friend. It was too gruesome, too terrible. Even though she was a killer now too, she still hated the sight of blood. It made her feel lightheaded and ill. So instead of looking at Justin, she watched Draco *scourgify* himself lazily as he grabbed another drink and lowered himself back onto the sofa with Theo and Blaise. They gave him wry looks, and Draco just rolled his eyes.

He could be so unaffected by it? She didn't know.

How could she love him so much? She didn't know.

How could she have used Justin's torture for her own purposes? She didn't know.

Why had she already forgiven him for it? She didn't know.

But she did and she had, and then he tugged her magic back almost playfully, and Hermione felt warmth bloom inside of her. Sometimes she hated him just as much as she loved him.

She wondered if that would ever change.

She was standing there under the Invisibility Cloak, her task complete, contemplating the many facets of Draco Malfoy. *Now* she finally knew everything. *Now* it was more than just hypothetical. And she already knew what he would say if she confronted him about it.

"I never wanted you to see that, little dove. You're far too sweet for it. But you know why I had to do it. I have to stay on top for a few more weeks. It was a necessary sacrifice."

And Hermione would sigh and nod, and he would cup her face and kiss her like she was the only good thing left in the world. And secretly she would be grateful that he had a stomach for blood that she did not share, because it meant that *he* was the one who punished Cormac. *He* was the one who had stabbed Cormac in the eye and brought him so close to death that Hermione could practice the killing curse to finish it. And *he* was the one who had given her the distraction she needed to curse Grayback tonight.

It had been a sacrifice, but it *had* been important. She only hoped that Justin knew what his blood had purchased now that he was dead.

Hermione was pulled out of her thoughts as a drunk Death Eater nearly stumbled into her. She blinked and backed up, but knew it was time for her to go. She had cursed nearly fifty people, and even with the boost from Draco she was feeling very drained.

She began to turn around to leave when a pair of prostitutes caught her eye. They were making a beeline for Draco, who was still chatting with Theo and Blaise and didn't notice them. Hermione came to a halt and watched as they approached. Draco looked up in surprise just as one of them pushed his head back to kiss him, and the other's hand cupped his crotch. Even from a distance Hermione could see the bulge in his trousers that told her he was erect.

At that moment, Hermione found her line again – the thing she would not tolerate, regardless of the stalking and the torture and the murder.

She would not tolerate him being with another woman in *any* capacity. She felt a burn of deep-seated rage as she glared at the women who dared to touch her wizard like that.

She knew Draco hadn't initiated this and was caught entirely by surprise. Their tie meant he could never stray, not really. But the details of those parameters had been oddly sparse, and now Hermione wondered how far the prostitutes would be able to go before Draco would be forced to stop.

Hermione didn't wait to find out.

She tugged Draco's magic as hard as she could, and she heard him gasp as raw magic exploded out of her, streaking out from underneath the Invisibility Cloak. The two women were blasted backwards, one hitting a table with food on it, the other hitting a stone wall ten meters away. They both crumpled.

Hermione idly wondered if they were dead, but at that moment she couldn't bring herself to care. Her anger was still coursing through her, and she was feeling violent and unstable after the things she had witnessed this evening.

Several Death Eaters turned to look at Draco in shock at the commotion.

"They were going for my wand," he said in a bored voice.

This seemed to satisfy the curious bystanders, who cast one last, wary look at him, but they did not object. Of course something like that would cause him to become violent.

Hermione was breathing hard, resisting Theo who must have felt her anger through their bond, because he was tapping on it curiously. Draco's brow was furrowed, and a moment later she felt her palms tingle. His expression moved from confusion to disbelief as his eyes began to dart around, clearly trying to find her just like that night at the Ministry. But this time he was being more discreet, and he whispered to Theo who soon pushed his way in.

Hermione, Draco knows you're here.

I had something I had to do. I told him not to look at the prostitutes.

They practically jumped him. He didn't ask for it at all. You know it wasn't his fault.

Maybe not, but Justin was. I'm leaving now.

There was silence on the other side, and she saw Theo muttering quickly to Draco, whose face turned pale.

Satisfied that he knew she had seen the very worst parts of him now, she slipped quietly through the crowd. She glanced back at the picture of Draco, sitting stiffly on the couch, fingers tapping his thigh impatiently. She knew he would be checking again any minute to confirm that she had indeed left.

I stole the magic from fifty people tonight. I'm really no better than he is.

Draco had been in a fantastic mood since becoming engaged.

Hermione was back in his life. She had moved home and settled back into the Manor as though she had never left, only this time the entire wing was open to her. They tended to alternate beds, but still slept in her room more often than his. Draco was strongly considering moving into her room permanently and turning his room into her potions lab. Currently her “lab” was crammed into one corner of her sitting room, and while he no longer restricted any ingredients, it still felt very cramped.

Hermione’s room was far larger than his, and he had no great attachment to his bedroom now that his little shrine to her had been moved to a small potting shed on the grounds that was separately fideliused. Nobody could get in except for him. Hermione’s room, however, was precisely to her tastes, and she needed space for her books and dressing table, among other things. Her bathroom had a tub, while his did not. Draco felt certain that with her lab moved next door, the wardrobe with Draco’s clothes would fit perfectly well. He had never used his closet.

Yes, Draco was going to propose moving in for *real* very soon, and he could scarcely wait.

Since Hermione’s return, Draco had spent more than one night worshipping her tits and cunt with his mouth and cock. Other than a short break for her period — which had arrived right on schedule — he made a point to make her come every single day they were back together.

Each time he touched her she became more confident, more comfortable. Draco still adored slow, sensitive sex with her, but he also thought she might be willing to try something a little more adventurous soon. He was in no rush though. He would wait until it was her idea, and if she never asked for it that way, Draco would be perfectly content.

Her sweetness still left him breathless, and though she was getting bolder, she still succumbed to him so beautifully. She still looked wide-eyed and innocent. Some part of Draco wanted to bend her over and fuck her ragged, but another part of him wanted his darling Hermione to be innocent forever.

It meant he was satisfied with anything she desired.

It wasn’t just the sex and intimacy that had been wonderful. When they arrived at Nott Castle together she took charge, and Draco thought it was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen when she bossed him around in front of the other boons. It was true Draco had to prevent a small revolt after the boon reshuffle and Bellatrix had run her mouth about the Black and Malfoy fortunes joining, but Hermione had taken care of that for him too. Her performance that morning as Aquila had been spectacular. True, she had been cross with him for a time, but an afternoon relaxing by herself had done wonders for her mood. By the time she sent him off to the revel tonight he sensed no lingering resentment from her, and all was as it should be between them.

Things had been going perfectly up until the revel.

As usual, the revel had been fairly boring until the promised prisoner arrived. Draco had no interest in prostitutes, so he gambled away a few thousand galleons while he waited for the prisoner torture bit to roll around, fully intending to take his leave soon after and rejoin his witch at a reasonable hour. That was especially true once she began to tug on his magic. All

he could think about was burying himself into her tight, delicious little cunt, and he couldn't do that while sitting in the hall. Draco was very pleased when the prisoner arrived a bit ahead of schedule so they could get on with it.

It really wasn't Draco's fault that Finch-Fletchley had been caught trying to assassinate one of the junior ministers at the Ministry of Magic. He had been idiotic, careless. He wasn't even doing it on behalf of the Order, who had been alarmed when they heard of the attempt. Finch-Fletchley was part of some other rogue group that was very small and poorly organized. Draco had force-fed him some veritaserum after his capture and now had a list of names that would be rounded up soon. The Dark Lord had signed off on it, and the Order had too.

Neither side wanted any competition, it seemed.

If Finch-Fletchley hadn't been so fucking stupid Draco would never have called Greyback, who collected him after the veritaserum was administered. It wasn't *Draco's* fault Greyback decided to make him tonight's entertainment. If that ridiculous sod had just joined the Order and fought in a more organized skirmish, Draco could have taken him out like Viktor Krum: a quick *Avada*, and that would have been the end of it.

Krum had never made it out of Bill Weasley's wedding of course. Hermione had been Draco's first priority that evening, but once he saw her apparate away with Potter and Weasley, he turned his attention to Krum. The world had lost a talented quidditch player that night, but nobody was terribly surprised that Krum became a casualty of war once it became known that he was at a blood traitor's wedding just as the Ministry of Magic fell.

Draco had been more than happy to do the honors, and Hermione didn't seem too torn up about it. It wasn't like she had ever asked Draco what happened to the lecherous bastard.

But no, Finch-Fletchley evidently fancied himself an assassin, so when he fucked it up he was destined to experience something far more violent than a simple *Avada*.

"Maybe you shouldn't have tortured him," said Theo wryly.

Draco's jaw was clenched as he continued to track Hermione's progress out of the hall. He couldn't see her at all, which was driving him a bit mad. She should be *right there*, but there wasn't a damn thing...

"You know why I did that," muttered Draco, his eyes still glued toward the exit.

Theo sighed and nodded.

"She'll be fine," said Blaise in a bracing voice. "She took out those prostitutes for you, didn't she? That means she cares."

Draco glanced at the body of one of the prostitutes who was being levitated out of the hall by one of the elves. He was unsure if she was dead, but he rather thought she might be.

"You think?" asked Draco with interest, as he considered it.

“Definitely,” said Blaise. “That’s a sign, mate.”

Draco tracked her again. She was out in the courtyard now, and his momentary lightness as he thought about her murdering for him vanished. He tensed.

“Why is it always something?” he grumbled.

“It’s because you’re a colossal fuck up when it comes to Hermione,” answered Theo.

Draco glared at him. “Fuck you. I’ve gotten a lot better recently. Besides, it’s not like I knew she was here! You sent Luna away, didn’t you? You didn’t want her to know what it was like either.”

Theo’s mouth thinned, but he inclined his head in acknowledgment.

“Fine. You’re right. There are some things the girls never needed to know.”

Blaise was nodding in agreement, and Draco’s stomach sank.

“But now Hermione does...” he said.

He tracked her again. She was at the edge of the courtyard now. Evidently whatever spell she used to make herself invisible was working.

“Go to her once she’s in your room and work your magic on her,” advised Blaise.

“Apologize if you have to. She may be pissed off for a day or two, but she always comes around mate.”

“Blaise is right,” agreed Theo, evidently taking pity on him now. “You didn’t know she was there. Would you have been that brutal if you knew?”

Draco thought about this.

“No,” he said, perking up a bit. “I probably would have left his balls on.”

“There you go,” said Theo with encouragement. “Just apologize for the blood and tell her you went a little overboard with it.”

Had he gone overboard? Finch-Fletchley was the last of Hermione’s former love interests. All the rest were dead now, much to Draco’s delight. Draco had watched that fucking Hufflepuff carry a torch for her for *years*. And Hermione continued to give him dates and then there was that hot snog he witnessed...

Draco was sure Finch-Fletchley had rubbed more than a few out while thinking of Draco’s girl. He truly didn’t feel that guilty for how far he had gone. He only wished Hermione hadn’t seen it.

Then again, maybe I shouldn’t have castrated him.

Draco was fairly certain he wouldn't have done that if he had known Hermione was there. He would have stuck to the legs or arms — he wouldn't have actually cut anything off.

It was a strange sensation, indeed, recognizing that Hermione's approval for the way he treated prisoners was enough to make him consider exercising some restraint in the future. Perhaps the next time he tortured somebody he would pretend his forgiving little dove was watching him work. Maybe he would just cut their carotid so they would bleed out quickly instead of choosing a method that was as slow and painful as the thing he had done to Finch-Fletchley. He was talented enough with a knife and dark magic that he could exert his position using other methods.

That restraint wouldn't apply to anybody who had hurt Hermione, of course. Dolohov was going to be nothing more than a pile of body parts by the time Draco was through with him. That scar on her abdomen made him burn with suppressed rage every time he saw it. But when it came to others for whom it was less personal? Maybe it was time to grow a little and turn a new leaf. Draco could become a better man for his darling girl and kill them faster next time. He knew she hated all the blood.

Internally marveling at the changes Hermione had wrought in him, Draco nodded to himself. He would throw himself upon her forgiving nature once again. She would understand why he had done it after he explained himself. He would give her comfort so she could process the things she had seen tonight and help her forget them. He would make absolutely certain she wasn't frightened of him. And like Blaise pointed out, she had hurt those prostitutes in the immediate aftermath so surely she wasn't *that* angry with him.

It would be fine.

He tracked her again and now she was in the air, clearly headed toward their room. He breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't running from him, then. Of course she wasn't. She knew there was no point in it, and she loved Draco now. She accepted the good and the bad. Once Draco talked her down, everything would be just as it should be between them.

"Right," he said, draining his drink. "I'm going to find her."

"Good luck mate," said Theo.

"You might consider fucking it out of her," advised Blaise.

Theo swiped at his head, and Blaise ducked with a laugh.

But Blaise's words were echoing in Draco's mind as he left the hall and headed toward the staircase to their room.

Apologize first and then fuck it out of her.

Draco was ready to do just that. Perhaps the day would end on a high note after all.

Chapter 36: Nagini

Hermione didn't know how she made it back to their room. As she slipped back into the courtyard and darted behind the same tree to turn into Columba, she was coming to grips with the fact that she hadn't tried to stop the horrible thing that had happened to Justin. No, she had *used* it. She had been distressed and disgusted by it, but she wasn't as angry about it as she knew she ought to be. It made Draco safer from those who wanted to watch him fall, and it allowed her to get close to the werewolves without detection.

That was all she needed to justify it.

Draco hadn't stopped tracking her, and by the time she flew through the window of their room, her chest was almost numb from the tingling. She transformed in a huff as she realized she was angrier about the prostitutes than Justin's brutal torture and subsequent death. *That* had been the thing that triggered an explosion of magic from her.

I'm a terrible person. We both are.

She knew this. She hadn't changed so much that she was unaware of how the old Hermione would have reacted to the things she saw tonight. But everything that had happened to her since the Battle of Hogwarts had left its mark, and the Hermione of today was capable of watching her former classmate – a boy she had once kissed – be hurt and die in a truly horrifying manner.

What she *wasn't* capable of was watching another woman grope her wizard. She idly wondered if Draco's own magic had anything to do with the possessive rage she had felt.

Hermione canceled her disguise as soon as she transformed back. She had just stashed the Invisibility Cloak in her bag and slipped on a nightgown when the door to their room opened, and Draco strode through it, looking at her warily.

She crossed her arms and pursed her lips but said nothing, as his eyes narrowed on her. Then she noticed the smudge of lipstick on his cheek. Anger sparked again, and she waved her hand to vanish it before huffing and turning her back on him.

"Hermione, surely you must know why I did it."

He's talking about Justin.

She said nothing and just moved to the loo to finish her nightly routine. She took her time with it, mulling over her truly warped priorities, but she had no great insights. When she finally emerged he was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking tense.

"Hermione, talk to me please."

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry there was so much blood. I didn’t realize you were there and—”

“Yes, I’m obviously aware of that. Nobody knew I was there.”

She turned her back on him and found her eyes welling up, but it *wasn’t* because of Justin, or at least not entirely.

I’m a terrible person.

“Hermione,” he said gently, gripping her wrist, but she sniffed and yanked it out as she crossed her arms again.

He sighed and stood, and she felt him place his hands on her shoulders and begin to knead them a little.

She really hated how good it felt.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I told you that the others are looking to knock me out of my spot. I don’t always participate in torture, but tonight I really had no choice. And honestly, when I saw him all I could remember was watching you on a date with him in Hogsmeade and then kissing him behind Honeydukes...”

She spun around to look at him in surprise. “You saw us kissing?”

She was sure he would have known about the dates, but the kiss surprised her. She thought they had privacy that day.

He frowned down at her. “Of course I saw it. I followed both of you all day, and you never noticed me. If it hadn’t been for the other Death Eaters I would have just thrown an *Avada* at him and been done with it. But I have a reputation, sweet girl. I had to uphold it, and I... might have gotten a bit carried away.”

She turned her back on him again.

“Please, Hermione, forgive me.”

She was chewing her lip and finally said, “I’m not as mad about it as I ought to be.”

He moved to stand in front of her and cupped her face just like she knew he would. “Thank you, little dove. You’re always so generous and forgiving when it comes to me. I know I don’t deserve it.”

He leaned down to kiss her, and she pulled away. He furrowed his brow in confusion.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not angry!” she insisted, as she stomped her foot. Then to her horror the tears start in earnest, and she looked away from him as she sniffed.

“Hey,” he said with concern. “Talk to me. I don’t understand...”

“Those women!” she burst out. “You didn’t push them away!”

He looked at her incredulously. “You’re mad that a couple of prostitutes threw themselves at me?”

“I’m mad because you didn’t curse them yourself! *And* you seemed to be enjoying it!”

She looked pointedly at his crotch as she said this, before wiping her eyes angrily and glancing back up at his face. He just raised one eyebrow.

“Hermione, you were tugging on my magic all night. You know that makes me hard.”

She scowled and looked away again, but she caught a speculative gleam in his eye before she did it.

“Is that what this is about then?” he asked, as he took a step closer and ran a finger along the edge of her neckline. “You aren’t mad that I cut off your ex-boyfriend’s balls... you’re angry that the prostitutes surprised me so much that I didn’t react as quickly as you did?”

Hermione said nothing, and he reached up to touch her neck. Involuntarily her eyes fluttered closed.

“Come on sweet girl, talk to me.”

Dammit, he was using that voice and doing those things to her that always, *always* meant she confessed.

“Yes,” she breathed. “That and... I’m mad that this is the thing I’m mad *about*. I should be furious about Justin! And he’s not my ex-boyfriend!”

“He took you on three dates and kissed you. He’s as good as an ex in my book. But it’s okay that you aren’t that mad about him,” Draco said, and Hermione thought she heard approval and maybe even a little excitement in his voice. “You aren’t angry, because you love *me* now, and you know just how precarious my position is. You understand that even with the Dark Lord’s favor we’re living on top of a house of cards, and it cannot fall. It’s the other women that bother you, even though I barely spared them a glance tonight. You know I’m all yours...”

“I didn’t like it.”

“No,” he said. “And I certainly don’t blame you for attacking them. I wouldn’t like it if some bloke groped *you* like that, either. I can assure you that I was about to hex them myself. You just reacted faster than I did. But it does beg the question... what were you doing there tonight anyway? And how were you hiding so well? I didn’t see anyone leave the hall when you did... there was no shimmer of magic and no birds fluttering about...”

Hermione sighed and looked up at him. “You can’t get angry.”

His face darkened at this.

“Hermione, what did you do?” he asked in a warning voice.

She chewed on her lip, now feeling nervous in addition to some lingering anger. She knew she needed to tell him about it, but she also knew he might react poorly to it.

There was nothing for it.

“I found Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. And I used it to steal the other Death Eaters’ magic.”

Draco went perfectly still as his hand dropped to her shoulder and gripped it.

“How?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Susan told me Dolohov had the Cloak. I broke into his room while everyone was at the hunt this afternoon, and I found it. I stole it and... I might have rescued his boon too...”

“Hermione,” he groaned, his eyes closing in dismay.

“She was fourteen Draco! Barely fourteen, and he had her chained to the wall by the neck! It was fine, I got her to Grimmauld Place, changed the wards so she and I are the only people who can get in, and I made it back without anybody discovering what I had done. We staged it to look like she escaped all on her own, and Dolohov hasn’t even reported it yet. He knows he screwed up by keeping her here alone.”

He gave a deep sigh and opened his eyes again, studying her face intently.

“Fine. I’ll ignore the boon for now. But what’s this about the magic?”

She grimaced. “It was the same spell your mother performed on Astoria. I cast it on... well, nearly everyone.”

His eyes widened, as he looked at her in amazement.

“*Everyone?*”

“Almost,” she said. “Obviously I left you, Blaise, and Theo alone. And I didn’t cast it on Snape. I couldn’t cast it on Bellatrix because we’re in the same House. And I left a few others who are so lowly ranked that they barely count. But yes... everybody else. It was about fifty people in all. That’s why I kept pulling on your magic. The spell is a little tiring.”

He looked utterly stunned. “Remind me how the spell works.”

“It will drain their magic completely over eight to twelve weeks. None of them seemed to realize what was happening. I am certain they will all try to keep it a secret for as long as they can once they understand what’s happening to them. Within the next few weeks the unforgivables should be impossible for them.”

“Merlin,” he breathed, his eyes huge.

“And I got the werewolves too... while you were torturing Justin. The blood masked my scent so I could get close enough to them for it.”

His hand tightened reflexively on her shoulder, and he pulled her into him.

“Never, *ever* again...”

“I had to, Draco, it’s a huge advantage.”

“I’ll not deny it, but *Hermione*... the risks you took...”

“We’re both taking risks,” she insisted. “The Invisibility Cloak is perfect, absolutely flawless. I’ve used it for years and know precisely what its limits are. We have to play to our strengths and do some terrible things if we’re going to beat him. I had to take their magic when I had the chance to do it, and you have to play your part at those revels, even though I *hate* that you keep going to them...”

He pulled back and looked down at her. “Don’t think twice about those fucking prostitutes. How could I ever want them when I have you?”

Hermione’s face fell. “They know what they’re doing better than me.”

He tilted her chin up. “And I’ve told you before, you don’t have to know anything about it, my darling. Not a single thing. Everything we’ve done together... it’s better than anything I’ve had from any others, I swear it. All I’ve ever wanted was you, even when I was with other women. You were always the one I dreamed about, fantasized about... And then you haul off and drain the magic from the Dark Lord’s most dangerous fighters and tug on my magic all night while you do it... is it any wonder I’m so obsessed?”

“I should be angry with you.”

“And I should be *furious* with you...”

“But you aren’t,” she said.

“No, because you pulled off something that will give us an enormous advantage. I can scarcely comprehend it. And you aren’t angry with *me* because every single thing I do is for you and for us together — so we can be safe and love each other out in the open someday. I don’t care how many people I have to hurt or kill to get there, and I know you don’t either, not really. That’s how I know you’ve already forgiven me for your ex. I’ll admit I went a little overboard, but it served a purpose. He didn’t die in vain. And I know you’re still angry about those other women, but I didn’t call them over to me. They surprised me and touched me entirely on their own, and you handled them beautifully.”

“I think I killed them.”

“But you didn’t use *Avada*. You shouldn’t feel any aftereffects.”

Hermione paused as she considered this. He was right: this *didn’t* feel the same way as using a spell to take a life. If she had killed them it had been had through traumatic injury, not

direct magic.

“No...” she said slowly. “No, I don’t.”

“So how do you feel then?”

“I... don’t care about it as much as I probably should.”

And it was true. She didn’t care that much because Draco was right about all of it. She would also torture and kill to be free to love him openly and without the taint of the war over them. Besides, she was a terrible person now. But she was *Draco’s* terrible person, and he thought she was perfect so it didn’t matter.

None of it mattered.

“Good girl,” he said, as his lips lowered to hers. He groaned when she opened for him, and he pulled her in close so she could feel his erection before wrenching his mouth away.

“This is all yours. I was hard all fucking night because you were using my magic to eliminate the others. I can’t tell you how badly I’ve wanted to be inside of you instead of sitting in that hall playing cards. Not even torturing your ex made me satisfied.”

Hermione’s hands drifted down to the same place where the prostitute’s had been not that long ago, and she squeezed a little.

“*Fuck...*” he breathed. “Yes, just like that. All yours, sweet girl.”

“Can I see it again?”

The words just slipped out, but she wanted to. They had been together several more times now, but he was careful not to give her a full view of his cock ever since that day it gave her a panic attack. He made love to her under the privacy of sheets and kept himself covered when he wasn’t inside of her. But Hermione wanted to try it again. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he was around women who sold their bodies on a regular basis. Or maybe she had finally done enough, seen enough, that she believed she could move past it now.

She wanted to see it. She wanted to watch him become weak for her. She wanted to be certain that it wasn’t just pretty words, and he would never look at another woman but her.

Draco said nothing to her request, but stepped back and quickly undressed. As he slid his pants down he sat back on the bed and began to stroke himself as he looked at her. She was in a thinner nightgown tonight. She had placed her hair ribbon in the loo, taking care to do it just the way he liked it. She had been angry with him, yes, but not so angry that she left it off in protest. She had no bra and small knickers. She was prepared for bed. She felt her nipples hardening under his gaze.

“You’re lovely. And you should look at me for as long as you want. Do anything to it you wish,” he said.

Hermione allowed herself to study it. She knew it fit inside of her now, even if the initial moment of entry was still a bit precarious for her. They had had penetrative sex several more times since the night of their tying, and she had enjoyed it.

It wasn't quite so scary anymore and neither was allowing him to see her without any clothes on. She took a deep breath and gathered her courage as she pulled the nightgown over her head.

His breath hitched, and he stared at her hungrily, his eyes darting over every part of her, memorizing her. His hand continued to pump almost unconsciously. He wasn't even blinking.

She walked toward him slowly, her eyes on him and his on her. She made it to the nightstand and slipped her ring off. Her eyes closed for a moment as she felt her nerves come back, but they were lesser tonight. She still wanted him, wanted *this*.

"I've seen those other women do something... I thought I might try it."

He looked spellbound and just nodded. "Anything you want."

"I'm nervous."

"That's okay. You can give it to me."

With that, Hermione took a deep breath and sank to her knees.

Draco released himself and stared down at her in shock.

"Hermione, are you really going to—"

"Tell me what to do," she said, cutting him off as she leaned forward and gave his cock a small lick.

Her heart was racing, but the strangled cry he made as soon as she did it steadied her.

I can make him come undone. I can make him weak.

"No teeth," he gasped. "And eyes on me. I want to see you watching me... I imagined this so many times..."

Hermione nodded a little and raised her eyes to fix on his face as she gave another lick, longer and slower this time.

His jaw dropped, as he groaned, and Hermione was a bit surprised it was this easy.

"Put your hand around the base. Pump for me. And play with the tip. Wrap your lips around it... oh *fuck*..."

She felt his hand reach around her head, and his fingers tangled in her curls. He was guiding her along, setting a rhythm as she opened her mouth and let him fully in.

“Gods just look at you,” he breathed as he stared down at her. “Topless and on your knees for me, sucking me off with that perfect mouth. A pretty ribbon in your hair and looking at me with doe eyes after I tortured and killed your ex... and then you blasted those bitches who dared touch me... we’re both jealous aren’t we? We’ll hurt anybody who touches the other one. That’s because we need each other my darling... just you and me together like we were always meant to be. You’re such a good fucking girl for me...”

Hermione’s own eyes fluttered closed at his words. They always managed to melt her. He could be so crude and so cruel, but he was telling her the truth and celebrating it. They *were* both jealous, violently so. He had always been unapologetic about it, and now so was she. It was a match made in Heaven. Or perhaps Hell. Hermione couldn’t be sure.

She settled into the rhythm and pace he was setting for them. She breathed through her nose and opened her throat to take him in deeper, letting herself sink into him just a little. The groan he rewarded her with made her own heat begin. She was soaked, eager, that tightness building again. She wanted him in other places. She wished for that release.

She was feeling bolder tonight, reckless. It had been an emotional day, and she wanted to get it out.

Without stopping to consider what she was about to do, Hermione released him from her mouth before rising and pushing her knickers down so she was naked.

Draco’s eyes opened and then widened when he realized what she was about to do. She flung a leg over him and said, “I’m still cross.”

She clenched her stomach to steady herself as she sank down, but the moment he was inside of her, she breathed a sigh of relief and began to move. Draco’s hands lifted to hold her in place. “You’re still cross?”

“Mmmm,” she said.

“Do you want to rage fuck me then?”

Hermione paused as she considered this. There was a glint in Draco’s eyes. “Maybe,” she acknowledged. “What would that be like?”

“Maybe like this...” and he thrust up, harder than she was used to. She gasped, and her eyes widened.

He was watching her closely, and then did it again, and she leaned against him. “More,” she breathed. “I was so angry with you *all day*...”

Draco’s eyes lit, and he began to move harder, faster, gripping her to him until all she could feel was him pushing her to the very edge of awareness. Hermione could scarcely believe she was able to do this, but here they were, rage fucking each other just as he said, and Hermione loved it. She craved it.

“Goddammit...” muttered Draco, as he threw his head back and tried to breathe through it.
“I never knew if you’d let me do it like this...”

“Help me get it out,” she demanded.

At this, Draco lifted her under the bum and tossed her back on the bed before moving over her and back into her so swiftly she barely noticed they had been separated at all. He leaned back on his knees and pulled her hips up to him as he unleashed himself on her, snapping his hips as his mouth dropped and his brow furrowed.

Hermione shattered instantly, and then it built and broke again. She opened one bleary eye to see Draco’s face transformed as he watched her, in obvious disbelief that she was letting him use her this way. But it felt wonderful, freeing, and oddly safe. He would pound her within an inch of consciousness but would never hurt her while he did it. And for once, Hermione’s mind left her, having no more fear or anticipation of what they were doing. He was fucking every bit of anger and frustration out of her, leaving behind a version of herself that no longer cared just how far she would go to be with him.

When he finally licked his thumb and pressed it on her clit, Hermione’s vision wrenched. She barely noticed it moments later when he came with a groan, emptying himself into her. She was too far gone, finally at peace, and able to see the day through new eyes.

She had made three kills as Aquila and set a new record.

She had successfully rescued Mary and the Invisibility Cloak from Dolohov.

She had depleted the magic from nearly fifty Death Eaters and werewolves.

She had hurt the women who dared touch her wizard.

Hermione opened her eyes to find Draco’s silver ones staring at her with something that looked like adoration. He tugged on her magic and then made her palms tingle before leaning in for a deep kiss.

God, but she loved him.

When he pulled back to look at her one last time, he smiled down at her.

“Feeling better, my darling?”

“Much.”

The last morning at Nott Castle was spent with the usual pandering before Draco announced the wizards were free to ride the estate. Hermione transformed into Aquila, and she flew

down to the stables where Draco, Theo, and Blaise were saddling up their horses – two real ones, plus Ginny. Draco's horse was a stunning pure gray that reminded Hermione of his eyes and the coloring of Columba. Theo's horse was a blonde with blue eyes that were so similar to Luna's that Hermione did a double take.

But no, it wasn't Luna. She was there in her dog form.

Together the group set out, the wizards riding through a rough trail in the woods, with Luna following along behind and Hermione doing lazy circles above. They were going to visit Nagini this morning, whom Theo had found housed on the very edge of the estate on a previous visit.

It took nearly an hour of riding for them to approach the area that housed her. There was a small clearing in the woods that Hermione could see well from an aerial view, but it was so tucked away that it didn't surprise her that it had taken them several visits to find her. With Aquila's exceptional vision Hermione could see an enormous wall of wards that shimmered out fifty meters in all directions. It had a domed top, where the wards seem to meet. The area where she was held captive was large, and Hermione circled slowly to join the others when they finally reached the edge of it.

"Stay as you are," said Draco, as she landed on a branch and peered through the wards.
"She's in there."

Hermione caught the faint glimpse of Nagini's body, undulating to move through the brush toward the carcass of some dead animal. She didn't notice the group, entirely preoccupied by her meal. If Hermione could have made a facial expression as an eagle, she would have grimaced.

"It's taken us a long time to figure out how she's being kept alive," said Theo in a quiet voice. "The Dark Lord has been using a few low-level Death Eaters to bring her food, before obliterating her location from their minds. She's a python. She only has to eat every ten days or so, but I was lucky enough to catch a feeding the last time we were here. I was disillusioned so they didn't notice me."

"And the wards?" asked Draco.

Theo just shook his head. "They are all his. They aren't tied to Nott Castle like the perimeter wards. She's in some unique, protective bubble. I have not been able to identify them."

Hermione reached out through their bond.

Theo, how do they get food in? Do they have a way of lowering the wards when they feed her?

Theo grimaced. "Hermione wants to know how they get food in. They just throw it. It appears that animal carcasses can pass through the wards."

Hermione cocked her head at this and then fluttered to the ground before transforming back into herself and then into Columba very quickly. She launched herself back into the air.

“Hermione!” hissed Draco, but she ignored him.

She was an animagus, not a true bird, but anti-animagi wards were exceedingly rare. The only one she had ever encountered in real life was the ward Draco placed on Crookshanks’ cat door to prevent Hermione from getting into his room before she left for Grimmauld Place. Without anti-animagi wards, she would be recognized as an animal, or at least she thought she would be. And she was the only one of them who could fly. She would be in no danger from the snake while in the air.

She glanced down at Draco and saw that his jaw was tight, but he also looked intrigued. No doubt he was wondering precisely the same thing: would the witches be able to pass the wards in their animal forms?

Tell Draco I’m not going to get close to the snake like this. I just want to see if we can pass. You all should stay back so she doesn’t see you. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but she can communicate with Voldemort.

Hermione saw Theo whisper to Draco, who looked surprised, and all three wizards, Ginny, and Luna backed away slowly until they were fully hidden from Nagini’s view. Hermione looked down and saw them watching her in the air as she took a deep breath and circled down toward the edge of the shimmering barrier in lazy spirals.

She glided slowly, fully prepared to fly back into the air again if it hurt or repelled her, but to her surprise and delight she felt nothing but a slight shudder as she crossed it.

It worked!

The snake didn’t seem to notice her as she fluttered to a branch.

She took in the surroundings, knowing this might be the only chance she would get to do it. They would not be killing the snake today. The plan had always been to kill the snake right before Voldemort, and they would be sticking to it. But this was an opportunity for reconnaissance, and she knew she had a far better view than any of the others.

The enclosure was warm, almost sweltering, and the air felt thick. It was stifling, and she felt some sort of oppressive magic inside of it that made her feathers ruffle and told her she should not return to her human form. The ground was mostly bare, though there were a few flat rocks for the snake to sun herself. The small grove of trees appeared to be dying, as though this portion of the forest never received any rain.

How odd.

The snake itself was enormous. Hermione knew this of course, having fought her once, but she had never gotten such a close and unobstructed view. As Theo said, Nagini was a python – specifically, a Burmese python – her scales in a green and gold diamond pattern that clearly projected just how dangerous she was. She was easily five meters in length, and as Hermione watched, she slithered toward an animal carcass that must have been left out earlier that day and consumed it whole.

Hermione was fairly certain it was a deer.

Hermione gulped and fluttered away back toward the barrier. She gasped when she reached it, feeling it press in on her like glass.

Oh no.

Was the barrier one-way? Were animals allowed in but not out? If so, this was very, *very* bad news.

Hermione, what's going on?

Theo must have felt her nerves spiking.

Just a small complication. Give me a minute to think.

What complication?

I might be a little stuck. But there has to be a way out, just give me a second.

There was a pause as Theo communicated this with the others.

Draco is freaking out. He's about to come in there with you.

No! Something about the magic feels very wrong! I think it's fatal to humans. Just let me think! If he has any ideas he can communicate them to me through you, but he should not cross those wards!

There was another pause, and Hermione felt some sort of odd bubbling with her magic. It was as though Draco was pushing *his* magic into hers. It was an almost heady feeling as he seemed to be pouring his magic into her.

Draco says that every ward has a weak point. You need to find it, Hermione. He thinks this one will be high up, some place where Nagini cannot reach to force herself through.

Of course.

She made herself calm down and think about the ward theory she had studied. Draco was slightly better at wards than she was, but only slightly. Surely they could solve this together, and her bond with Theo was still working well.

Calm down, Hermione. Think. Remember everything you've read about this.

Sometimes wards could be bypassed if one could find the weak point. Every ward had a weak point, generally the place where everything connected to itself. Wizards who were very good at wards usually hid the weak point against something else impenetrable — a building or other structure that was impossible to sneak through. Draco's own wards at Malfoy Manor were certainly like that, and Hermione had never found the weak point in *his*. That was why she had been forced to break them magically. But here, they were in the forest, and the wards were creating a sort of large bubble. Hermione knew that Draco was right to think the weak

point would likely be in the air. Nagini was mostly a ground dweller, as were all the animals who would be her prey. Something about this magic was very harmful to humans, Hermione was certain of it. Only an animagus who could fly would have any hope of finding that weak point and forcing their way back through it. The possibility was so remote that Voldemort *surely* wouldn't have accounted for it when constructing this prison.

Hermione took to the air and began to fly against the edge of the ward, hoping she would be able to spot it. She glanced down and saw Draco looking tense as he watched her flying in increasingly tight circles to press against the dome, looking for that section that would just *give* a little.

It took nearly twenty minutes of flying before she finally felt it: a soft spot, a section that flexed when she pushed.

Theo, I think I found it! Tell Draco to get ready...

Hermione had never tried this before while in one of her animagi forms, but there was nothing for it. She glanced down and saw that Draco seemed to know precisely what she was about to do, because he had preemptively braced himself against a tree. His eyes were glued to her, his jaw was clenched, and she could feel him starting to push his magic toward her harder than ever, as she pulled it toward herself and gathered it before trying her utmost to then push it *out*.

It was one of the most challenging things she had ever done, but she channelled that power, and she tried to remind herself that she was still a witch. She had wandless magic. She might be a bird at the moment, but that didn't mean she couldn't use her body as a magical conduit, however small it was.

She strained against the soft spot in the wards, concentrating and flapping with all her might, and suddenly she felt that area give ever so slightly as the combination of her own magic and Draco's helped her force her way through them. It felt like she was being coated by something almost gelatinous as she finally emerged on the other side with a great gasp.

She glanced down and saw Draco and the others slumping with relief. Hermione was drained as she fluttered back down and perched on the pommel of Draco's horse. She would ride back. She didn't think she had any energy to fly.

Theo, tell the others we need to go. I have no idea if Voldemort was able to sense that.

Theo's eyes widened in alarm at the prospect, and he hurried Draco back on his horse before they all took off through the woods at a brisk pace.

"Are you alright?" came Draco's voice as he stroked her neck.

Hermione gave an exhausted *coo* and leaned into his hand.

"That was absolutely mad. I want you to know that I am not at all pleased by what you just did."

Hermione just closed her eyes and sank into him as much as her little bird form could. Draco pressed himself gently against her and held her to him, as though shielding her from anything or anyone who might spot her.

And they continued the long journey back, Hermione's mind ground back into action as she started mulling over the question of Nagini. The snake was fast, vicious, and Hermione was not at all keen to be on the ground with her. Hermione was almost certain that humans couldn't be within the wards at all without something terrible happening to them. The enclosure had felt *wrong*, the air thick and uninviting. Even though they knew where the weak point in the wards were, there was no good way for any of the others to cross them to test her theory about the enclosure. They would have to escape from the air, and for everybody else that would require being human on brooms.

A dangerous, but intriguing idea started to percolate in Hermione's mind as she and the others made their way back toward the stables. They spoke little, knowing that they couldn't talk freely here. The thing they had just discovered was too important to risk even a whisper of it at Nott Castle, lest another Death Eater overhear.

Once inside the stables, Draco performed a *hominum revelio* to confirm they were alone, and then the wizards dismounted and began to unsaddle the horses. When Ginny was bare again, all three girls transformed back into themselves. Draco took a moment to hug Hermione close.

"Never again," he whispered in her ear, but she just grimaced back. She knew it would be happening again, at least one more time. There was no choice.

Hermione took a moment to compose herself before pulling out the Invisibility Cloak she had brought with her and throwing it over all three of them. She noticed the looks of surprise from Theo and Blaise, but Ginny just gave her a relieved look, and Luna appeared only slightly intrigued. Once they had vanished, they began the slow, shuffling walk toward the portal at the edge of the wards, while the wizards moved back to the castle itself.

They would all meet up to debrief once they were within their wing of the Manor.

"What do you reckon?" breathed Ginny, as they got to the edge of the wards.

"I might have an idea," whispered Hermione. "But let's wait until we're all together before I tell you."

Ginny nodded, and Hermione reached out to Theo.

We're ready for you to open the wards. Nobody is around.

A moment later the portal shimmered, and the three girls crossed through it.

Done, she said, and it closed again. They turned to apparate back to Malfoy Manor, and fifteen minutes later they were waiting for the wizards to let them into their warded wing and pulling the invisibility cloak off of themselves.

A few minutes after that they all settled into Hermione's room to discuss, with Hermione leaning against Draco tiredly. He pressed a reinvigoration draught into her hand and watched carefully as she drank every drop before he broke the silence. She slumped with relief as the magic began to work, and her energy started to return.

"Well?" he finally said.

Hermione took a deep breath and made herself sit up. "Obviously animagi can cross, but the wards are one-way, except for that single weak point in the sky. But like I told Theo, I think it's too dangerous to be human inside of the enclosure, so I think I'm the only one who will be able to get in *and* out."

He cocked a skeptical eyebrow at her, and Hermione just shook her head.

"I can't explain it. It's just... something about the magic felt wrong. It was thick, almost viscous. It was in the air itself, not just the perimeter wards."

Draco huffed an exhale and leaned back, obviously thinking hard.

"I was going to suggest having us fly in on brooms, sit on a tree limb, and cast *Avada's* at her until one of us lands a hit," he confessed.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I think that's too risky. I really think her enclosure is dangerous to humans."

"What then?" asked Theo. "We all know she has to die first."

Hermione licked her lips. She couldn't believe she was going to suggest this.

"I think we should go to the goblins for some custom talon covers."

"What are you on about?" asked Draco in confusion.

Hermione glanced at him. "I need something very sharp that we can use to cover my real talons. Think of it like a glove, one for each claw. We can adhere them to my talons with a sticking charm so that I can fly with them. They need to be goblin-made metal and hopefully lightweight."

"And why is that?" asked Blaise in confusion.

"Because goblin-made metal imbibes that which strengthens it. And if we dip them into basilisk venom first, then I can kill her as Aquila."

To say that Draco was not thrilled by Hermione's suggestion would have been an understatement.

"You can't possibly believe we're going to let you take care of this by yourself," he insisted.

"How is it any different than your suggestion of flying in on a broom, sitting on a tree branch, and throwing *Avadas* at her?" asked Hermione in consternation.

"Because she can't climb a fucking tree, and you wouldn't have to get close to her that way!"

"Burmese pythons can absolutely climb trees," she admonished him. "I've done my research."

"Only young ones," he countered. "When they get as large as Nagini they become ground dwellers. I've *also* done my research."

Their friends were looking back and forth between them as though it was a tennis match.

"Well if you can come up with some other solution, I'm all ears. But there are only three ways to kill her, and two of them require wands. If we can't transform into a human inside of her bubble, then wands are off the table, and that only leaves basilisk venom. Ginny, Luna, and I are the only ones who will be able to get into her enclosure to administer it to her, and out of the three of us, I'm the only one who can get back out again, unless you can figure out how to bring down his wards entirely."

"Wait, why are those the only ways to kill her?" asked Ginny, chiming in. "I know that's what you've said, Hermione, but can you explain why? If we could crack the wards, couldn't I trample her or something?"

Hermione exchanged a glance with Draco and sighed. She supposed that Ginny and Luna deserved to know the whole tale. When she finally finished explaining it to them, they both looked appalled.

"Great Merlin, that's terrifying," concluded Ginny.

"I know," said Hermione. "But let's try to think rationally. The fact that I can get into her bubble as animagus is a huge break. I had no trouble getting into it at all - I barely felt the wards as I passed through them. It was getting back out that was a problem, and the air inside of it felt so wrong... I *really* don't think it's safe for humans to be inside of it. I can't explain how I know, but every instinct I had told me not to transform back into a human while I was in there. Besides, it would make sense for the enclosure to be deadly to humans wouldn't it? There's no reason to stop other animals from being allowed in - she's a predator herself so maybe she catches rabbits now and then or other kinds of prey when they happen to wander across her path - but he wouldn't want *any* humans to survive it if they somehow managed to cross his wards. He would believe they are the only species that could truly harm her. He probably hasn't thought of animagi being a threat since he didn't actively block them out with his wards, but if he ever considered it he would probably conclude that they have to transform back into a human to kill her with a wand. His enclosure would kill them first, before they could hurt her or escape through that single weak point."

“So you need to be able to kill her as animagus,” said Luna. “And that requires goblin metal filled with basilisk venom secured to you so that you can stab her with it as an animal.”

“Precisely,” said Hermione. “The Sword of Gryffindor has basilisk venom in the blade. That’s how I know it works. It was from the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets when Harry killed it in second year. Dumbledore used the Sword to kill one horcrux, and Ron used it to kill another.”

Ginny physically jolted at this and swallowed hard.

“Sorry, Gin,” said Hermione quietly. Ginny just nodded as Blaise put a hand on her shoulder.

“So you’re certain goblin metal absorbs basilisk venom,” said Theo thoughtfully.

“I’m positive,” said Hermione. “And I think we only have to dip the very tip of it for it to work – just the sharp part, I mean. Harry, Ron, and I all touched the flat side of the blade of the Sword of Gryffindor multiple times, and it never harmed us. I’m almost certain the venom was concentrated at the very end of the sword, and that’s why stabbing with it worked.”

Everyone sat back to consider this.

“You may be right, then,” Theo finally said. Draco shot him a look of betrayal, and Theo sighed. “Look, I’m not saying I’m thrilled about it either, but Hermione’s Aquila form is about as good as we could hope to accomplish something like this. We can try to crack the wards so the rest of us can get in too, but you know how much he leans on obscure magic. We might not ever find the spell to fully break them. Besides, we will need to get that venom deep inside of her to make sure she dies, and I think we have to assume that we can’t just throw knives at her from the perimeter. He will make sure that spells and weapons are blocked with his wards. Hermione can pass the weak point in the wards both directions, so she should be able to force some goblin metal through them. If the two of you pool your magic to help her get in with it and then she uses one of her insane dives, she’ll be faster than the snake.”

“And I’ll go for the head,” added Hermione. “I’ll aim for that spot right behind the neck so she can’t bite me.”

“And I can serve as a distraction,” added Luna.

Everyone turned to look at her incredulously.

“Absolutely not,” said Theo.

Luna just rolled her eyes. “It will be perfectly safe. I’ll just show myself at the edge of the wards to lure her out. I won’t actually cross them.”

“And I can be there as back-up,” added Ginny. “Getting out of that enclosure exhausted Hermione. She was in no fit state to fly or even walk afterwards. She can ride back with me so we can make a quick escape in case he’s alerted to it.”

All three wizards were looking very uncomfortable now.

“It’s a good plan,” said Hermione firmly. “You know it is.”

She stared hard at Draco, until he finally slumped in defeat. The others noticed too, and Hermione saw looks of relief on their faces that he was conceding.

“So Aquila is going to kill her,” said Blaise.

“Yes,” said Hermione, a small rush of excitement unfolding now that they had a real plan.

“And it will be the easiest kill I ever make.”

Chapter 37: Basilisk

“Hello?” said Hermione, as she arrived through the floo at Grimmauld Place.

It was the day after she and the others returned from Nott Castle, and Hermione determined she needed to check on Mary. Draco had berated her for not warding Mary in, but Hermione didn't think it was necessary. The poor girl was obviously traumatized, and Hermione rather thought that giving her the freedom to choose whether to stay or not would be the thing that convinced her to take Hermione up on her offer of sanctuary.

Today she had Ginny and Luna with her too, though Hermione opted not to bring any of the wizards just in case it would frighten Mary. Luna had never been to Grimmauld Place of course, and Ginny hadn't seen it since it was headquarters for the Order.

“Whoa,” was Ginny's reaction, as she looked around the sitting room in amazement.

“I know,” said Hermione. “Draco updated it.”

“I'll say,” she muttered.

“Mistress!” came Posy's voice, as she popped into existence.

“Oh hi, Posy. We are just here to see Mary. I dropped her off rather quickly a couple days ago and promised I would return so we could come up with a plan.”

“I is fetching her, Mistress! She is in the library.”

Hermione nodded approvingly at this, and she caught a flash of amusement on Ginny's face.

“What? It's good that she's finding something to do.”

“I told you, Mary Walsh idolizes you.”

Hermione scoffed, but internally she was pleased. When she finally told the others the complete story of her weekend – including her rescue of Mary – Ginny turned speculative and told Hermione that she had gotten to know Mary the previous year, and Mary was starstruck by Hermione. She had looked up to Hermione as a first year Gryffindor when Hermione was a sixth year Prefect, and Ginny insisted that Mary was part of a small group of girls who followed news of Hermione closely during the year she was on the run.

“She was one of the first students Neville and I had to smuggle away into the Room of Requirement because she was so determined to give the Carrows hell,” explained Ginny. “They tortured her a few times, and eventually Neville and I couldn't take it anymore and decided she had to go into hiding. I can't imagine what she must have thought when you revealed yourself to her.”

“She might have squealed,” confessed Hermione.

“I bet she did,” said Ginny in amusement.

Hermione was far more curious to meet Mary properly after hearing everything Ginny had said about her. It wasn't the first time Hermione was struck by the fact that she had missed a full year of school and left Ginny, Luna, and the others to deal with the Carrows themselves.

Mary's small form peered around the door to the sitting room cautiously.

“Hi Mary,” said Hermione gently. “We've just come for a visit. I'm sure you remember Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood?”

She nodded carefully.

“They're like me,” added Hermione, “romantically involved with a Death Eater but working to undermine them.”

Mary relaxed a little at this.

“Come on in, and let's talk.”

Mary walked forward slowly, and Hermione took a moment to take in everything about the girl. She was slight and looked younger than fourteen, though Hermione suspected it was because she was too thin. Her hair was a dark blonde and her eyes hazel. She had a long nose and thin lips. She was quite pretty, Hermione thought, except for the haunted look on her face.

As Mary lowered herself into a chair, Hermione could see she was wringing her hands a little.

“Is everything alright? Have you been comfortable here?”

“Yes, of course,” said Mary quickly. “I just... I know you need to send me away...”

“I don't,” said Hermione quickly. “Not unless you want me to.”

“I don't have any place to go,” confessed Mary. “I'm a muggleborn, but it's just me and my mum. I'm afraid they will find her if I go home.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I live at Malfoy Manor, so it's no trouble whatsoever. But tell me – where is home for you?”

“Mum and I lived in Whitby. But I haven't heard anything from her, nor her from me, since the Battle of Hogwarts.”

Hermione went a bit cold.

“We can check on her if you want. We can let her know you're alright.”

Mary looked at her eagerly. “Would you?”

“Yes, of course. Why don’t you write her a letter so she knows it’s you? Don’t include anything about who you’re staying with, but you can tell her you are safe now. We will get it to her if we can find her. You’re sure you don’t want to go back home?”

Mary shook her head. “Not until it’s safe. I’m a nobody. I doubt the Death Eaters will go after my mum... but I can’t risk it.”

“I understand,” said Hermione simply. “I sent my parents all the way to Australia.”

Mary’s eyes were huge, and Hermione smiled wryly. “I’m a bit... well known among the Death Eaters.”

Ginny and Luna huffed laughs at this, and Mary cracked a shy smile too.

“Is there anybody in the wizarding world who needs to know about your safety?” asked Ginny, now chiming in.

Mary shook her head. “No, I don’t want the Death Eaters to find me again. And the Order... Well, I don’t trust them either.”

Hermione exchanged intrigued glances with Ginny and Luna.

“Why not?” asked Luna.

Mary scowled. “Because they’re the reason I got caught in the first place! I evacuated with the other students during the Battle of Hogwarts. I was going to fight, but Ginny and Neville convinced me I didn’t know enough as a second year. So I went through that portrait hole with the others, but the bartender at the Hogshead only sent home the students with wizarding families. All of us who were muggleborn got stuck. He didn’t know how to get us back to the muggle world since obviously we don’t have floo or anything like that. He didn’t know what to do, so he just told us to stay put until they figured something out. Eventually the old man left us there to join the fighting, and he never returned. The Death Eaters raided the pub the next morning. There were about thirty of us caught that way. The boys were either taken as prisoners or *Avada’d* on the spot, and the girls were all taken as boons. We tried to fight at first, but... well, they had us surrounded, and none of us were of age yet.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped in disbelief.

“Aberforth Dumbledore just left you all there?”

“Was that his name?” asked Mary curiously.

“Gray beard, scraggly, tall, and old. He looks a bit like Professor Dumbledore, except more run-down.”

Mary frowned, but nodded. “You know, I never realized it, but yes. He did look like Dumbledore.”

“Bloody hell, I’m going to kill him myself,” muttered Hermione, remembering that Dumbledore was on Draco’s list.

Mary’s eyes widened, and Hermione realized what she had just said. “Metaphorically, I mean,” she added quickly.

Mary looked relieved.

Hermione straightened up. “Well we certainly don’t have to tell the Order about you. Frankly, the three of us have some personal issues with the Order as well. We are aligning ourselves with them just as much as we have to so that we can take out You-Know-Who, but they are not aware that I’m alive, nor are they privy to all of our plans just yet.”

Mary’s eyes were huge now. “Can I help?” she asked.

Hermione exchanged glances with the others before looking back at Mary with some concern. “Are you certain? You’re only fourteen, and you’ve been through a lot.”

“I know, but... but I *have* to,” she insisted.

Hermione fell silent as she weighed this. She was not inclined to bring an underaged witch out into the field – especially not one who had been through the things Mary had experienced – but then again, Hermione certainly understood the need for a project. Perhaps there was a way to get Mary’s help without putting her in any further danger.

“Tell me something, Mary. Do you enjoy potions?”

In the end, Hermione lowered the muggle repelling wards and brought Mary’s mother to Grimmauld Place to stay as well. The poor woman had been relieved, then shocked, then horrified when Hermione presented the letter from Mary and told her about everything that had happened to her daughter. Hermione didn’t have it in her to keep them apart from each other.

“You can stay as long as you want, Mrs. Walsh. Don’t worry about your job. We have plenty of money to cover you for as long as you wish to stay here, and if they won’t hire you back once this is all over we’ll just do a memory charm on your boss.”

It was a testament to just how much Betty Walsh had missed her daughter that she didn’t question Hermione at all when she proposed this plan. Indeed, the reunion between mother and daughter was so bittersweet that Hermione cried along with them. She missed her own mum desperately.

Draco, unsurprisingly, was rather put out.

“That house is supposed to be for *you*,” he insisted.

“And it is! I’m using it just the way I want to. Mary Walsh is a muggleborn Gryffindor girl who loves the magical world and was top of her class, just like me. She got pulled into the war because Aberforth Dumbledore couldn’t be bothered to worry about the thirty muggleborn children he had in his pub that night, and instead he was cutting deals with *you* about the future of the Order after You-Know-Who won the battle that day. She’s been traumatized, abused, and I got her out. I got her mother out too, because eventually Dolohov will think to check with her muggle family. You know he will. They both understand just how dangerous it is, and they aren’t going to leave Grimmauld Place until You-Know-Who is gone.”

She felt him wavering. “You’re too soft-hearted, sweet girl.”

“I’m not that soft,” she insisted. “But she’s so much like *me*, Draco. In fact, that could have been me if I had been born just a few years later or if I hadn’t had you to help me. She looks up to me so much. I can’t stand to let her down.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “Hopefully it’s only for a few more weeks.”

“That’s right,” said Hermione. “We just need the basilisk venom and our distraction.”

Acquiring basilisk venom was, of course, a rather critical part of the plan. Not knowing what else to do about it, Hermione suggested going back to the Chamber of Secrets in the hopes that there would be fangs left over from the Battle of Hogwarts.

Draco had not been thrilled by this suggestion either, but he acknowledged that it could probably be done if they could get Snape to cooperate.

“What am I supposed to tell Severus?” he demanded, when Hermione pitched this suggestion.

“Tell him whatever you want. Or tell him it’s for the Order, but it’s classified. It’s nothing less than the truth. We could sneak in under the Invisibility Cloak if we really had to. Harry also had a map of Hogwarts that I took from that shrine in your closet that’s very helpful... but it would be better if Snape just lets us in and covers for us.”

“You’re turning into quite the demanding little thing, aren’t you?” asked Draco, with one eyebrow cocked.

Hermione gave him her sweetest smile. “You still love me.”

“Fuck, I really do...” he sighed. “Fine, I’ll talk to Severus.”

He left her in his study, reviewing books on basilisks and horcruxes, only to return a couple hours later with good news. Snape had been reluctant, especially when Draco would not explain what they needed to find. But eventually he agreed to let them both into Hogwarts under the guise of looking at wedding venues.

“You have to be kidding. That’s the best cover story you two could come up with?” asked Hermione in disbelief.

“Why else would you be allowed at Hogwarts? I can always visit on Death Eater business, but you aren’t a Death Eater.”

“So we’re telling everybody that we might get married there?”

Nothing about that was believable.

“Why is that a problem?” he demanded.

“Because we’ll get married at the Manor, won’t we?”

At this, Draco’s face transformed, and he closed in for a deep kiss that became heated very quickly. And that was how Hermione found herself perched on the desk in Draco’s personal study, the books scattered on the floor, while he kneeled between her legs and ate her out.

“Fuck, I can’t believe you’re going to marry me someday,” he kept saying, as he licked and sucked and Hermione groaned.

“That’s what we agreed to do when we tied, right?” she breathed, though she could barely speak.

Draco looked up, his hair tousled and his lips red from where they had just been.

“Absolutely. But I will confess I thought I would have to talk you into it.”

Hermione grinned as he resumed what he was doing, before she finally shattered with a great gasp.

When he was done, she pulled him in for her own kiss.

“I’ll marry you someday, Draco. And we’ll do it at the Manor.”

He tucked a curl behind her ear, looking inordinately pleased with himself. “Excellent. And while we’re waiting to set a date, we can pretend to explore other venues, can’t we? Columba has never been to Hogwarts, remember? It’s not unreasonable to think she might want to get married in an enchanted castle.”

She cocked her head as she thought about this. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Good,” he said, pecking her on the nose. “We’ll go tomorrow. I need to check on the boons’ progress with occlumency this afternoon.”

Hermione nodded as he slipped out of the study, giving her one last heated look. The boons Hermione had gotten released from Nott Castle were staying in a small cluster of bedrooms in the north wing of the Manor, away from the section that Hermione thought of as hers. She had not visited them yet because Draco wanted them to have rudimentary occlumency in place before they learned too much. Luna, Ginny, and even Susan had spent innumerable

hours with the other boons that week working through an occlumency crash course, with only the occasional visit from Draco to check on their progress.

They had all been told that they would learn more once they were moderately proficient, and according to Luna, the five of them who had no prior training in it accepted the challenge, perhaps sensing that things weren't exactly as they seemed.

That evening Draco reported they were making good progress. "A few more weeks should do it, but I'm still not sure about revealing yourself. Too many things could go wrong if they are searched by the Dark Lord, and they aren't going to have months to practice like you did."

"It will be alright," said Hermione. "Let's just see how far they get with it before we decide."

The next morning was a Saturday – a full week after their visit to Nott Castle – and Draco side-along apparated Hermione to Hogsmeade, purportedly because she did not have a wand. Draco was carrying her beaded bag concealed in his robes, along with the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map, which Hermione had shown Draco how to use earlier that day, much to his amazement. Hermione wore only her knives and necklace, along with the sapphire and diamond ring that soothed her.

She clutched his arm as he escorted her toward the gates of Hogwarts and the Death Eaters that were guarding it. They had chosen Saturday intentionally, knowing that it would be lower ranked Death Eaters who got this shift, and Draco would have no trouble intimidating them.

"We have a letter from the Headmaster. He's expecting us," said Draco, producing what was effectively a permission slip from Snape for the appointed day and time. He handed it off to one of the junior Death Eaters who glanced at it warily.

"We're really not supposed to..." he started, but Draco just gave him a stern look, and the young man swallowed hard.

"Right," he amended. "You're here to..." he glanced down at the paper. "Consider wedding venues?"

He gave Draco a questioning look, and Draco just nodded toward Columba. "She has never been to Hogwarts and wished to see it as we consider our own union. The Headmaster was kind enough to offer a tour today. As you know, Columba is deeply involved in the marital prospects of certain Death Eaters like yourselves."

The young mens' eyes widened, and they exchanged nervous glances. Hermione wasn't sure if Draco's comment should be interpreted as a bribe or a threat, but they just nodded quickly and stepped aside without even searching her.

Draco gave them one final, stern look, before tugging Hermione toward the castle.

"Come along, little dove. Let's see if this suits your tastes."

At the reminder of her animagus form, both Death Eaters went white, and Hermione gave them a Malfoy-worthy smirk as she responded in her light accent, "Thank you, Draco. Your little friends were most helpful."

They turned crimson, and Draco smirked too before they crossed the gates, which shut behind them. Hermione took a shuddering breath as she crossed the wards and then looked up into the sky.

It was filled with dementors, swirling in the air. This side of the Hogwarts gates felt like stepping into an icebox, cold and harsh. They were too far away to require a patronus, but the sheer number of them cast a pallor across everything. Hermione's amusement at the encounter with the guards immediately vanished.

"This is terrible," she whispered.

Draco just nodded and placed a comforting hand on hers. "They won't attack us. They're supposedly guarding the students. But there's no question that Hogwarts is... different."

Despite his assurances, he reached into his cloak to pull out her beaded bag and then retrieved her wand and arm holster for her.

"Here. Nobody is going to search you now."

Hermione slipped everything onto her arm, hidden by the sleeves of her robes. She glanced back up at the dementors warily as they began to move toward the castle.

It *was* different. As they walked the path around the lake and toward the castle, Hermione couldn't help but notice just how dead everything looked. It was November, yes, but Hogwarts had never been this barren, not even in the middle of winter. The greenhouses were gone. The Whomping Willow had been cut. Even the Forbidden Forest appeared to be nearly leafless, as though the dementors had ruined the very life source of the plants and animals that lived there. Hagrid's hut was still standing, but it looked more dilapidated than she had ever seen it, and she was forced to acknowledge that it would not have been a good hiding place when she planned to flee from Draco.

She shivered. This was not her Hogwarts.

She gripped Draco's arm hard as they approached the front steps of the castle. This was the last place she had seen Harry. This was where his green eyes stared at her, open and dead. This was where Ron's final words were spoken and...

"Hermione?" asked Draco quietly. Hermione realized she had come to a complete halt, staring at the place where Harry's body had been dumped. He looked worried as he scanned her face.

She swallowed hard and made herself push the memory away.

"Sorry. Let's go. I don't want to stay here."

He nodded and pulled open the front doors without knocking. Now that they were inside, Hermione found herself looking around a bit curiously, despite herself. Signs of the Battle of Hogwarts were all around her, with charred marks marring the walls, tapestries destroyed, and most of the portraits removed. The castle had been cleaned up, but not repaired, especially in the corridors where most of the fighting took place.

“Most of the classrooms survived, as did the Library,” said Draco under his breath. “The dormitories were fairly intact too. But the hallways and other common areas...”

It was a tragedy.

“Where are all the students?” asked Hermione, only now realizing they were entirely alone. “It’s a Saturday.”

“They are confined to their dormitories when not in class or the library on the weekends,” he said. “The library hours are strictly monitored by the professors and Prefects.”

“Why?” asked Hermione in confusion.

Draco shrugged. “For their safety, mostly. The dementors went rogue a couple times and...”

Hermione blanched, and her ring kicked on.

“Shhh...” said Draco, turning to pull her close to him. “Don’t think of it.”

She exhaled. “I don’t like it, Draco.”

“No, me neither. But hopefully soon...”

“Yes,” she said simply. They couldn’t speak freely here.

“On the bright side, we’re not likely to be seen by anybody except for the occasional portrait.”

“Then let’s go. The entrance is in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.”

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. Hermione had not given him any details about *how* to get into the Chamber of Secrets. She only told him that she had done it once before.

“Fascinating,” he said, as he led the way. Only belatedly did Hermione remember that was where Harry had sliced Draco open with *Sectumsempra*.

They continued on their way toward the bathroom, Hermione clutching Draco’s arm, and Draco radiating an air of authority. He was dressed in his military uniform for this, just in case they received personal questions from anyone except for the guards at the gate. Snape had made it clear he had no great interest in meeting them unless absolutely required to maintain their cover for being there, and Hermione hoped they could get in and out without having to speak to him at all.

When they finally reached Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, Draco pushed open the wooden door, and Hermione looked around the space with a critical eye. This place had not changed. It seemed that this bathroom was still left just as it always had been – vacant, with slightly cracked tile, and an air of neglect, not to mention that faintest smell of open drain.

Hermione had pointedly avoided it ever since transforming into a cat in second year.

“What are *you* doing here?” came a familiar voice that made Hermione grimace.

Myrtle's translucent face rose from one of the stalls, and her eyes narrowed at them suspiciously for a moment, before widening in recognition when she saw Draco.

“You came back!” she exclaimed.

Hermione turned to look at Draco in disbelief, and she could see his cheeks turning a bit pink. “Yes, Myrtle. I've returned.”

Myrtle's own cheeks turned a bit more solid-looking, and Hermione realized she was blushing. She had to hold back a scoff.

“And who is *that*?” Myrtle asked, with a suspicious look at Hermione.

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione just planted her feet and stared intently at Myrtle. “I'm his fiancée.”

She heard Draco give a faint groan next to her, but Hermione didn't care. Myrtle's eyes widened, and she howled with dismay as she turned to look at Draco with something like betrayal.

“*How could you?*”

“Myrtle, please... I'm alive and...”

“But you *promised!* You said that if you died you would come haunt the toilets with me!”

Hermione gave an outraged gasp at this, and Draco groaned again.

“Merlin, Myrtle, I said that in sixth year when I sure my... well, I didn't think the girl I fancied wanted anything to do with me, and...”

But Myrtle wasn't listening. She just gave an almighty wail and there was a distant splash as she disappeared back into the stall.

Hermione turned and glared at him. “You promised to spend *eternity* with her?!”

“I didn't mean it!” said Draco, giving her a pleading look. “I swear it! I was just very upset, you know... I had a rough year in sixth year. I had to take the Mark, and I wasn't that keen on it because I was *sure* you would never give me the time of day if you learned what I was tasked to do. I really didn't think I would survive killing Dumbledore, and I was sure I would die without ever even *kissing* you first... Plus I would be leaving you behind to fend

for yourself with just Potter and Weasley and Merlin knew *they* were hopeless. It was a low moment when I said it, my darling. If I had died and come back as a ghost, I would have found some way to haunt *you* instead of sharing a stall with Myrtle, I promise.”

Hermione huffed, but found herself softening. “Is that why you didn’t kill Dumbledore then? You thought I would be angry?”

“Yes,” he said simply. “I was caught in a dilemma with that one. I was surprised that the plan to get him alone worked in the first place, and when it did... well I was afraid it would push you away from me forever if I cast the spell. But if I didn’t go through with it then I might die and leave you behind. Dying didn’t scare me, but leaving you alone did. And my mother would have been killed too. I didn’t care for my father by that point, but I did care about her.”

“But Snape did it,” she said.

“Yes. It wasn’t precisely what the Dark Lord wanted, but I had done enough to get the Death Eaters into the castle so he wasn’t *too* angry with me for balking. I spent the next few months honing my skills and making myself indispensable to him. And when you, Potter, and Weasley went into hiding I started putting together the plan to find you and prepare for your arrival once I did. I hoped that the fact that I didn’t kill Dumbledore would be enough for you.”

Hermione slipped her arms around Draco’s shoulders.

“Thank you. He was... well, I resent him a lot. But I do think I would have felt differently toward you at the beginning if you had killed him that day. I would have been frightened of you.”

Draco softened and leaned down for a kiss. “Don’t ever be scared of me.”

“I’m not,” she said with a small smile.

Draco pulled away, looking relieved. “Good. Now care to show me how to get into this mysterious chamber?”

“It’s over here,” said Hermione, leading him to one of the sinks. “Look below it, you can see a snake etched on the pipe.”

Draco crouched and let out a surprised sound when he found it.

“So how do you open it?”

Hermione sighed. “In parseltongue.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ron did it last time.”

“There’s no way Weasley knew —”

“He didn’t, but he heard Harry speak it enough that he got there in the end. I was a bit distracted though. You may need to do some legilimency to find the memory.”

Draco pursed his lips but nodded as he stepped back to look at her intently. “Think of the memory you want to show me. Fill your cauldron with it.”

Hermione exhaled and nodded, visualizing the bottom of her cauldron with the tiniest crack for the memory with Ron to seep through it. Within seconds she felt it being pulled to the surface.

“Come on, Hermione, you know this is a good idea!”

She and Ron were looking battleworn and exhausted, as they quickly maneuvered the hallways. Harry had left with Luna for the Ravenclaw common room, and Hermione was worrying her lip as she followed Ron a bit half-heartedly.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, but we can’t even get in, Ronald! Don’t you think it would be better to just find the horcrux and then wait until we can get the Sword back to destroy it?”

Ron came to a complete halt, and Hermione nearly ran into him. He turned and looked at her seriously.

“No, Hermione, I don’t. The last horcrux we carried around with us... well look, I’m not making excuses for how I acted, but it brought out the worst side of me. You know it did. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to carry them around for months on end, and we could finish the war tonight if we have a way to destroy them.”

Hermione’s heart sank. She knew Ron was right. She just wasn’t ready for Harry’s turn yet.

“Fine,” she sighed. “You’re right. If you can figure it out...”

“Great, come on then,” he said, grabbing her hand and leading her toward Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.

They pushed open the door and wasted no time heading toward the sink.

“In here?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Yes, it’s your favorite loo, right?” he asked, with a lopsided grin. “You turned into your favorite animal in here while Harry and I questioned that blonde git about being the Heir of Slytherin.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but felt a small burst of pleasure that he was teasing her again. Their relationship had been strained ever since he returned, and it had been months of careful interactions. This felt better.

“He could have been worse, you know. He didn’t kill Dumbledore, and he tried not to identify us at the Manor.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “That’s a high bar you’re setting.”

Hermione huffed a laugh. "True. Alright, let's hear your parseltongue then."

Ron started trying sounds, and Hermione wrinkled her nose as spit went flying against the cracked mirror.

"Must it be so wet?" she asked delicately. "I don't think Harry's is that wet when he does it."

Ron choked and started to cough, as he gave her a slightly incredulous look.

"You prefer it... dry then?" he asked in a strained voice.

"I don't prefer anything... I'm just saying that it certainly involves less saliva than this when he does it. Honestly, Ronald, why are you looking at me like that? Keep trying if we're going to do this."

Ron cleared his throat and tugged at his collar a little. His ears had gone red, and his cheeks were aflame.

"Right. Not so wet then. Let's try again."

This time the hissing sounds were smoother, softer, and on the fourth try the tap began to lower itself into the floor.

"YES!" bellowed Ron, punching the air, before he turned and lifted Hermione into a hug.

She was beet red as he put her back down on the ground, and she found herself grinning up at him as she blushed furiously. Her eyes lowered to his lips and...

Her vision swam, as Hermione blinked, and she found herself staring back at Draco's face. His expression was stoney.

"Don't be like that," she insisted.

"Did you kiss him then?" he asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Not then. It was later. And like I told you once, it wasn't exactly mind-blowing, and our relationship had been very strained for months beforehand. You have no need to be jealous. He's dead."

"Myrtle's dead too," pointed out Draco.

Hermione scowled. "Myrtle still lives in the U-bend. You don't see the ghost of Ronald Weasley floating around the halls do you? Honestly, Draco, what did you expect?"

*He made an irritated noise, but turned back to the tap. "Fine," he said curtly. "I'll make sure mine is *not* wet."*

Hermione flushed as a faint hiss came out of Draco's mouth. It was...

“Oh,” she whispered.

He turned and raised one eyebrow as the sink began to move.

“Yes?” he inquired.

Hermione bit her lip. That sound was *far* sexier coming from him than hearing Ron try it that day.

She said nothing, but she was sure her thoughts were written all over her face, because a slightly arrogant smile crossed his lips as he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the hole.

“It’s a giant slide down a drain. It’s rather gross.”

“Lovely,” said Draco, as his smile turned into a bit of a grimace. “Let’s go together then.”

He tucked her between his legs and they slid down the pipe together. When they stood on the other end, they were covered in muck.

Draco wrinkled his nose and cast a few cleansing charms on them, before looking around curiously. “This is it then?”

“Not quite. It’s at the end of this large corridor.”

They both pulled out their wands and lit them as they stepped over small animal bones, and at the end they found the same doors with the snakes surrounding it.

“You’ll have to do it again,” said Hermione.

Draco made the same sounds, and the snakes began to move before the door swung open. Hermione stepped through first, and immediately the torches lit. She saw Draco looking around in some amazement. The cavern was tall, with a small moat surrounding most of the perimeter, and the enormous statue of Salazar Slytherin at the end. In the middle of it was the basilisk skeleton.

“Potter killed it in second year?” asked Draco curiously, as he approached it. “This is the thing that petrified you?”

“Yes,” said Hermione simply as she watched him walk all around it.

“I will never forgive Father for it,” said Draco quietly. “I wasn’t certain if it was him for many years, but when he finally told me...”

He turned back and looked at her with an almost sad expression.

“It’s alright Draco.”

“No. It isn’t. He finally told me how he did it after you three escaped the Manor. Things were already very tense between us, but that was the moment I was certain he would have to

die. I had already claimed Grimmauld Place and started preparing it for you by that point, but I started getting your room ready in the Manor too that very day. I knew I would be bringing you home with me as soon as he was gone, and I could find you.”

Hermione’s heart broke for him just a little, but Draco didn’t appear sorry.

“Are you alright being down here? Given what that thing did to you...”

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t remember it. Just a pair of yellow eyes, and then nothing until I woke up. But we shouldn’t linger in any event. We’ve been down here long enough.”

Draco nodded and approached its mouth. “You think the venom will still be good then?”

“I hope so,” said Hermione a bit worriedly. “The fangs hadn’t dried out last May. But we should take all the rest of them, just in case. We can try to extract it later.”

There were only a half dozen fangs remaining, but at least Voldemort had not been back to destroy what was left. They both approached its mouth and used a few carefully placed *diffindos* to sever the remaining teeth. Then Draco pulled out her beaded bag. He removed his broom from it first and then gingerly placed the fangs inside. They watched for a moment to make sure the venom would not leak and destroy the bag, but to Hermione’s great relief nothing happened.

“That’s it then,” said Hermione. “Hopefully it’s enough. It won’t take much.”

The journey out of the Chamber of Secrets was faster than the journey in. Hermione transformed into Columba and flew alongside Draco, who paused only to reopen the door and the small entry at the sink. Evidently they closed on their own after a few minutes.

When they were back in Myrtle’s bathroom, Hermione headed to a stall to transform back into herself, and then emerged so Draco could clean them both off again.

“Ready?” he asked, once they were presentable.

Hermione glanced at him and hesitated.

“What?” he prompted.

Hermione bit her lip. “It’s just... we’re here. And I was wondering if you could show me where Harry... you know.”

Draco’s eyes softened.

“Are you sure you want to do that, sweet girl?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “Yes, I think it would help. You know where it happened don’t you?”

He nodded, his eyes fixed on her with some concern.

"Then please, Draco. Let me see it. Just for some closure."

"Alright," he said. "But stay close."

Draco pulled out the Marauder's Map from Hermione's beaded bag, and Hermione tapped it with her wand and said the password to check if the coast was clear. Draco, naturally, tried to swipe it from her.

"This is a Black family heirloom. The magic is incredible..."

Hermione huffed. "It is *not* a Black family heirloom."

"Of course it is," he insisted. "Only the Blacks have survived. See? The Potters are dead. The Pettigrews are dead. The Lupins are dead..."

"Teddy Lupin is *not* dead, unless there's something you've forgotten to tell me?"

"Of course not, my darling, but Teddy is a Black."

"Only distantly," she said, folding as she wiped the Map and placed it in her pocket. "And if it *is* a Black family heirloom, perhaps I should remind you that I'm the only person who bears the last name?"

Draco seemed torn between irritation and pleasure at this reminder.

"Fine. Take it for now, but I want to examine it again when we get home. It's extraordinary."

They exited the loo and began to walk back toward the entrance to the castle. As they passed the library they came to an abrupt halt at the sound of a door opening and the feet of dozens of students passing in front of them. Hermione's eyes widened as she took it in. They were walking in pairs, being ushered along by the prefects and several professors. To her utter shock, one of those professors was Minerva McGonagall.

How on earth is she still teaching here?

McGonagall saw Draco and raised a single, proud eyebrow before her gaze fell on Hermione, who was clutching his arm. Hermione schooled her face as the professor approached.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" she asked curtly, as the students filed past, casting furtive looks their way.

"We had business with Professor Snape," said Draco in his usual drawl. "It has just concluded."

McGonagall glanced down at Hermione again. "Is this your boon then?"

"She is my intended," said Draco a bit more coldly. "She is a boon no longer. Columba Black. You have seen the papers, surely."

“Of course,” said McGonagall, eyes narrowing a little. Then she turned to Hermione. “I knew both of your parents rather well.”

Hermione said nothing, but just inclined her head.

“And I understand you are an animagus?”

At this, Hermione could hear McGonagall’s thinly concealed curiosity.

“A dove, yes,” said Hermione in her light French accent.

“A most unusual form. It is very advanced.”

“I inherited my father’s talent for transfiguration.”

“His talent... yes. He *was* very talented. I have had a very small number of students over the years who were that talented. They all stood out.”

McGonagall’s eyes were boring into hers, and to Hermione’s shock, she felt the slightest brush of legilimency against her mind. It was so faint she never would have sensed it if she hadn’t been trained in occlumency. She immediately visualized a cauldron bottom. McGonagall’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly before she pulled away.

“I’m afraid we must be going,” said Hermione quickly. She was unnerved. She had no idea McGonagall was a legilimens. Then again, it did explain how the woman always seemed to know *everything* that went on in Gryffindor tower.

“Of course,” said McGonagall. “Perhaps we can arrange a meeting soon, Miss Black. To reminisce, you know.”

Hermione gave her a tight smile as Draco pulled her away. She felt McGonagall’s eyes boring into the back of her as they headed toward the entry hall and front doors. When they stepped out into the cold November air, Hermione glanced up at the dementors again before turning to Draco.

“How is she still teaching here?” she demanded.

Draco snorted. “Because she’s indomitable. She’s the best transfiguration master in England or Scotland – besides *you*, of course – and the Dark Lord really had no choice. Severus pointed out that Hogwarts must have teachers, and he convinced the Dark Lord that the teachers who stood against him that day were really just trying to protect the students. Her work for the Order has always been concealed to ensure an Order member would be at Hogwarts. The Dark Lord never knew she was a member. Severus convinced him that the teachers would be no serious threat to him as long as there was no more fighting at the school. The Dark Lord agreed to keep them on, but he tightened security considerably. Nobody goes in and out of the castle without going through the front gates. Floo access is entirely cut off, except for Severus’s quarters. And of course the Dementors guard the skies and have the authority to kiss anybody who is unauthorized, including teachers who leave

without permission. Needless to say, McGonagall has not been given permission. The Dark Lord thinks she's a prisoner in the castle, and she would be if it wasn't for Severus's floo."

Hermione glanced up at the dementors warily.

"It should be alright," he said. "We have permission to be on the grounds today, and I bear the mark. Just stay close to me until we get to the forest."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. She was second guessing her wish to see where Harry died, but Draco seemed to think it would be safe. And she desperately wanted to visit it, at least once. She had regretted allowing him to go to the forest alone that day ever since his body was dumped in front of her. She felt she owed it to him.

Draco led her toward the treeline, keeping an eye on the sky as he did it. Hermione felt tense, on edge, but she *had* to see it. She just had to.

"Let's get into the trees," said Draco, eyes narrowing as the dementors seemed to fly faster. They weren't flying any *lower*, so Hermione wasn't willing to abandon the plan just yet. But she did pick up speed as they strode toward the edge of the forest, and then lit their wands.

It was still unnaturally cold here, but the trees were thick even without their leaves. They blocked much of the view of the skies above.

"Most of the magical creatures are gone," said Draco simply. "But you should still keep your wand out."

They both drew their wands and lit them, casting their light down a narrow path that wound through the dead trees.

"Potter came this way," said Draco simply.

"You're certain?" she asked.

Draco nodded. "Yes. I found him before he got to the Dark Lord. Just up here."

Hermione inhaled, and she looked at him with wide eyes, but his face was inscrutable. Their wands were lighting the path, but Draco wasn't looking ahead. He was looking down at the ground, brow a bit furrowed.

"What is it?" asked Hermione softly.

He shook his head.

"*Draco.*"

"Fine," he sighed. "It's just... when I came upon him that night, I think he dropped something. He was wearing the Invisibility Cloak so I couldn't see him, but I heard his voice talking to somebody. I recognized it of course, and once he saw me he stopped what he was doing and showed himself. But I could have sworn I heard something fall to the ground. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but now that we're here, I wonder..."

Hermione frowned. “You mean...”

“Yes,” breathed Draco, his eyes growing huge as his light fell across a part of the path up ahead. Hermione squinted a little, and then her own eyes widened as she saw it. It was the faintest glint of gold.

She was frozen in place as Draco hurried forward and crouched to the ground. He grabbed the gold thing and then held it up for her to see. It was a snitch. And it was open.

“Oh my God,” said Hermione in a small voice. “Don’t tell me...”

“It has to be here,” said Draco, as he started to move some old leaves and dead undergrowth aside. “It just *has* to be...”

His motions grew frantic, harried, as the circle of his search grew increasingly wider. Hermione was just about to transform into Aquila to help with her superior eyesight, when Draco gave a triumphant shout.

He stood and turned, eyes blazing with excitement as he held it up so she could see.

Draco was holding Slytherin’s ring. And the Resurrection Stone was intact.

Chapter 38: Resurrection

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione moved forward, as if in a trance.

“That’s it,” she whispered. “That’s the ring...”

Draco’s eyes shown with pride as he handed it out for her to take.

Hermione’s own hands were shaking as she clutched it. Harry must have solved that riddle from the snitch at last.

I open at the close.

She had had her suspicions about what it meant as soon as she worked out that Harry was a horcrux, but of course it had never been something she could tell Harry. Because if she did, then she would also have to tell him that he would be dying and Dumbledore knew it all along.

Harry had been aware, then. Those memories Snape passed to him must have revealed the final secret just before he was killed.

She held her wand up to the ring so that the light fell across it. It was made out of heavy gold. It was valuable and obviously quite old. The stone embedded in it was black and perfectly round. Sure enough, a small symbol of the Hallows was scratched on top of it.

Perhaps the Hallows really *were* real, then. And if that was the case, they now had two out of the three.

She turned the ring over in her palm to examine it. Then she turned it again. And on the third turn she gasped as something seemed to tug from her very heart, and then she was staring into the faces of her best friends. They were in color and seemed to be a bit blurry at the edges. They had an internal light that was making them glow just a little.

“Harry?” she whispered, and she knew her eyes must be huge.

“Hermione, are you alright?” she heard Draco asked in concern. He wasn’t looking at the images of Harry and Ron at all, but was staring at her with worry.

She glanced at Harry and Ron who were giving her rather teasing smiles. She blinked and swallowed, as she realized Draco obviously couldn’t see them like she could.

“Yes, erm.... Do you mind? Could I have a moment?”

Draco searched her face, but then nodded slowly.

“Alright, I’ll just step over to the clearing up ahead. Call me if you need me.”

He glanced curiously between the ring in her hand and her face, and his eyes narrowed. She suspected he knew or at least *thought* he knew what was happening. But to her great relief he didn’t press her and wandered just out of sight.

Immediately Hermione put her hand against her heart.

“Harry... Ron...” she said.

“Hey Hermione,” said Harry.

Immediately tears began coursing down her cheeks.

“Hiya, Hermione,” added Ron.

“Oh my God...” she sniffed.

“Hey, chin up. We’re alright,” said Ron.

Hermione gave a wet laugh as Harry raised his hand and whacked Ron against the back of the head.

“Honestly, mate, we’re dead. Don’t say things like that to her. We talked about this, remember?”

Her heart squeezed. It was so *familiar*.

“Right,” said Ron, flushing a little. “Sorry about that, Hermione, you know I’ve always been a bit...”

“Insensitive,” came a third voice, and Hermione turned to find a form of Lavender Brown walking over, her lips quirked in amusement.

“I was going to say idiotic,” came the voice of Fred Weasley. Hermione spun around to find him laughing, as Ron huffed.

“Jus' like he's always bin,” came the deep voice of Hagrid.

“Perhaps all of the above,” came Neville’s voice. Hermione turned once more, and as she stared at them all around her she dissolved into sobs.

“Oh Hermione,” said Harry with a sigh. “It’s alright.”

“No, it’s... all of you... I’ve just...”

“Harry’s right, kiddo, don’t cry,” said yet another voice. And now Hermione was amazed to see Sirius Black approaching her. “You’re a Black now – you have to keep that stiff upper lip. We’re famous for it.”

His eyes were twinkling.

“You know?” she asked weakly, looking around them. “You all know? About everything?”

“Oh yeah, the afterlife is ominent,” said Ron with some relish.

“It’s *omniscient*, for fuck’s sake...” said Fred, with a marvelous eye-roll. “And you call yourself a Weasley...”

Hermione gave a wet laugh at this, as she looked at them all in amazement. Her eyes fell on Lavender.

“Lav... thank you.”

Lavender just waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. You would have done the same for me. And look, we each ended up with the right bloke in the end, didn’t we?”

She moved toward Ron, and linked arms with him. He actually blushed.

Hermione gave her a genuine smile at this, her heart easing a little to know that she and Ron had found each other even in the afterlife. “We did. That’s true.”

Then she turned to look at Neville, who raised one eyebrow.

“Neville, I’m *so sorry* I told everybody that your mum and Sirius... erm...”

“Hey, Alice was pretty sexy. I totally would have tapped that if Frank hadn’t gotten in the way,” said Sirius, as Neville rolled his eyes and gave him a little shove. She heard Hagrid laughing behind her.

“It’s fine, Hermione,” said Neville with a smile. “Someday this will all be over, and you’ll be able to tell everyone the truth. It was a brilliant story. I never wanted to be your brother, exactly, but I’m happy to maintain the fiction for now.”

Something inside of Hermione eased at this.

“Thanks.”

“Speaking of brothers though,” piped up Fred. “I’ll be honest, I did *not* see the Theo Nott thing coming at all. But I’m very pleased to welcome you into the twinhood.”

Hermione turned to smile at Fred. “Thanks. It’s incredible isn’t it?”

“It’s the best.”

“How is George? And your parents?”

Fred frowned a little. “They’re managing. It’s not been easy, but perhaps someday...”

“Maybe someday they can do this with you too.”

“At least once,” said Fred, nodding. “I think it would help them a lot.”

Hermione looked around at them all. “I’ve missed all of you *so* much.”

“You’ve bin incredible, Hermione,” said Hagrid gruffly. “I’ll admit I havin’ seen it all, but what I’ve seen’s bin damn impressive.”

“Hagrid’s right,” said Harry. “We’ve all been there watching you the whole time.”

Her breath caught. “Have you seen... I mean, is everybody...”

“You want to know if we’ve encountered McLaggen,” said Harry simply.

Hermione nodded hesitantly. Perhaps omniscient was right.

“I saw him from a distance right after he died,” said Harry. “He was close to you when he transitioned. But for the most part we just dwell around the people who care about us... The ones who need us the most.”

“Oh,” said Hermione softly. “I suppose that’s alright then. Is it like heaven?”

“Maybe a bit,” said Harry, frowning a little. “It certainly doesn’t hurt here. But there’s all sorts, you know. It’s not just the Gryffindors.”

Hermione exhaled. “Will I be able to go there then? Even though I’ve...”

“Killed?” asked Sirius gently.

Hermione nodded.

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Like Harry said, we take all sorts. We just tend to stay close to the people we cared about in life and then dwell around those who are still on earth. We’ll let you in, Sprout. Malfoy too.”

“Sprout?” she asked in confusion.

“Sure. You and my cousin made a whole new branch pop out on the Black family tree, didn’t you?”

Hermione smiled a bit embarrassedly at this, but Sirius just winked at her. He seemed inordinately pleased.

“Wait, I thought we agreed we still needed to vote on the ferret,” said Ron seriously.

Everyone rolled their eyes at this.

“We’re letting Malfoy in,” said Harry seriously.

“Yeah, he saved her life, and he kicked McLaggen’s arse,” said Neville.

“He gave me a painless death,” added Lavender.

“He helped Hermione break the rules to become an animagus,” chimed Fred.

“He comforted her after I died,” said Hagrid.

“And he gave me an adopted daughter,” finished Sirius. “Of course he’s allowed in.”

Ron huffed and grumbled a little.

“Besides,” added Harry, “I don’t think we would be able to keep him out. He’s the Master now, after all.”

Ron deflated. “Fine.”

“Wait, what?” asked Hermione, looking at Harry. “What do you mean, the Master?”

Harry smiled a little. “I know you’ve wondered why Voldemort’s wand doesn’t work properly. Why do you think that is?”

Hermione frowned, as she thought about it.

“Dumbledore was the last master of the Elder Wand,” she said slowly. “And Snape killed him.”

“Yes he did, but it was only *after* Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “You’re saying the disarming was forced?”

“Much more so than the murder was,” said Harry, nodding. “Snape and Dumbledore arranged his death between them, you know. But Dumbledore did *not* want Malfoy to have his wand. He wanted the wand’s power to die with him or else transfer to Snape.”

Hermione straightened up. “So Draco was the Elder Wand’s master... but then *you* took his hawthorn wand that day at the Manor! You should have been the Wand’s master!”

Harry’s familiar green eyes softened a little.

“No,” he said. “I’ll admit I *thought* I was, as I was walking into the forest that night. Once I realized Dumbledore’s death was arranged it hit me in a flash that Malfoy had been the master and not Snape. I believed the Wand’s power transferred to me. And of course I had the Cloak and the Resurrection Stone with me. For a very short while I believed that the Master of Death was me, and Voldemort wouldn’t be able to kill me, not really. Wands never work against their masters properly. But then Malfoy found me, and everything changed.”

“How?” asked Hermione, utterly transfixed. The other figures around her were fading a little as she focused on Harry and only Harry. But he had answers for her, and she sensed she could call back the others at any time. They were a part of her now. They were always there. She finally understood that. She *believed* it. She looked around and smiled at them softly as they waved or winked and then faded into the treeline until they disappeared.

When they were finally gone, she refocused on Harry. The light around him was brighter than ever.

“Like I said, he found me that night. It was right after I talked to Sirius and Remus and my parents – much like you are doing now. I had the Resurrection Stone and wanted to find out what it was like to die... just in case I was wrong and Voldemort *could* kill me after all. I dropped the Stone when I heard Malfoy approaching, and when I saw who it was I took off the Cloak. He... well, he *begged* me not to do it.”

“Why?” whispered Hermione, as tears began again.

“He didn’t know about the horcruxes. He thought I was just sacrificing myself because I was being a Gryffindor. He looked me in the eye and said, ‘She will never recover if you die, Potter. Hermione needs you. Please don’t leave her.’ And that’s when I knew.”

“Knew what?” she asked softly, her tears falling freely now.

“I knew that he cared about you. He always watched you. *Always*. For a long time I didn’t understand it. It used to make me and Ron so angry. But there was that day in the forest at the Quidditch World Cup when he warned us not to let you be seen. And then there was the time he caught us in Umbridge’s fireplace before the Department of Mysteries. Don’t you remember? He tried to convince Umbridge to let him go to the Forbidden Forest *with* us. Then again at the Manor and then yet again in the Room of Requirement. Over and over again, Malfoy kept showing up. He was always *there*. When he begged me not to die so that *you* wouldn’t be hurt, I finally understood that he was there for you. It had never been about me and Ron – it was always about you.”

“So the Elder Wand...” she said.

Harry shrugged. “I realized that I had never taken the hawthorn wand from him, not really. He gave it to me that day at the Manor. I grabbed it out of his hand, you know, but he let go. He barely fought me at all. He knew he was seriously outnumbered by the other Death Eaters with Voldemort on the way. He wanted me and Ron to save you, because he couldn’t do it himself without blowing his cover. He gave up his wand so I could get you out. I never truly disarmed him.”

“Oh my God...” whispered Hermione, as the meaning of this hit her. “What did you do when he begged you not to die? What did you say?”

“I told him it was the only way to end the war. I said I had to die that night so that Voldemort could die in the future. I told him it was prophesized that way, and you were prepared for it. I told him that you had known I would have to die for a long time.”

“Harry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you.”

He smiled softly. “Don’t be sorry. I wasn’t angry with you. I actually think you did me an enormous favor. I would have struggled with it, and I probably would have tried to end it before I had to. I’m only sorry you had the burden of carrying that secret.”

Something else inside of Hermione eased.

“Thank you,” she said.

Harry nodded and then picked up the story.

“Once I told Malfoy you had been preparing for it, he stopped protesting. I gave him his hawthorn wand back and the Invisibility Cloak. I told him that it was his, and he should use it in any way he needed to so that he could take care of you and keep you safe. I knew Ron would try to protect you too, but I was afraid he would be so torn up by my death that he would be distracted and might misstep. Malfoy only cared about you.”

“And then?” she asked.

“Then he told me that he would go back and find you. He said he had been working with the Order a little bit, but he had always intended to find you and get you out of danger if he could. He said that he had to be a Death Eater a little longer if Voldemort wasn’t dying that night because it was the best way to keep you safe. We both believed the Order would protect you if they found you first, but if the Death Eaters caught you then he had to be there to intervene. I told him that he might as well get credit for finding me since I was going to die anyway. It would make Voldemort trust him implicitly and make up for what happened at the Manor. It was a bit like Dumbledore and Snape, you know... we arranged for him to take me directly to Voldemort to buy him favor. So we put the Cloak back on me, and he took me to the clearing with Voldemort. Then he pulled the Cloak off of me dramatically in front of that old bastard. Malfoy’s got a flair for that sort of thing, you know.”

“Yes,” Hermione sniffed. “I do know.”

She could see it so clearly: a quick plan put together between them so that Harry would die and Draco would rise. It was to protect Hermione, *always*.

And it was something Draco never told me.

But she knew why he didn’t. He thought it would be too painful for her. He knew just how much she had missed Harry, how much guilt she harbored about it. At the beginning of their relationship he surely feared that she would never forgive him for helping Harry die. But once he learned the truth and was certain that Hermione really had known it was inevitable, he simply didn’t want to reopen old wounds.

For once she wasn’t angry about it. In fact, she was grateful he spared her that pain of learning precisely how much Harry had given up at the end.

“I never heard that he got credit for finding you,” she said.

Harry shrugged. “A couple others joined him at the last minute. But he was in the group that turned me over, and he revealed me. He gave the Cloak to Voldemort on the spot because he couldn’t very well keep it for himself. Then the next day he turned you over too after cutting his deal with the Order. He set everything up so he would become untouchable. You know the rest.”

Hermione nodded and frowned, as she thought back to an earlier part of the conversation.

“So he’s the Master of Death then? Because nobody has beaten him?”

“That’s one of the reasons, but not the only one,” said Harry. “The Hallows have been united before, you know. Those who have the *potential* to be the Master often handle one or even two of the Hallows. But the Master commands all three.”

Hermione frowned. “What do you mean?”

Harry spread his arms. “I handled the Cloak and the Stone. You’ve also handled the Cloak and now the Stone. Voldemort handled the Cloak and the Wand, though it wasn’t perfectly loyal to him. And then think about Dumbledore... he handled all three at one point or another. And the Hallows were united regularly during our sixth year, weren’t they? Dumbledore had the Stone and the Wand that entire year. I had the Cloak, and I carried it with me everywhere, but Dumbledore was the one who gave it to me in the first place and could have easily taken it for himself. I would have given it to him, without any question, if he told me it was important to bring down Voldemort. Dumbledore was the closest thing to a true Master that we’ve ever had before. He even went so far as to bond with a phoenix, which is one of the signs that the Master of Death has been found – but it was never quite *right*.”

“Why not?” asked Hermione, utterly spellbound now. She had never thought of this, but Harry was right. He was absolutely right. The Hallows *had* been united before. They had been united for nearly a whole year. And yet, Dumbledore died anyway.

“The circumstances under which he acquired the Cloak were a major factor. And Dumbledore never went far enough to truly *master* death.”

“Explain, please. You know more than me for once.”

Harry grinned at this. “Being dead does have its perks, I’ll grant you that.”

Hermione smiled a little.

“Alright, so the circumstances... Dumbledore got the Elder Wand the right way – he won it. He got the Stone the right way too – he found it. But the Cloak? It has to be given away.”

Hermione frowned as she pondered this. “I thought your dad gave it to him though?”

“No, Dad loaned it to him to examine, and then Dad happened to die while Dumbledore had custody of it. Remember the story of the third brother? The Cloak is supposed to be passed down when the current owner takes it off to face death willingly or else it’s passed down from parent to child. It was never Dumbledore’s, not really. That’s why he gave it back to me. He handled the Cloak for years. It worked for him. But it was never *his*. It became mine the moment Dad faced death to try to save me and Mum.”

“And it’s Draco’s now?”

“Yes, I took it off and gave it to him to keep right before I welcomed my own death. Malfoy acquired it the right way.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “And he won the Elder Wand from Dumbledore,” she said slowly. “And he found the Stone...”

“Just a few minutes ago,” agreed Harry.

“But he gave the Cloak to Voldemort,” said Hermione with concern. “Doesn’t that cause a problem?”

“No,” said Harry. “He gave the Cloak to Voldemort because he really had no choice. It wasn’t done willingly, nor was it done in anticipation of his own death. He’s the proper owner. And he will continue to *be* the proper owner until he passes it down to your children someday or he hands it off to somebody else right before he accepts his own death. Anybody else who uses it is just borrowing it from him.”

“My God,” breathed Hermione.

“And there’s more,” added Harry. “Malfoy has earned the title of Master.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that he has examined Death thoroughly. He has called upon it over and over again. He is not haunted by it, he directs it. He has condemned, and he has granted mercy. He has both fractured and healed his own soul. He doesn’t fear his own death. He has faced it before, and the act of dying doesn’t frighten him – he’s only disturbed by the thought of what might happen to those he leaves behind. Dumbledore believed that the Master of Death was the person who accepts death willingly. He thought the Master had to be a martyr. But that’s simply not true. The Master is the person who *commands* Death – it is the person who understands all the different facets of it and knows it most intimately.”

“So Draco’s the Master because he’s a murderer,” said Hermione softly.

“Partially,” said Harry, nodding. “It’s true that the Master has to be willing to call on Death to take lives. But the true Master also uses Death to save lives too. He saved you by killing Lavender. He saved the Weasleys by killing those muggles. The rest of us who *could* have been the Master never did that, not really.”

“Dumbledore tried to do it with you,” pointed out Hermione.

“He tried, yes. And as I said, he was probably the closest thing we’ve ever gotten to a Master until Malfoy came along. But Dumbledore feared fracturing his soul, and he never killed anybody directly. He never examined Death as closely as Malfoy has or interacted with it in the same way. And in the end, Dumbledore died before he finished using me to save the wizarding world.”

Hermione was silent for a long while as she absorbed this.

“So what does it mean?” she asked softly. “What can the Master do that others cannot?”

At this, Harry just smirked. “When the Master of Death is Draco Malfoy? I think it means that he can put on one hell of a show when it comes time to kill Voldemort.”

Hermione talked to Harry for several more minutes before finally letting him go. When his image faded away, she stood on the path in the woods for a full minute, contemplating everything that had just happened.

There really *was* some sort of afterlife. Her friends were all there. They didn’t hate her. They didn’t resent her. They didn’t even dislike Draco anymore, despite all the things he had done.

It meant everything to her.

Hermione finally understood the second brother a little better. In *The Tale of the Three Brothers*, the second brother had always perturbed her. He had tried to bring back the love of his life, but she was never quite *there*. He went mad until he killed himself to join her in death. Hermione had been frightened of the idea of communing with the dead. Before the Battle of Hogwarts, she rather felt that the dead should stay dead. That was the lesson from that part of the tale, or so she thought.

But after that Battle she had craved seeing them again and had been willing to join them too. There had been so many loose ends that something inside of her had always felt unsettled until she finally got to talk to them one last time. Hermione wondered if she would ever pull the Stone out to speak to them again. Perhaps she would someday. Or maybe she could be content now, knowing that they were there with her, watching her, rooting for her, and someday they would welcome her with open arms once it was finally time.

She turned her head to find Draco. He was still giving her privacy, presumably waiting in the clearing up ahead.

She clutched the ring in her fist and walked toward it, her wand lit again. She no longer needed to see the place where Harry died for closure. She had gotten far more closure on the wooded path than she ever would have believed possible.

“Draco?” she called softly, as she stepped into the clearing. His blonde head was turned away from her, studying something intently up in the branches. “What are you...?”

“Shhh,” he said, waving at her without tearing his eyes from the thing he was looking at.

She furrowed her brow and approached him slowly, slipping her free hand into his and then following the path of his gaze. She gasped as she saw it clearly now, peeking its head out from behind a trunk of a tree, studying both of them.

It let out a small trill of song. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever heard.

“Hello Fawkes,” she said softly. “Harry told me all about you.”

Draco glanced at her curiously, but at her words the phoenix fully emerged from hiding, and settled on a nearby branch, his impressive plumage nearly sweeping the tops of their heads.

“You came to meet your new master, didn’t you?” she asked softly.

Again the phoenix trilled, and Hermione smiled a little as Draco looked at her in amazement.

“What are you on about?” he asked.

Instead of answering him, she lifted his hand and closed his palm around the Resurrection Stone.

“Turn it over three times,” she said.

He quirked an eyebrow at this, but he did as she asked, and then they both took a step back in surprise as the form of Dumbledore materialized in front of them.

Fawkes made a low, plaintive sound at the sight.

“I can see you!” said Hermione in amazement. “But why...”

“Because I was called by the Master, my dear. His power to recall the dead is greater than yours or mine.”

Hermione blinked and turned to look at Draco, who was watching Dumbledore with a mixture of wariness and anger.

“Why?” was all Draco said.

Dumbledore sighed and looked off into space for a moment.

“I’m afraid I have no satisfactory answers. I am not proud of the things I’ve done. I did not keep a clear conscience with my actions, but I also did not go far enough to master Death myself. I died suspended between the two. I’ll confess some part of me hoped that if I used Harry to destroy the horcruxes and he died in the attempt that I would finally earn the title of Master. I wasn’t willing to kill him outright because I feared what that would do to my own soul. But I was selfish and naive. I viewed the Hallows as a quest.”

“But Luna’s father said that they *are* a quest,” said Hermione in confusion.

Dumbledore shook his head. “No. They are a journey, just like all things in life are meant to be. They’re a summation of experiences, along with some luck. I do not think Mr. Malfoy here even knows what we are talking about, so how could it ever be a quest? That would require active pursuit. And yet, he became the Master without ever realizing it.”

“Will you two please explain?” demanded Draco.

“You’re the Master of Death,” said Hermione simply. “Just like in *The Tale of the Three Brothers*. Harry told me, just a few minutes ago.”

Draco’s eyes widened, and he turned pale, as he spun back toward Dumbledore to confirm.

Dumbledore looked grim as he nodded. “You are, my dear boy, and while I confess that I would have been jealous of you during life, I do not envy you in death. I know what you have done and the trials you have put yourself through to become it.”

“Are you here to tell me what to do then?” Draco asked, looking perturbed.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Oh no. I would never presume to tell the Master of Death what he can and cannot do. It is not my place, and in any event I think it is one of the few things that those of us who are dead cannot know. We may speculate – Harry and I have had many lively conversations about it since his death of course – but we aren’t certain what it means because nobody has ever united the Hallows quite like you. The few others who have come close have all been like me – a Master in name, perhaps, but never quite *right*. You understand Death in a way that even those of us who are in that state cannot comprehend. I suspected it would be you the moment you told Miss Granger how to cast her first *Avada Kedavra*. Your explanation about *summoning* Death... well, it was enlightening. I knew then that you were familiar with Death in a way that I never had been. And you were already the proper owner of two Hallows. All you had to do was find the third, and then...”

Dumbledore made a little gesture with his hand as though to say, *voila*.

Draco huffed an exhale. “So if you’re not here to tell me what it means, then *why* are you here?”

“You tell me,” said Dumbledore simply. “You are the one who summoned me.”

Draco glanced at Hermione and then at Fawkes.

“I think I just wanted to know why you used Hermione the way you did. I saw your bird and —”

“Ah, but as Miss Granger has just said, Fawkes is *your* bird now. He bonded with me years ago, after James Potter died. Before that, his prior owner was Nicolas Flamel – whom Miss Granger knows was quite keen on beating Death in his own way, though he never used the Hallows to do it. He was successful for centuries too. Eventually though, I came along, and Fawkes seemed to sense that I had better odds at becoming the true Master of Death than my friend Nicholas did. Fawkes was a wonderful companion to me until the very end of my life, though there were times when I believed he was transitioning to Harry during the last couple of years. After the Elder Wand acknowledged *you* as its new master, however, Fawkes left. I expect he’s been waiting in the Forest for you ever since Harry gave you the Cloak,” said Dumbledore, smiling fondly at the phoenix.

Fawkes released another trill at this, and Dumbledore chuckled as Draco’s eyes widened and turned to him.

“He knows then?” he asked curiously.

“Phoenixes always know,” said Dumbledore. “They are symbols of death and rebirth are they not? And Fawkes here is a very social bird, compared to others. Think of him as an emissary.”

Draco extended out his arm, and Fawkes fluttered down on it. Draco gasped a little at the weight and reached up to stroke his chest. He gave a musical cry in delight at the attention, and Hermione saw Draco begin to smile.

Then he turned back to Dumbledore and said, “You should know that your brother is still on my list.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Dumbledore actually chuckled at this. “Yes, I’m well aware. He angered the Master of Death to his detriment. And he’s angered the Master’s great love too. I fully expect to see him soon. The only question in my mind is which one of you will send him to me.”

Draco glanced at Hermione knowingly, and her eyes narrowed.

“You aren’t bothered by it?” she asked.

Dumbledore shrugged. “Death bothers me far less now than it did while I was alive. I think that is true for nearly all of us on the other side. No, the only things that bother me now are the actions I cannot change.”

“Has Harry forgiven you then?”

“He has,” said Dumbledore simply. “Ronald too.”

“I don’t know if I have,” said Hermione.

Dumbledore sighed and looked contrite. “No, Miss Granger, I would not expect you to, nor would I ask it of you. I think I did you the greatest disservice of all by placing the burden of the Hallows on your shoulders, along with the horcrux hunt. I arranged for *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* to be passed to you because I thought Fawkes was transitioning to Harry. I wanted to be the Master of Death, but I thought that if it couldn’t be me, then Harry might find some way to achieve it and maybe – just maybe – he wouldn’t have to die. It was a fool’s hope, I’ll admit, but I saw the signs from Fawkes and left you that book as a backup plan. You are clever and insightful, and I was sure you would be able to make those connections and help him on what I thought at the time was a quest to unite the Hallows. I also knew that you would eventually figure out what Harry was. You would understand my betrayal before the others did. And I watched you choose to live with that knowledge, rather than reveal me to Harry. You gave him peace of mind at the expense of your own. I can never apologize enough for what I put you through, my dear girl, but when I see you now... well, I am proud of the journey you have taken.”

“If you hadn’t done the things you did, then I wouldn’t have known how to kill You-Know-Who,” said Hermione slowly. “I wouldn’t have known about the Hallows at all. I may not

have taken risks to steal the Invisibility Cloak back. I wouldn't have told Draco about the Resurrection Stone. He never would have found it."

Dumbledore's lips quirked, as Draco looked at her thoughtfully.

"It has, indeed, been interesting to watch everything come together," said Dumbledore lightly.

"And this is it then?" asked Draco. "This is how we beat him?"

"Oh I think there are any number of ways to beat him. You two are quite lethal and resourceful enough without the moniker of Master of Death too. I imagine that the Order will be dumbfounded when they discover just how far you two have already gone to bring him down. But then again, to have the Master of Death on our side and pitched *against* Voldemort at the end of it all? That, my boy, has always been my greatest wish since the first war began."

Draco exhaled and exchanged glances with Hermione. She gave him a reassuring nod.

"I'll kill him," said Draco simply. "I was always going to, but this... well, I'm not sure what more I can do with the Hallows and Fawkes on my side, but I'll take any advantage I can get."

At this Dumbledore beamed. "Thank you, my dear boy. You have truly earned the title. And now you should release me and send Fawkes to his new home. He will be your loyal companion for life, until it is finally your time to join us."

Draco said nothing, but he furrowed his brow for a moment as though concentrating, and then Dumbledore began to fade, his sparkling blue eyes the last things to disappear.

"Fawkes," said Draco softly. "Go home."

Fawkes gave a trill and then rose in the air, before disappearing in a flash of flames. Draco inhaled as he watched it, before turning gleaming eyes toward Hermione.

"This is mad," was all he said, as he pulled her to him.

Hermione huffed a laugh and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him.

"You're not wrong. But Harry and Dumbledore are both right, Draco. It was always meant to be somebody like you."

Draco accepted her kiss before pulling back and tugging her hand.

"Come along then, let's head back. Unless you still want to see where Potter...?"

"No," said Hermione simply. "No, I don't need that anymore."

Draco smiled a little and slipped the ring on for safe-keeping before he held out his arm for her to take. They were quiet as they made their way out of the Forbidden Forest, only

coming to a halt once they could see the sky clearly again. Several of the dementors were circling low, seeming to hover near a figure in the distance. There were flashes of silver coming from the figure's wand, but there were too many dementors to be held off by a single, small patronus.

"Draco is that...?" asked Hermione.

"McGonagall," said Draco, looking a bit grim.

Hermione gasped and pulled out her wand, but Draco put a hand on her. "*No*. Your patronus is distinctive. It will identify you."

"Then you do it!" she insisted.

He looked at her, and a flash of sympathy lit his eyes. "Hermione, I've never been able to cast one very well."

Hermione looked at him furiously. "You can do it, Draco! Pull out your wand, say *expecto patronum*, and think of the happiest memory you have!"

"But—"

"Do it for *me*, Draco, please!" she pleaded. "Or else I'll do it myself!"

Draco gritted his teeth and nodded once as he pulled out his wand.

"Take my power Draco to make it strong... *please* help her!"

He closed his eyes and raised his wand toward the dementors in the distance. Then he looked right into Hermione's eyes as he bellowed, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" and he tugged so hard on her magic that Hermione gasped and fell to her knees.

She lifted her head to see an enormous thing erupt from his wand, silver and powerful, and so dense it looked almost solid. She squinted for a moment as she watched it fly toward the dementors, joining with McGonagall's own cat patronus and sending them back into the air and away from the older witch, who had wandered out onto the grounds for some inexplicable reason.

Across the lawn, McGonagall raised her head to stare at them both in shock, and Hermione knew why she was looking at them as though she was seeing a ghost. There had only ever been one wizard who produced a patronus like the one that had just come out of Draco's wand. And that wizard was dead, buried in a marble tomb on the Hogwarts grounds.

As the patronus continued to swirl around McGonagall's head, pushing the dementors further into the sky, she rose on shaky feet and began to approach them both.

"I thought I heard him," she said, as she arrived. "Fawkes, I mean. I haven't heard his call in over a year. I just... I had to know."

“He was greeting his new master,” said Draco simply, and as one all three of them looked up at the patronus still flying above them.

It was a phoenix of course, and it was Draco’s – rising into the sky like the very resurrection it represented.

“I think you have to be the one to kill him,” said McGonagall simply as she watched it fly ever higher, pushing the dementors away from all three of them. And as she said this, her eyes slid to Hermione’s. “And you’ll be with him at the end, Miss Granger. You were a Gryffindor, and you should be at his side.”

Hermione blinked, and Draco froze. But McGonagall just gave them both a small smile and shrugged. “A teacher always knows her students. Welcome back to the land of the living, Hermione. I’m thrilled you’ve found your way home.”

Draco watched Hermione breathing deeply as she snuggled into him in her sleep. He lazily twirled one curl around his finger, the new ring he was wearing glinting in the moonlight with every pass of her hair.

It was odd, this Master of Death business. Draco had been wondering if he should feel something ever since he learned of it, but he really didn’t. He was just a bit numb and perhaps relieved that nobody would stand in his way when it was time to take the Dark Lord out.

Draco had been prepared to do it ever since he accepted that Hermione would not be with him while tied with Astoria. When she returned, he knew that keeping her identity a secret forever was fruitless, and it wasn’t what either one of them wanted in any event. He had accepted that this would happen one way or another, so in his view the Master of Death title did not change very much.

It was still strange, though. He and Hermione had not really talked about it yet, having been pulled into separate directions the moment they arrived back at the Manor. Perhaps he would be able to get her thoughts on it in the morning. Hermione would know more about this than anybody, he was certain of it.

Then again, Draco sensed that whatever powers he supposedly had now would be largely instinctive. If there were really no records of the Hallows being united in this way, then they would have to figure it out as they went along.

In fact, Draco was itching to try it again.

He grabbed a pillow from behind him and maneuvered it into Hermione’s arms, smiling fondly as she nestled into it instead. His sweet girl always *did* need something to hug in her

sleep. Then he slipped out of bed and made his way to the connecting door to visit his old room.

He lit a lamp and looked around it in satisfaction. Hermione had been agreeable to transforming this place into a real potions lab, with a separate reference section and even a small lounge area that was an homage to Draco's days playing quidditch. It was an amalgam of both of their interests, but something about it worked very well. It enhanced the domesticity of Hermione's room too, and Draco relished the bubble that was just *theirs*.

He tensed for a moment when he saw a large form outside of the window, but then immediately relaxed when he realized what it was.

"Hello Fawkes," he said cordially, as he unlatched the window to let Fawkes in. The phoenix trilled, and Draco felt warmth filling him from the inside out. He reached forward and stroked the bird, which immediately leaned into him.

Of all the astonishing things that had happened to Draco over the past day, Fawkes might have been the most surprising. Draco had never connected to an animal like this before. He had been enamored with his golden eagle and was very fond of Crookshanks for his connection to Hermione of course, but *this*...

Fawkes seemed to embody the sort of peace Draco had always sought but could never quite find unless Hermione was with him. He was calm, confident, and they understood each other perfectly, though Draco couldn't really articulate *how*.

"You'll need a perch old boy," he commented. Fawkes trilled again, and Draco made a note to talk to Hermione about this. Surely she would have some ideas for a design.

"Have you been out looking for food?"

Another trill, and Draco nodded. "Yes, of course. You can take care of yourself perfectly well. You were just waiting to be invited in, weren't you? You can already pass my wards. Please, come and go at your pleasure."

He stroked Fawkes one more time before leaning against the work table and sliding off the ring.

"What do you think? Should I try it?"

Fawkes cocked his head to the side as though considering Draco's question. Draco sensed approval or perhaps support coming from the phoenix. It was odd, but it emboldened him. He knew he would probably regret this, but he couldn't seem to help himself. He took a deep breath and turned the ring three times in his palm before looking up to find those familiar, cold gray eyes staring back at him.

"Hello Father," said Draco.

Lucius just sneered, which caused Draco to cock an eyebrow.

"Fascinating. Even with your supposed omniscience you're still a bastard then?"

“You killed me,” said Lucius curtly.

“I most certainly did not. The Manor would never have become mine if I did.”

Lucius scowled. “You plotted with Theo. The two of you planned it.”

“Of course we did. You would never have given us what we wanted. And after the way you treated Mother... well, you should be grateful we let you live as long as we did. It was an enormous mistake.”

Lucius scoffed. “Please. Don’t bring your mother into this. You’re exactly like me. Or don’t you remember telling your little mudblood that you like to see her fear?”

Draco went cold. “I am *nothing* like you.”

“Of course you are. You are ruthless, violent, and you will continue to hurt the woman you love.”

“I’m not hurting Hermione ever again.”

Lucius rolled his eyes at this. “Please spare me. You aren’t capable of *not* hurting her. It’s who you are, Draco. You are precisely who I made you to be, disappointing though you have been.”

Draco felt his anger starting to build as he stared at the cold countenance of his father.

“Disappointing, am I?” asked Draco softly. “Then I’m sure you’ll be *terribly* disappointed when I send your master to join you. It’s funny though – you can’t seem to stay away from me, can you? Even though I’m such a disappointment.”

“Careful, Draco.”

“No, *you* be careful. I’m the Master of Death now, in case you haven’t heard. I’ve only started to explore my new powers. Would you like for me to experiment on you?”

Lucius’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me,” hissed Draco. “Keep telling me how disappointing I am, how I’m destined to hurt Hermione. You and I both know you’re in the same plane as Potter and the others. I can sense it, Father. But I also think I could make you permanently disappear if I wanted to. There would be no trace of you left, no spirit, no nothing. I could put you past the veil and beyond this world. I could make everyone forget you if I was so inclined.”

Draco saw a hint of fear in Lucius’s eyes.

“The Beyond,” said Draco softly. “Imagine it, Father. For all of your omniscience you don’t know what that’s like, do you? And I can tell that you fear it.”

“What would you ask of me, Draco?”

“Nothing, Father,” said Draco. “I want nothing from you, not ever again.”

“Then why summon me?”

“I just wanted to make sure you knew.”

“Knew what?” asked Lucius angrily.

“That I became greater than you. I wanted to see it on your face when you realized that I have more favor than you, more power than you, more wealth than you, and superior magic to you. You expected great things of me, Father. Well, here I am.”

Lucius looked away, and Draco saw bitterness cross his face. Something about that expression was both heartbreaking and deeply satisfying. He had fought for his father’s approval his entire childhood. It took falling in love with Hermione to make him realize that he should never have wanted it in the first place. And yet, some of the lessons from his father *had* stuck, as reluctant as Draco was to admit it. He had become ruthless and a master at courting the favor of others. He had figured out how to manipulate players on both sides of the war to ensure he would remain untouchable, regardless of who was in power or the atrocities he committed.

“I must be going, Father. If we ever see each other again, I expect it will end poorly for you. Perhaps you should use eternity to reflect on your failures as a man and a wizard.”

At this, Draco shut his eyes, and Lucius’s form winked out a moment later. Draco opened his eyes to find Fawkes looking at him dolefully. Draco felt oddly deflated.

“Well I don’t know what I expected,” he said wryly. “He always was a bastard.”

Fawkes gave a soft trill, and once again it warmed Draco up from the inside.

“You’re absolutely determined to thaw out my cold, wicked heart, aren’t you old boy?”

Draco sensed some amusement coming from the bird. Draco sighed as he stroked Fawkes’s chest one more time.

“I’m not like him,” he whispered. “Because for all of my fuck-ups and all the blood I’ve spilled, I’ll never treat Hermione the way he treated Mother. Not ever.”

Draco sighed one more time as his hand fell. He cast a final look around his old room, his eyes sliding to the now-empty closet before he opened the door to Hermione, who was still clutching the pillow in her sleep.

He slipped back into bed with her and replaced the pillow with himself. He found himself dwelling on the wholly unsatisfying conversation with his father, wondering why he had even bothered. Of *course* Lucius wouldn’t be different in the afterlife. Draco should never have expected him to change.

Draco felt hollow inside and disappointed. It had been foolish of him to summon Lucius, and he would never make that mistake again. It achieved nothing.

Draco knew there were parts of him that *were* like Lucius, as much as he was loath to admit it. Draco knew he was a bit mad. Draco knew he was very violent. Draco knew that in a perfect world somebody like Hermione Granger would probably never want him, nor should she. But the difference between Draco and men like Lucius – men who became obsessed with power and violence and seeing their partner's fear – was that Draco would never harm his sweet girl intentionally. No, he would cherish her. He would adore her. He would revere her.

He would always love her.

Draco knew he was greater than Lucius now, but he realized it was not necessarily for the reasons he gave his father. No, Draco was greater simply because he strived to make the woman he loved happy and content. Hermione was his path to redemption, while Lucius had none.

And that made all the difference.

Chapter End Notes

So... there are a lot of plot holes and inconsistencies surrounding the Deathly Hallows in the books. The fact that the Hallows were united for the entirety of the sixth book has always bothered me. Dumbledore knew where all three of them were for an entire year, and yet he did not use them against Voldemort.

Dumbledore also did not intend for Harry to be the Master of Death in Book 7, because he wanted his wand's power to die with him. And yet, despite this, he still planned for Hermione to inherit Tales of Beedle the Bard when he passed away. That meant he arranged a quest for Harry to collect these objects, one of which was the wand he hoped would no longer work after he died. It has never made any sense to me because it's internally inconsistent.

Finally, when Harry 'dies' Dumbledore insists that the Deathly Hallows are not the reason Harry could choose to come back from the dead. He says it's Lily's sacrifice and Voldemort's use of Harry's blood in his resurrection ritual that gives him that ability. He dismisses the Hallows' power in that conversation. If Dumbledore was right, then the Hallows were pointless. The cloak could have been a special family heirloom, and Dumbledore's wand could have been an interesting plot point without using all the pages JKR devoted to the lore about the Three Brothers and the Master of Death.

All that is to say, in this fic the Hallows are not pointless. I'm taking the position that the Hallows would have helped Harry come back from the dead if he had truly been the master of them when he died. But since Draco gave up his wand voluntarily at the Manor to help Hermione escape, Harry never mastered it, and that's why Voldemort's Avada worked in this version of events.

Chapter 39: Andromeda

“What do you reckon?” asked Draco, as he held the ring with the Resurrection Stone up to examine it.

It was early the following morning. The sun was barely up, and Hermione had just risen. As usual, Draco was already awake, playing with one of her curls while he looked at the ring from every side. Tonight she knew he would be going out with some of the younger Death Eaters who were considering becoming tied to the boons Hermione had raised. Several Death Eaters had come forward on their own. Others had been identified by Draco, Theo, and Blaise as suitable targets. And all of them were being vetted as though it was the boons who were the real prize.

It was a true role reversal, and it struck Hermione as a little odd, but not unwelcome.

Right now though, it was just the two of them. Draco appeared to be lost in his own thoughts about all the strange things that had happened the previous day.

“I don’t think you should tell anybody the full extent of it,” said Hermione simply. “Definitely not the Order, but not even Theo or the others.”

He glanced at her in surprise.

“You think?”

“Yes,” she said. “It could frighten them, Draco.”

“But it doesn’t frighten you,” he pointed out.

“No,” said Hermione. “But I’ve studied the Hallows as much as anybody can. I’ve used one of them regularly for years. And I love you, Draco, and I know you love me. You’ll never turn them against me.”

He leaned down and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Of course not, sweet girl.”

“But other people? I don’t know. I think it’s something that needs to stay between us, forever.”

“Will we be able to keep it a secret when I kill the Dark Lord?”

Hermione’s stomach clenched at this. She didn’t want to think of Draco doing that, but she knew he was the best choice. He might be the *only* choice.

“Whatever you end up doing... we can say it’s something Dumbledore passed down to Harry, and I learned about it and shared it with you. Some obscure spell or magical artifact that was

single use and destroyed when he dies. We don't want them to think it's anything you could replicate."

Draco was nodding slowly as she spoke. "You may be right."

"Do you feel any different? Do you have any idea what you can really do with them?"

He hesitated. "It's hard to say. I'm going to do as much reading as I can about them, but I suspect a lot of it is instinctive."

"You could always summon Dumbledore and Harry and talk to them about it some more," suggested Hermione. "They did say they've discussed it at length."

"Dumbledore already said he doesn't know the extent of my powers now."

"No, but his guesses are usually pretty good, Draco. Between that and some research..."

She shrugged a little, and he sighed.

"It's strange," he muttered.

"Is it?" she asked.

He looked down at her askance. "You don't think so?"

She shrugged again. "I spent most of my magical life being best friends with a wizard who had a prophecy created about him. Harry, Ron, and I got into a lot of scrapes because of it and between the three of us we encountered so many incredible things in the magical world while we did it that very little surprises me anymore. It wasn't just horcruxes and the Hallows, you know. It was the Mirror of Erised, and all of Hagrid's special pets, and the Sword of Gryffindor, and the merpeople in the lake. I spent the entirety of our third year with a time-turner so I could make it to all of my classes and—"

"Ha!" declared Draco, sitting up and looking down at her excitedly. "I fucking *knew* it!"

Hermione chuckled a little, as he leaned back, now appearing extremely smug.

"Yes, well, my point is that I'm used to prophecies and legends coming true. I have handled some very powerful magical artifacts. The fact that the Master of Death is *you* does not seem that strange to me. Harry said the Master is the person who understands every facet of it and unites the Hallows while he does it. He has to kill, but he also has to save. He doesn't fear Death, and he can command it. Some of it is earned and some of it is just luck. Harry's own situation with the prophecy was similar, you know."

He was quiet for a long while as he thought about this. Finally he said, "Alright. Just you and me then. We will tell the others part of it, but nobody else can ever know that I'm the Master of Death."

"Good," she said, rolling toward him to kiss him. He immediately deepened it until she pulled away. "And when we finally meet with the Order, we make it clear that he is *ours*."

Just the two of us, Draco. We'll get it done."

He smiled a little as he reached up and tucked a curl behind her ear.

"My fierce girl," he murmured. "My *fiancée*. Fuck, I'm still not used to that."

Hermione smiled. "Just think, a year ago I pitied you at best and loathed you at worst and was living in a tent in the woods."

"We've come a long way, it's true," he acknowledged, his eyes twinkling. "A year ago I was pining for you and scouring the papers for any trace of you. And now here I am the Master of Death and in your bed."

"Let's not worry about death right now and focus on the part where you're in my bed," she said with mock seriousness, as she pulled the ring with the Resurrection Stone out of his hands and placed it back on his finger. "Make me feel alive Draco."

"Your wish is my command, little dove," he murmured as he rolled on top of her and began to undress her.

It was slow this time, unhurried. Draco trailed hot, deep kisses down her neck and toward her clavicle, while nudging off the shoulder of her nightgown.

"What do you think?" he asked as he started to suck. "Should I ravish you or do you wish to ravish me? You have the Master of Death at your command, my darling. Does that make you feel powerful?"

Hermione groaned and arched, because it *did* make her feel powerful. It was heady to know that the man who could call on such darkness would fall at her feet to please her.

Draco sensed her growing arousal because he just gave a wicked chuckle and teased off the other side of her nightgown, before peeling it down to expose her.

"I will never get enough of these," he sighed as he lowered his head to swirl his tongue around one nipple. Hermione felt it tighten, and she groaned just a little.

"We're engaged, sweet girl," he murmured as he kissed around the globe of her breast. "And that means someday you will be holding a babe right here. What do you think?"

"Draco," she admonished, though it also turned into a groan as he pulled her whole nipple into his mouth.

A moment later he released it and pushed the nightgown down her stomach and hips, and she shivered a little as the morning air hit her.

"Don't pretend like the idea doesn't affect you. I haven't forgotten precisely how many loopholes you closed with my mother to make sure we could have that someday."

Hermione's breath caught, as he moved her knickers to the side.

"And see?" he commented, as he gave a swipe. "All I have to do is talk about it, and it makes you wet."

"It's other things making me *aaaaagh*," she groaned, her retort dying in a moan as Draco impaled her with two fingers and twisted.

"You'll let me have my little fantasy," he said sternly. "I dream about it."

He twisted again, eliciting another groan from her.

"Why?" she gasped.

"Because that will be the day you give me everything you have to give. Be sweet and let me pretend."

"Alright," she breathed, because what else could she say in the face of all this? If Draco wanted to pretend, he could pretend. She had learned that giving him just a little meant a tenfold return in pleasure for her.

"So good for me," he sighed, and then with a deft motion he yanked her knickers down and lowered his head to suck on her clit. Hermione cried out and arched into his face. He made an indistinct noise as he pressed into her, and Hermione got the impression he was trying to bury his whole mouth against her she felt his tongue move to penetrate her.

"Oh *God*," she groaned as she started to shake. She felt herself approaching, and she knew Draco did too. He didn't move away or let up, and within seconds she was snapping, small tremors pulsing over her as Draco lapped it up.

When he lifted his head, his pupils were blown, his eyes wild, and Hermione felt a thrill of elation that she could affect him like this.

He was the Master of Death, fantasizing about creating new life with her. Even if it wouldn't happen for a very long while, she knew he was dreaming about it, and once again she was the most important piece of that dream.

"How do you want me?"

The words just slipped out, but Draco's eyes widened, and then they started darting all over her body, like he couldn't make up his mind. It was strange, seeing him so undone and indecisive. Usually he just took control. But upon offering herself to him, he seemed slightly overwhelmed as though he still could not believe she was really here.

Finally, he seemed to come to a decision.

"I want to come inside of you. And I want you to ride me."

Hermione's eyebrows flew up. She had never been on top before, not a single time. Draco liked to control things in bed, and she enjoyed letting him do it. So this was new, but she found herself deeply intrigued.

Just how quickly would she be able to make him break?

"I can tell what you're thinking," he warned her. "And if you don't give me at least a few minutes to enjoy it, then the next time I have you I won't let you come."

Hermione gasped. "You *wouldn't*."

Draco pursed his lips. "Alright, fine. I probably wouldn't. But *please*, sweet girl, don't go so fast I can't enjoy it."

Hermione smiled a little as Draco wrapped his arms around her and rolled to his back. She was laying on his chest now, before propping herself up and flicking her curls out of the way. They had become wild from sleep.

"Merlin, but you are everything," he whispered as he stared up at her and ran a firm palm down her body. The metal from the ring was cold against her body and made her shiver. "Who ever knew that love could command Death?"

Hermione felt herself shuddering at this as she lifted her hips and moved back down him. She hesitated for just a moment.

"Take your time," he whispered. "I'm in no rush."

She nodded and clenched her stomach as she slowly sank down. Draco groaned and threw his head back, as he moved his hands down to settle firmly on her hips.

"I swear to fucking Merlin that little cunt of yours is always so tight for me, it's like taking your virginity again every single time."

Hermione gasped, but raised herself just a little and then sank down again. Draco gave a strangled cry, and she did it a second time.

"Fuck... *slow* sweet girl, or I'll blow my load inside of you already..."

"Maybe I want you to," she said.

Again the words, just slipped out, but Draco's eyes flew open, and he was giving her a covetous look now.

"Yeah? You want my seed inside of you? I'll fill you up all the way to here," and he pressed a firm hand below her navel, as Hermione nodded and began to rock in earnest.

Why was this so appealing to her? She didn't know. Maybe it was watching him come totally undone at the knowledge that she fantasized about it a little too. Maybe it was the biological imperative. Maybe it was simply a claiming to feel him leave something behind. Whatever it was, it excited her, and now she was chasing that moment for *him* so she could feel it.

When Draco saw her nod, he groaned, and she sensed him struggling to maintain control. But that wasn't what she wanted - she wanted him to lose it, *now*, so she could feel it.

It was a battle of wills: his to enjoy the ride as long as possible, Hermione to force him to end it. Soon, she found herself bouncing on him, her breasts heaving to the motion, and Draco's jaw dropped in disbelief.

He immediately reached up to clutch her breasts, and he looked at her as though he would happily stay like this forever.

But Hermione had one more trick up her sleeve to make him give her what she wanted, or at least she thought she did.

"I want it in me, Draco," she said, and he actually whimpered a little to hear those words fall from her lips. "Come for me."

Then she reached behind her and lightly brushed his balls. The skin was wrinkled and a little pebbly, and they were oddly firm. He jerked in surprise to feel her touch there, and then he lost the fight between them as he surged his hips up and sputtered deep inside of her. The feeling made her gasp too, as she pitched forward and felt herself come apart just as he did. When it finally came to an end, she collapsed fully onto his chest without bothering to pull out, and Draco wrapped his arms around her tightly so she couldn't leave.

The scent of cedar and spice enveloped her, and Hermione sensed a new darkness in Draco that she knew must be tied to the ring he was wearing. But it was comforting, all encompassing, and safe. She could turn herself over to it and know that he would only ever call upon it to protect her or to give her the things she wanted in this world. Dumbledore had said that she was the Master's great love, and she knew it was true.

It wasn't long after that she found herself tangled up with him, their arms and legs intertwined after she vanished the mess. She had just taken a potion so their fantasies remained only that, laughing a little at the look of mock disappointment on Draco's face. Now he was playing with her ribbon and nuzzling her neck.

"I'm going to kill him for you. I swear it."

"I know you will," she said. "And after you do, you'll recall Hermione Granger from the dead, and we'll be able to live together openly. Our story will end so much better than the second brother's."

Unlike the time Snape discovered that Hermione was alive, neither she nor Draco were that worried about it when McGonagall figured it out too.

Maybe it was because they were finally on the same page as each other. Maybe it was because they had both done unforgivable things to be with the other. But whatever the reason, neither one of them was that concerned about the rest of the Order hearing about it.

Hermione would not cooperate with an extraction attempt, and Draco would never allow them to get close enough to her to try.

Besides, the fact that Hermione – as Columba Black – had tied with Draco Malfoy and challenged Astoria Greengrass publicly to get Voldemort's blessing had been all over the papers. Once the Order heard that it was really Hermione, it would surely tell them everything they needed to know about her. She was loyal to Draco, not them. Her life and future was bound to him permanently. Trying to convince her to come to an Order safe house would be futile.

The only complication was the Death Eaters. They could not know about the deception, not yet. And that was the reason Draco made contact several days after acquiring the Resurrection Stone to request a meeting with the same group who condemned Hermione in the first place. It was time to tell them the truth if McGonagall hadn't done so already – and then threaten them all within an inch of their lives if the information was leaked back to the Death Eaters before they were prepared for it.

With this visit Draco and Hermione were accompanied by Theo, Blaise, Ginny, and Luna too. Hermione had come to think of the six of them as their own faction of the Order. They were aligned with the Order leadership, but they would not betray each other for any greater plan the Order was developing. In fact, the entire scheme to bring Voldemort down for good was hashed out among their six, and they fully intended to do it whether the Order cooperated or not.

The meeting taking place that night was at a safe house Hermione had never visited, though she knew Harry had been there once before.

"It's my Aunt Andromeda's house," said Draco, turning a bit pink. "She was how I started working with the Order in the first place."

Draco told her that Andromeda was really a fringe Order member at this point. She was not a fighter and never had been. But she also hadn't turned away her desperate nephew when he tracked her down and cornered her in Diagon Alley one day, soon after Hermione and the boys went into hiding the previous year. He spilled his darkest secret to her: that he was a Death Eater but in love with Hermione Granger and had been for *years*. He was desperate to learn anything about her, to help her in any way he could. And he knew she was his aunt, and his cousin was an Order member, and could she please, *please* tell him whatever she knew of Hermione and where she might be?

Andromeda had taken a chance on him, having heard from others in the Order that he lowered his wand when it came time to kill Dumbledore. She invited him to her home, where she introduced him to his muggleborn uncle and then his half-blood cousin and her werewolf husband who used to teach Draco Defense Against the Dark Arts. It felt oddly like coming full circle to see Remus Lupin again, and he was the one who confirmed Draco's feelings for Hermione to the larger group.

"The entire staff knew about it. He could never keep his eyes off of her," Remus had said.

Satisfied that Draco was telling the truth, the four of them had guarded Draco's secret and told him Hermione was safe at Grimmauld Place. In return, Draco slowly fed information to them, and eventually they introduced him to the Order's leadership as a young man who could become a second spy if he could find a way to rise high enough.

Hermione had been fascinated by the tale, and she was pleased to hear that his Aunt Andromeda had not been in on the plan for Hermione's execution. Ted Tonks had died in the spring, and then Remus and Tonks died at the Battle of Hogwarts. Andromeda had naturally been devastated when she heard about it and had not engaged with the Order in the immediate aftermath. She became reclusive after their deaths, focusing solely on Teddy, and Draco had not heard from her in months. But after the news about Columba Black made the papers, she finally reached out to Draco again, and he suggested an Order meeting with a very select guest list.

Andromeda was kind enough to offer her home for it, and that was how Hermione and the others found themselves floo'ing directly from Draco's room to Andromeda's cottage. It was comfortable, cozy, and Hermione looked around it in bemusement as she stepped through.

"Draco," said a woman who looked a little like Bellatrix. She stepped forward and clasped Draco's hand, while bouncing a baby on her hip. Draco and Hermione stepped aside to greet her while the others came through.

Draco's breath caught as he turned to look at Teddy, and Hermione's did too. She had never met him of course, and the only picture she had ever seen of him was as a newborn.

She did some quick maths in her head and determined he must be approaching eight months old. He was chubby, with dimpled fists clutching at Andromeda's shirt, and he gave them a gummy smile.

"He's so big," said Draco in amazement.

Andromeda gave them a small smile. "Babies have a way of doing that."

"I haven't seen him since he was a newborn," said Draco. Hermione didn't know if she was more shocked by the fact that Draco had met Teddy before or the regret in his voice that he had missed the last several months.

"They don't do much as newborns," said Andromeda. "These days it's all I can do to keep him contained. He learned to crawl recently, and Merlin... I'm too old for this."

Draco shocked Hermione yet again by reaching for the little boy, and Andromeda handed him off gratefully. Draco started to bounce him a bit absently, while the others approached Andromeda for introductions. Hermione, however, couldn't help but gape.

She heard a low chuckle and turned to find Andromeda watching her curiously as the group started to migrate into a back sitting room where the meeting would be taking place.

"Surprised?" she asked, nodding toward Draco who had not relinquished Teddy.

“Stunned,” confessed Hermione. “I know he wants children someday, but I really wasn’t expecting this...”

Andromeda gave a small shrug. “My nephew fell in love with Teddy the moment he laid eyes on him. I only regret... well, I should have reached out.”

Hermione stopped and turned to place a hand on her shoulder.

“He’s not angry with you, Andromeda. Not at all. He knows why you didn’t, and he had... quite a lot to be dealing with himself over the recent months.”

Andromeda narrowed her eyes a little and cocked her head. “I suppose that’s true. I’ll confess it was my curiosity about you that finally drew me out of hiding... Columba?” She said the name with suspicion.

Hermione smiled a little. “In a way.”

Hermione thought that something like satisfaction flashed across Andromeda’s face.

“Good,” she said. “I admit I had hoped... well, that’s neither here nor there. Let’s head on in with the others.”

Hermione followed Andromeda to the sitting room where the others were already being greeted. Snape and McGonagall were having a whispered conversation and casting glances Hermione’s way. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Aberforth Dumbledore both looked a bit irritated and were watching Draco and Hermione suspiciously. But Hermione’s attention was then pulled to the Weasleys, and she couldn’t look away.

Molly and Arthur were both there, squishing Ginny between them as tears rolled down their cheeks. Then to Hermione’s utter shock Molly pulled away with a great sniff and pulled Blaise toward her too, nearly suffocating him in her ample bosom.

Hermione huffed a small chuckle. Out of the entire group who had condemned her, the Weasleys were the only ones she didn’t resent. She couldn’t blame them for prioritizing Ginny, and Draco had said that they were the least enthusiastic, even though they had the most to gain by going along with the plan. Hermione’s heart warmed as Molly then turned to Draco and tried to pull *him* in for a hug as well.

“Thank you for keeping her safe, you wonderful boy,” Hermione heard Molly choke out.

Draco was uncharacteristically flustered, and Hermione let out a small laugh.

At the sound, Molly froze and released Draco, before turning toward Hermione slowly.

Hermione barely noticed the others fall silent as everyone turned to watch Molly, who was staring at Hermione with huge eyes and hope on her face.

“Are you... Columba?” she asked hesitantly.

Hermione gave her a small smile. “Only in certain circles, Mrs. Weasley.”

Molly gasped and then flung herself on Hermione, as sobs wracked her body once more.

Hermione was stunned, and she could see the others were too, as she patted Mrs. Weasley awkwardly on the back.

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped. “I’m so, *so* sorry... the moment we agreed to let him do that, I just... oh Hermione, dear, *please* forgive us!”

Hermione took in Kingsley's and Aberforth's expressions, and they both looked confunded. Arthur looked almost faint with relief, and Andromeda appeared very satisfied. Hermione gave her a small smile as she peeled Molly off of her.

“It’s okay, Molly. I understand why you and Arthur did it.”

She intentionally did not include the others, because the truth was she *hadn't* forgiven them, not completely. She could tell they noted the distinction as looks of awkwardness were exchanged among them.

“I suppose everyone knows now,” said Hermione, as she pulled out her wand. “*Finite incantatem.*”

Her regular appearance reemerged, and Molly cupped her face in her hands.

“My dear. We have missed you so much.”

Hermione smiled down at the woman. She had never been as close to Molly as Harry had been. There had been times when Molly had hurt her or irritated her with her insistence upon traditional gender roles. But Hermione knew that the Weasleys had still loved her in their own way. They opened their home to her and never once made her feel like she wasn't a real witch because she was muggleborn.

After a bit more fussing, Hermione took a seat next to Draco, who was still holding Teddy. The little boy seemed perfectly content snuggled in Draco's arms, and Hermione idly wondered if he liked the smell of cedar and spice as much as she did.

“I assume this is why you called us together?” started Kingsley, as he gestured toward Hermione.

Draco scowled. “Partially. Severus and Minerva both figured it out. We decided it was time for the rest of you to know too. But the news that Hermione is still alive will not leave this room until we are ready for it.”

“Who did you kill instead?” demanded Kingsley.

Hermione pursed her lips, as Draco responded coldly, “Lavender Brown. I told you she was seriously injured. I offered to give her a clean exit, and she volunteered.”

There was a heavy silence at this. McGonagall, in particular, appeared sad to hear the news. Then it was broken by Hermione's least favorite person there.

“And you really tied with a Death Eater?” asked Aberforth, now glaring at Hermione a little bit.

Hermione’s temper flared. “Please tell me how tying myself to a single Death Eater who saved my life is worse than leaving thirty muggleborn children to be *caught* by Death Eaters right after the Battle of Hogwarts?”

Aberforth froze, and to Hermione’s surprise, most of the others looked at him in confusion.

“What is she talking about?” asked McGonagall sharply.

Aberforth’s face turned red and said nothing, so Hermione relayed the story Mary had told her.

“I have Mary Walsh in hiding in a secure location,” she added, now looking at McGonagall, who appeared relieved. “But when I found her, Dolohov had her chained to the wall of his bedroom by her neck. So I *suggest* you keep your judgmental comments to yourself. You care nothing for my life – that has been made abundantly clear – but you also failed to help *dozens of children* simply because you couldn’t be bothered to take them to a safe house or figure out how to return them to the muggle world. You have no moral ground upon which to stand.”

As she said this last bit, she glared at Aberforth again, and he seemed to shrink a little.

There was another uncomfortable silence as everyone in the group absorbed this. Kingsley cleared his throat a bit awkwardly to draw attention back to himself.

Hermione sensed he was the *de facto* leader.

“We’re obviously pleased that Draco was able to save Hermione. Of course we will all keep her secret. It would be catastrophic if the Death Eaters learned of this. Nobody in this room should reveal it to anybody else, unless Draco or I say so.”

There was murmured agreement of this, and then Kingsley looked at Draco again.

“So with that... is there any other reason you called us here?”

Draco shifted Teddy in his arms. The softness and care he was giving that little boy was in stark contrast to the words that came out of his mouth next.

“The six of us plan to kill the Dark Lord on the night of the Winter Solstice. We were hoping the Order might be there too.”

The reactions from the others were varied.

Molly and Arthur looked at Ginny and Hermione fearfully and immediately began to object to their participation in any attempts to bring him down. McGonagall looked a bit perturbed and Severus’s eyes were narrowed as though he couldn’t decide what they were playing at. Aberforth snorted in disbelief and rolled his eyes, while Kingsley frowned.

“What makes you believe you can do that?” asked Kingsley.

Draco raised one eyebrow and told the lie that he and Hermione had carefully crafted between them to get out in front of the extraordinary thing they planned for Draco once it was time.

“We recently recovered a magical artifact that will assist us in finishing it. We will only be able to use it once, so the timing has to be perfect. It will bring people back from the dead, temporarily. We will probably call on Potter because Hermione’s connection was close enough to summon him. We may be able to summon others too, but we aren’t certain how much power it will require. We will just have to see when the time comes. Either way, having Potter arrive on the scene should be enough of a distraction for one of us to get a spell off and finish the Dark Lord.”

The Order was looking incredulous.

“You’re not serious,” said McGonagall. Draco turned to look at her.

“I’m perfectly serious. It’s a ring – a very powerful one. We found it in the Forbidden Forest that day that Fawkes found me. Surely you remember.”

Her eyes widened.

“Albus Dumbledore had it first,” said Draco, now reverting to the truth, or at least part of it, “but he died before he had a chance to use it. He passed it to Potter by leaving it inside of the snitch he gave to Potter in his will. He did not leave instructions about it because it was too dangerous.”

“That’s what Harry, Ron, and I were doing while on the run,” added Hermione.

“Dumbledore left us clues about it, and we put those clues together right before the Battle of Hogwarts. But Harry also died before it was finished. It took time before I trusted Draco enough to tell him about it. As he said, he eventually recovered it in the Forbidden Forest. Harry must have dropped it right before he died.”

Hermione could see the others becoming convinced.

“And the other thing we were doing,” she added, now taking a calculated risk, but knowing they had no choice if the Order was going to be there with them, “was hunting horcruxes.”

At this, McGonagall’s eyes became huge and Snape hissed. The others, however, looked at Hermione in confusion.

“What is a horcrux?” asked Arthur.

Hermione sighed and explained herself. By the end of it, they were all looking at her in horror.

“I know,” she added. “But there are only two left. One is Nagini, and she is at Nott Castle at all times. The other is a buckle he wears on his cloak. He is never seen without it. We have a plan to destroy both before going for the bit of soul left in his body.”

“And you want to do this on the Solstice?” asked Kingsley in a tense voice. “That’s only –”

“Five weeks away,” said Hermione, nodding. “Yes, we are aware.”

“But *why*? ” asked Kingsley.

Now, Theo jumped in for the first time.

“Because Luna and I will be tying that night at Nott Castle. So will six other boons whom we have identified as strategic choices. The Dark Lord will be overseeing it – seven ties on one of the most magically significant nights of the year. He’s planning an enormous party for it, which will serve as the perfect distraction to slip the Order in.”

“And we also can’t let it go too long because I *might* have cast a curse against most of the senior Death Eaters that will be slowly draining their magic,” added Hermione.

There was shocked silence at this.

“Pardon?” asked Snape in a slightly strangled voice.

“Oh I didn’t cast it on you,” said Hermione airily. “You’re welcome, by the way. But yes, most of the senior Death Eaters are being drained of magic as we speak. The only one I couldn’t get to was Bellatrix, unfortunately, but there was nothing to be done about it. None of the Death Eaters I cursed will be able to cast unforgiveables at this point. In five weeks their magic will be so weak that they won’t be able to stun or manage any strong hexes or jinxes either. They might be able to cast a *lumos* or a *wingardium leviosa* at you, but that will be all.”

The senior Order members were gaping now.

Hermione just shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“But... but *how*?” asked McGonagall faintly.

“It’s a long story, and it doesn’t matter. Let’s just say I saw my chance, and I took it. But it also put us on the clock to finish him. We need to do it before their magic is totally gone.”

“Why?” demanded Aberforth. “Shouldn’t we wait a few more weeks to –”

But to Hermione’s surprise, it wasn’t any of her friends who spoke up to interrupt him, it was Snape.

“No,” he said. “No, Miss Granger is absolutely correct. The Dark Lord will notice once their magic is totally gone. It’s best to do this while they are weakened but not so impotent that he’s on guard.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “We need to preserve the element of surprise. Most of the Death Eaters will do everything they can to keep it quiet once they notice it happening... but if we wait too long he will find out, and he will know that somebody must have cursed them all. He will be on the warpath to discover the traitor’s identity, and he will surely narrow it down

to Bellatrix, Severus, Draco, Theo, or Blaise very quickly since they will be the only ones in the inner circle who can still perform advanced magic. We can't risk it."

There was a short silence as everyone absorbed this.

"You don't think the Death Eaters have noticed their magic draining already?" asked Arthur thoughtfully, as he stared off into space and frowned a little.

Hermione shrugged. "It's hard to say. Not one of them noticed it when I cast the spell in the first place. They may not notice as their ability to perform the most difficult spells drains away. It's not like most of them kill or torture *all* that often. But they will undoubtedly notice it within the next few weeks once they can no longer manage simple spells either."

"Did you do this to Astoria Greengrass too?" asked McGonagall, now frowning at Hermione. "Because she was never as powerful as you, but she was no squib."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I didn't cast it on Astoria. Somebody else did though, and that's what gave me the idea. It took a lot of research, but I eventually dug up the spell that does it."

Everyone fell silent as they absorbed this. Then Shacklebolt gave a great sigh.

"Alright. So we will get the Ministry in position for a coup and then attack on the Solstice."

"Excellent," said Theo, now standing and unfurling some large maps. "Then let me familiarize you with the estate."

Hermione found herself letting the others lead the planning with the Order. She became quiet as she sat next to Draco, who had also fallen silent, as he cuddled Teddy who was on the verge of sleep.

"Are you alright?" he whispered.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. It's just... odd seeing them all again."

He grimaced a little. "I still haven't forgiven them. I doubt I ever will."

Hermione sighed. "I've forgiven the Weasleys. The others are harder."

"Hermione," came McGonagall's voice as the planning session began to break up. She wandered over to them and sank down on the other side of Hermione, who tensed a little.

McGonagall looked contrite. "I owe you an apology. We all do."

Hermione snorted a little, but McGonagall's gaze sharpened.

"I felt certain that Draco here would find a way to save you," she said. "I never would have voted for it otherwise."

Hermione turned to look at her in surprise, and she could feel Draco stiffening next to her. "Pardon?"

McGonagall shrugged. "He was always fascinated by you. I was certain he would find a way to swap you once he offered to do it. There was no reason to worry the others with it by endorsing a plan like that. I'm sure you can imagine that tensions were high that night."

Hermione looked at McGonagall skeptically, and her thin mouth turned up in a smile.

"Please, Hermione, give me some credit for knowing my own students."

"Snape thought he had gone through with it."

McGonagall rolled her eyes. "Severus has always had a blind spot when it comes to certain students, and in the case of Draco he cared too much to be objective about it. He wanted to believe that Draco went through with the execution, so he allowed Draco to convince him. But me? No, I always suspected it."

Draco turned to scowl at her. "If you thought I would swap her regardless, why not try to persuade the others?"

She looked at him askance. "Surely the answer to that is obvious. You needed a pardon for the things you would be forced to do. I could not unilaterally agree to give you one. You had to get the others on board as well, and as I said tensions were very high that night. I made the wording of your Vow generic enough that you would have space to rescue Hermione while fulfilling the terms of your Vow, and I trusted you would take it from there. Merlin knows you have been in more precarious positions than that before."

Hermione could see Draco warring with himself a little, but she blinked in surprise.

"*You* phrased his Vow?"

McGonagall nodded, and Hermione glanced at Draco to find him looking slightly irritated at the point she had just made.

"Of course," said McGonagall. "His actual Vow was with Kingsley, because we have always planned for him to lead the Ministry if the light side wins. But I was the one who bound them and phrased it for them both. It gave Draco plenty of leeway to take matters into his own hands."

"And does Kingsley have the same leeway to back out?" asked Hermione sharply.

McGonagall gave her a stern look. "Of course not. Draco will have his pardon if we are successful in a few weeks. The others too."

Hermione relaxed a little at this. “I suppose that if you *really* didn’t believe I would die...”

“Of course I didn’t,” said McGonagall. “Not even for a moment. I knew his occlumency was sufficient. I knew how much he cared about you. There was never any question in my mind that he would pull it off. I was happy, but not at all surprised, to learn I was right once Columba Black made her extraordinary appearance on the scene. That magic had your fingerprints all over it, my dear.”

Hermione found herself smiling a little. “It’s a bit funny how many people identified me that way.”

Now McGonagall gave her a genuine smile. “There are very few witches your age who could become an animagus in the first place, let alone a bird.”

Hermione glanced at Draco, who gave her a slight warning look, but she just rolled her eyes and said, “Well I’m not the only one.”

McGonagall looked intrigued by this.

“Oh?” she asked.

Hermione chuckled a little. “Ginny is a horse. And Luna is an English foxhound.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows flew up as she looked at the two girls who were in conversation with the Weasleys.

“I never would have guessed,” she said.

“And...” added Hermione, hesitating just a little. Now Draco gave her a stern look, but she wrinkled her nose back. The truth was, she had always loved showing off in front of her professors, especially McGonagall. And Hermione knew that none of them would appreciate this as much as she would.

“I might have a second form,” she added, with a small smile.

Now McGonagall turned to look at her fully, with her eyes huge. “You’re joking.”

Hermione shook her head, as Draco rolled his eyes and shifted a now-sleeping Teddy in his arms. But Hermione could tell he was amused, despite himself.

“It’s true. I’m also a golden eagle. You-Know-Who doesn’t know about the second form. None of the Death Eaters do. Just the six of us... and now you.”

McGonagall inhaled and sat back, studying Hermione with some admiration. “That’s exceptionally advanced.”

Hermione shrugged. “I did both forms in about five months. Draco had the instructions in his library, and we had an unlimited budget to acquire the potions ingredients and all the time in the world to practice while I was in hiding. It was on an accelerated schedule.”

“Extraordinary,” murmured McGonagall, eyeing her thoughtfully now. “And I take it you don’t plan to register the second form?”

“Not unless I have no choice,” said Hermione. “I’ll register the dove when this is all over and done with – too many people know about it for me to keep that quiet – but I think I’ll keep the eagle unregistered if I can. I prefer not to draw too much attention to myself or to Draco.”

McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. “Well I would love to see them both someday.”

Hermione gave her a genuine smile. “You’ll see them, Professor. I promise.”

With that, McGonagall gave them both one last nod and rose. As she moved away Hermione turned to Draco.

“I forgive her too.”

He snorted. “You’re so much like Columba sometimes.”

Hermione nudged him. “You’re the one who chose her for me.”

“And the others then? Severus, Kingsley, and Aberforth?”

Hermione hesitated, but then shook her head. “Perhaps someday, but not yet. I’ll probably get there with Snape eventually. He was only trying to help you. He was misguided, but at least I understand why he did it. Kingsley was just using me as a pawn, though. And Aberforth? Well, I rather loathe him.”

“I can’t help but notice you left him on my list.”

“I did, that’s true,” said Hermione. “I doubt I’ll find a reason to take him off.”

Draco gave a slow smile as Andromeda came over to them. The meeting was fully breaking up now and the others were floo’ing away.

“Thank you for giving me a break, Draco,” she said as she gently took Teddy from his arms.

“I don’t mind,” said Draco. “Once the Solstice is over and it’s safe to be seen, you can bring him to the Manor whenever you like. I’ll add you both to the wards. I know Mother would like to reconnect. She’s mentioned it to me before.”

Andromeda looked gratified at this as she glanced down at the sleeping baby. “It would be nice to have family again.”

Hermione’s heart broke for the woman. She looked at Draco, and she knew they were thinking the same thing. He nodded slowly and watched as the last of the guests moved out of the sitting room except for them before turning back to his aunt.

“Well speaking of family, I... might have told a small lie to the Order just now,” he said.

Andromeda's eyebrows went up. "Oh?"

"Yes. About the ring being single-use to summon one person. It's not. It's just one of those things that shouldn't be used very often, and given how many people would want to take it... well, we need everyone to believe that once we activate it the magic will be gone. But if you can keep it between us..."

Her eyes were huge now as Draco pulled the ring with the Resurrection Stone out of his pocket. He had taken to carrying it with him everywhere. He closed his eyes and turned it three times, and then Hermione looked up to find the images of Tonks, Remus, and an older man she didn't recognize but whom she was sure must be Ted Tonks standing before them. Just like that time in the woods, the images were bright, though their edges were blurred a little. They seemed to have an internal light.

Andromeda gasped and immediately began to shake. Draco carefully took Teddy back from her as she stared up at her dead family.

"Wotcher," said Tonks. Andromeda gave a little sob.

"How?" she whispered through her tears.

"Let's just say that Draco's a special one, Mum," said Tonks with a wink. Then she changed her hair from pink to purple and Andromeda stifled another cry. She turned to look at Draco with wonder and pain on her face.

"They're here?"

"We're still dead, darling," said the older man gently. "But we're always here in a way. We can always see you and Teddy and anybody else we want to check in on. Draco just has a way of letting you see us too."

She reached out a hand, and it passed through her husband. She swallowed hard, and her face fell.

"I know," he said softly. "There's still a veil that separates us. But it's thin, Andy. It's so thin. I've been with you every single day."

Hermione found herself starting to cry too, and even Draco looked surprisingly emotional. Hermione saw the forms turn to him and look at the little boy asleep in his arms.

"You'll be his godfather now, won't you?" asked Remus. Draco blinked in surprise.

"I thought Potter..."

"We *did* ask Harry, that's true," said Tonks. "But truthfully, it was very close between you two. We only chose Harry because he had lost so much by that point – both of his parents and his own godfather. We knew it would mean a lot to him and wanted him to have that connection again. But he's gone now. I can think of nobody better suited for it."

"I... alright," said Draco, blinking quickly and looking down at the boy. "Yes. Yes of course."

"And you'll be his godmother?" asked Remus, now looking at Hermione. She felt stunned, and glanced at Andromeda in confusion. She had known both Remus and Tonks fairly well, it was true. And yes, she was with Draco now. But it still shocked her that they would ask. Andromeda, though, was smiling encouragingly through her tears. She didn't seem surprised at all.

"Yes," said Hermione softly. "Yes, absolutely. I would be honored."

"Excellent," said Tonks brightly. "He's a quick little bugger – once he's walking you three will be completely fucked. But he's a sweet boy."

Hermione let out a huff of laughter as Andromeda pursed her lips.

"Nymphadora," she chided.

"Bollocks. Even when I'm dead you call me that wretched name..."

"It's a *beautiful* name!" insisted Andromeda.

The conversation devolved from there, but Hermione sat back and smiled a little as she listened. She looked at Draco, who was staring down at Teddy with an expression of amazement on his face. She nudged him, and he glanced back at her. She just tilted her head toward the baby, and Draco started to smile slowly. She could tell he was inordinately pleased. Truthfully, she was too. She hadn't even had a chance to hold him yet – Draco was always the possessive sort – but she didn't need to. In a single glance she and Draco promised each other they would help take care of this little boy. He would be a constant fixture in their lives as soon as Voldemort was gone. Hermione was surprised to realize she already loved him. She could tell by Draco's face that he did too.

It was a long while later when the figments of Remus, Tonks, and Ted finally faded away and Andromeda reached out for Teddy again.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "I can't ever thank you enough. That was... that was everything."

Hermione knew exactly what she meant. Each of the Hallows played a part in death. The Elder Wand could cause it. The Cloak could hide from it. But the Resurrection Stone wasn't meant to bring loved ones back. It was intended for closure, that was all. It was the only Hallow that could heal a broken heart.

"We can do it again whenever you wish," said Draco.

Andromeda gave him a soft smile. "Thank you. I think... I think I'll be okay now, at least for a time. And we'll keep this locked away between us as another Black family secret."

Draco gave her a relieved smile. "Thank you for understanding why we need to keep it quiet."

Andromeda nodded seriously. “Of course. Magic like that... in the wrong hands it could be dangerous. And you would never have a moment of peace.”

Draco nodded at this, as he raised a hand to brush a lock of hair off of Teddy’s head.

“We’ll kill the Dark Lord soon, Aunt Andy – Bellatrix too. And once we do, let’s be a family again. No more Black family feuds.”

At this, Andromeda finally gave a full smile. It transformed her face.

“I’ll tell you what. If you kill the bastard on the Solstice, then we’ll do Christmas at the Manor,” promised Andromeda. “It will be Teddy’s first one.”

Draco’s face lit up at this, and Hermione felt her heart lifting too.

Christmas. They just needed to make it to Christmas.

Chapter 40: Protection

The next two weeks passed, and Draco had been throwing every bit of energy into learning about the Hallows and phoenixes. Within a week of his bonding with Fawkes, he had commissioned a perch for his bedroom, much like the one Harry had once described to Hermione, with a tray at the bottom to catch the ash on Burning Day. Draco had sought her advice, and she drew a haphazard sketch that Draco evidently took to the goblins. The thing he returned with was perfect, and Fawkes trilled in delight when he saw it for the first time.

For now, Fawkes was in his prime, and he seemed perfectly content to grace his perch and watch Draco and Hermione study together. He disappeared a few times per day, and he always left with a dramatic flash of flame before reappearing an hour or two later, blinking serenely. Hermione supposed he was out getting food or perhaps socializing with other animals. Whatever he was doing, Fawkes seemed to have no trouble making his way through any type of ward, though Hermione wasn't that surprised by it. He had been known to do that frequently at Hogwarts.

Fawkes was perfectly self-sufficient and required no special care at all, but something about his presence was wonderful and soothing. He occasionally sang for them, and Draco always closed his eyes and leaned back to listen. Hermione thought that something in the phoenix song must be burnishing the cracks in Draco's soul so that it shined like new.

Hermione often caught Draco stroking Fawkes's chest or head when he thought she wasn't looking. It was similar to how he treated Hermione when she was in one of her bird forms. Though Draco had never had a strong emotional attachment to any of the animals he owned or used up to that point, Fawkes was clearly different. Draco made no attempt to cage him or train him, as it would have been pointless. Instead, they developed some form of communication that only the two of them seemed to understand. Though Draco insisted they couldn't talk to one another, Hermione was sure the bond was deeper than speech. It seemed to entwine with Draco's own magic, because she could sense something very old and wise and a little foreign whenever she tugged on it. Hermione was certain that they understood each other perfectly, and Fawkes also seemed delighted with *her* and even Crookshanks, perhaps sensing that they were as loyal to Draco as he was.

It took a couple days before the others learned about Fawkes too, and when they met him for the first time, their jaws uniformly dropped. Ginny, of course, knew all about him from Harry, but the last time she had seen him had been in the immediate aftermath of the Chamber of Secrets being opened. Fawkes seemed to remember her because he gave a special trill the moment he laid eyes on her. For the others, it was their first time meeting a phoenix in real life, and Fawkes seemed to preside over them all with a sort of regality that made Hermione feel very small. Though Fawkes was just a bird, she couldn't help but think he was wiser than all of them put together.

Eventually Draco set aside his research on phoenixes, after deciding it wasn't that useful.

“Fawkes and I understand each other,” he said. “I’m not sure any of the books will tell me anything I can’t learn from him directly.”

The research on the Hallows was something else entirely. With very little to go on except for *Tales of Beedle the Bard*, Draco had taken to using the Resurrection Stone to call Dumbledore to talk about it, and even Harry appeared a few times.

Eventually they concluded that Draco didn’t have to physically handle *any* of the Hallows to be the Master of Death, since he had acquired each one in the correct way. That meant Hermione could use the cloak, and the fact that Voldemort still had custody of the wand shouldn’t matter.

“It would be ideal if you could retrieve the wand,” commented Dumbledore. “It will be far more powerful than your hawthorn wand. But I do not think it’s strictly necessary to defeat him since you are its master already.”

This was a relief, because they already had a horcrux they had to destroy that was on his person. Trying to get the wand back too felt like a step too far, though they agreed that if they could locate it they should try to retrieve it.

“It’s not worth delaying the plan to get it first,” was Draco’s final word on the matter. “If we manage to locate it before then, that’s fantastic. If not, I’ll just use my Hawthorn wand and hope for the best.”

Hermione couldn’t decide which possibility made her more nervous: stealing a wand from Voldemort or hoping that Draco was powerful enough to kill Voldemort without it. But they were on the clock to finish this, so there was no sense in worrying about it. So far Voldemort had not noticed the Death Eaters’ dwindling magic, and they were determined to finish it before he did.

“It’s not like most of us *do* that much magic in front of him,” commented Draco. “Severus, Theo, Blaise, and I have been leading the prisoner torture whenever it’s required to cover for the others. I think some of them are beginning to notice issues with their magic, but of course they are not talking about it.”

Yes, they were on borrowed time and absolutely could not push the date without alerting Voldemort that something was very, *very* wrong with most of his inner circle.

The horcrux that Voldemort wore all the time was, of course, a major complication.

“It will have to be basilisk venom or fiendfyre,” said Hermione one night at dinner with the others. “And I think the latter is too destructive.”

“I could cast it,” said Draco, raising an eyebrow. “I’ve studied the spell ever since that disaster in the Room of Requirement.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, it can hurt too many people. There’s going to be a crowd.”

“I still think—” he said, but Hermione gave him a fierce glare.

“No, Draco. There will be innocent people there.”

He rolled his eyes and huffed.

“Maybe it can be the spell of last resort,” said Theo reasonably. “If Draco really *can* control it—”

“I can,” he interrupted.

“—then we can consider it if we can separate him somehow.”

“I think Hermione’s right,” said Ginny. “Use basilisk venom if at all possible. You retrieved six fangs didn’t you? Let’s see how much venom there is, and if we have any left over after we dip Hermione’s talon covers, we can ask the goblins to make us some throwing knives as well.”

At this, Hermione exchanged glances with Draco because she already had goblin-made throwing knives, and this had been her rough plan all along.

“Fine,” Draco sighed. “I’ll see what we can do. But any person handling basilisk blades needs a vial of phoenix tears too. Fawkes has been crying for me every night for the past week.”

This, Hermione learned, was something unprecedented. Phoenix tears were enormously rare and valuable, as phoenixes almost never cried on command. Dumbledore reported that Fawkes had only cried a couple of times during the years they were bonded together, including the time he saved Harry in the Chamber of Secrets. Dumbledore said that the fact that Fawkes was crying for Draco at his request was proof that Draco was the true Master of Death. Fawkes had bonded to him more strongly than any other wizard before him.

“Fawkes will keep doing it as long as I ask him to,” said Draco simply. “And I want *everyone* to have some when we do this. It can heal almost anything except an *Avada*.”

“And most of the Death Eaters shouldn’t be able to use *Avada* by now,” pointed out Hermione.

“Precisely,” said Draco with satisfaction. “So they will be limited to blunt force fighting and hand-to-hand combat. Phoenix tears can heal all of it.”

In fact, the phoenix tears gave them such an enormous advantage that Draco had gone back to the goblins and ordered a large number of tiny jars with screw-top lids on chains. Each one he filled with phoenix tears, and all six of them wore their tears under their clothes at all times. As Fawkes continued to cry, Draco distributed tears to the boons, then to other members of the Order, Narcissa, Andromeda, and even baby Teddy. Anybody who could be important to the plan had a vial and was instructed to wear it at all times.

Hermione was instructed to wear three.

“Draco, this is ridiculous.”

“The moment he knows what we are up to, he will go after one of us first. The only open question is which one. You are keeping at least three vials on you at all times, Hermione, I don’t care what you think about it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at this, but decided not to object. She knew Draco suffered from a bit of paranoia when it came to her safety. The fact that she was going to be involved in the fight against Voldemort at all was something he continued to struggle with.

“I can’t think about it,” he declared one night, while he pulled her close to him and twirled her curls on his fingers. “If I think about it, I start to mentally plan ways to ward you into the Manor until after the Solstice.”

“Draco...”

“I’m serious, my darling. It’s like my worst nightmare come true. We can’t talk about it, I can’t think about it, and I’m going to insist you take certain precautions or else I *will* hold you back from this.”

Hermione was torn between affection and annoyance. Then again, she supposed it was because he cared.

“Fine, we won’t talk about it.”

“And?”

“And I’ll take your precautions as long as I can be there too.”

So that was why Hermione wore three vials of phoenix tears, even though she thought it was entirely unnecessary. Draco practically growled at her whenever she attempted to take it off.

They were only a few weeks out from the Solstice when it was time to meet the goblins for her custom talon covers.

Hermione transformed into Aquila for it of course, and Draco secured her into the large aviary that had originally housed Draco’s eagle. To Hermione’s slight surprise, it was very much like her dream when she took the animagus potion for Aquila. The aviary was built into a far corner of the Malfoy estate that Hermione had never bothered to explore before. Most of Wiltshire was relatively flat with rolling farmlands, but at some point Draco’s ancestors had built a very tall, manmade rock outcropping that mimicked the side of a cliff for their birds. There was an enormous net that extended out from the side of it so that the birds could not truly fly away. However, the entire complex was enormous with six separate sections so the raptors were kept apart from one another but still had plenty of room to stretch their wings.

From her perch, Hermione could see rodents and other small animals that wandered through the holes in the net. Aquila was feeling quite peckish and looked at them with interest, but Hermione had enough control over the bird’s instincts by now to mentally wrinkle her nose. Instead, she tucked into a bowl of *cooked* chicken, which Draco had left for her while he retrieved the goblins.

It took nearly an hour for Draco to leave and then return with three goblins, who were looking at the aviary warily.

“Hang on, let me call her,” he said. Hermione’s hearing was good enough that she could make out most of their conversation from her perch.

Draco opened a door to step into her cage before placing two fingers into his mouth and whistling loudly. Hermione immediately flew down to his proffered arm. Draco reached up to stroke her chest, and Hermione’s feathers ruffled as if on command.

“She is quite large,” commented one of the goblins in a nasal voice. Hermione sensed nervousness. Of course he was nervous. She could have ended him with barely a thought.

“Yes, but her talons are brittle,” said Draco, immediately falling on the excuse they decided to give to the goblins for this commission. “I was forced to heal her twice the last time I brought her out for the Dark Lord. As we discussed, she requires talon covers. She will hunt with them. They must be as sharp as blades.”

Hermione’s claws clenched against Draco’s glove as she waited for the goblins to approach her. None of them moved.

“Well?” he insisted.

“Sir, the bird is...” said one of the goblins hesitantly.

“She is entirely under my control,” said Draco coldly. Hermione couldn’t help but ruffle her feathers in offense, and he automatically reached up to stroke her again.

The goblin swallowed and Draco glared.

“Let me phrase this another way,” he said. “If you don’t assist me with this, I’ll punish you myself. I can assure you that you are far safer with my eagle than you are with me.”

The goblins scowled, but finally approached her slowly.

“Aquila, present,” commanded Draco. Hermione flexed her claws and released one foot for inspection. Draco continued to stroke her while the goblins produced something that looked like clay and began to take castings of each claw. It felt oddly sticky, and Aquila did not care for it.

This is important, she told Aquila. Deal with it. Draco can scourge you later.

With a casting of each talon complete, the goblins hurried to move back from her and bowed to Draco.

“When can I expect them?” he asked.

“We should have them ready in a couple of weeks for—”

“No, I need them in three days,” he said.

“But sir–”

“Three days,” said Draco. “I will be taking her to hunt with the Dark Lord this weekend.”

“We will have to pull our artisans off of other projects,” said one of the goblins worriedly.

“Then do that,” said Draco. “I can’t imagine that you have a commission more important than this, unless the Dark Lord himself has contacted you for one?”

The goblins hesitated and exchanged glances before shaking their heads.

“Very good. Then I’ll expect to see the covers in three days. And do not forget that she must be able to hunt with them. The ends should be as sharp as her natural equipment.”

“Yes sir,” said one of the goblins.

“And also as light as you can make them. They should not weigh her down.”

“We can craft them out of aluminum and then dip them in gold if you wish,” said one of the goblins.

“Will that be sufficient to give it all the properties of goblin armor? Could I strengthen it with my magic?”

“Yes sir,” replied another. “Goblin-made armor is typically crafted from a light, common metal and then coated in goblin metal. Our gold is more receptive to other magic than our silver is. You should be able to perform enhancements on it with little effort if that is your wish.”

Draco nodded. “Excellent. Then that is what I would like. I will drop by your shop in three days and expect the commission to be complete.”

The goblins bowed and backed away as Draco moved back into the aviary to launch Hermione back to a perch high on the outcropping. He cast one glance back at her as he started to shepherd the goblins along and threw her a wink.

Your talon covers have been ordered, my darling, he seemed to say.

Three days later Draco arrived late to their regular training, carrying a large box that was wrapped up in paper as though it was a gift, bearing a large bow on top. Hermione and the others gathered around it curiously while his eyes glinted with pleasure.

“Are you all ready?” he asked with relish.

“Merlin, must you always be so dramatic?” sighed Theo, with an eye-roll.

“He’s right, mate,” chimed Blaise. “There’s no need for such a display for every damn thing.”

Draco pouted for a moment while the girls laughed.

“It’s alright, Draco,” said Hermione soothingly. “I, for one, would like to see what they came up with.”

He frowned. “Why are you acting like you already know what it is?”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to roll her eyes. “Because it’s obvious, isn’t it? And I am *still* finding remnants of that clay they used to make the mold.”

Draco harumphed, but must have realized he was surprising nobody with his elaborate gift because he just pushed the box toward Hermione a bit ungratefully.

“Well see for yourself then.”

“Oh stop,” she chided gently. “I’m certain they will be perfect.”

He seemed a bit mollified at this as Hermione carefully untied the bow and unfastened the paper.

“Merlin, could you unwrap a gift any slower?” mumbled Theo.

Hermione scowled at him. “Don’t tell me you’re the type to tear into a present! You would ruin the paper!”

“And why would that matter? It’s not like you *reuse* gift wrap!”

“Could you two *please* stop bickering?” groaned Ginny.

“We’re siblings,” pointed out Hermione as she carefully unfastened another side of the paper to make sure nothing ripped. Theo just snorted at her technique.

“I’m aware,” said Ginny dryly. “And you drive the rest of us barmy because of it.”

Hermione just pursed her lips as she finally unfastened the last piece, and the gift wrap fell open. She lifted the lid of the box and then gasped.

“My God,” she said as she stared down at the talon covers. They were pure gold and absolutely *stunning*. They reminded her of her knives in a way, with their superior craftsmanship, though they had little adornment. The box holding them was padded with velvet-covered divots that were nearly the perfect size for each. Then again, she couldn’t help but notice...

“The section around the tips is just empty air,” she pointed out, as she examined it closely.

Draco nodded. "Yes. I wasn't sure if basilisk venom would corrode the fabric. I told them to make each holder a little larger than needed on the end so that they touch nothing while the box is closed."

"Perfect," murmured Hermione.

"Well?" said Luna, as she reached forward and touched one thoughtfully. "Should you try them on?"

Hermione licked her lips and nodded. "Let's use a reversible sticking charm," she said. "We'll be going back to Nott Castle tomorrow, and I don't want the others seeing these."

They all nodded, and Hermione closed her eyes and transformed into Aquila. Draco slipped on his glove and held out his arm for her to balance while Theo carefully lifted out the talon covers one by one and secured them to each talon with a light sticking charm.

"Blaise, open the window, will you?" asked Draco, as Theo was finishing up the covers. "I already unwarded it. I want to see if she can do a dive with these."

Blaise nodded and hurried over to the narrow window Hermione had used that day she spied on Narcissa's garden party. The window was *just* large enough for Aquila to slip through too, though it was a rather tight squeeze.

She hopped from Draco's arm to the window and walked awkwardly through the hole to the exterior ledge, her talon covers clicking on the stone.

"Let's see what you can do with these, fierce girl," murmured Draco. "I know you dislike killing animals, but I think you need to hunt something to make sure they are sharp enough."

Hermione internally sighed, but she knew he was right. Nagini was large, and Hermione needed to know if she would require any additional force to pierce her flesh.

Tell Draco I'll hunt, she said to Theo through their bond, and then she launched herself off the windowsill. The air rushed around her as she flexed her claws to feel the added weight there. They were light, just as Draco had requested, but she could certainly feel a slight drag. Then again, it wasn't nearly as heavy as even a small animal would be, so she was perfectly capable of staying in the air while wearing them. Aquila did not particularly care for the feeling, but Hermione pushed her away as she circled out around to the gardens, intending to find a small animal she could use for practice.

There.

A squirrel was on the ground foraging. It was near a small thicket of trees but had ventured out far enough that Hermione thought she could attempt a dive without injuring herself.

She flapped hard to get height, circling ever higher. With her excellent eyesight, she could see that her friends had evidently left the training room and were out on the back patio now, all watching her progress. She tucked in her wings and dove, relishing the speed for a split second before her wings flared open, and she caught the squirrel neatly. A quick squeeze,

and it was done. She released the squirrel onto the other side of the garden wall and called out to Theo through their bond.

Tell Draco these are perfect. They are slightly sharper than my own talons. Aquila doesn't love how they feel, but she will tolerate them. I'll be able to kill the snake with them.

He's pleased, Theo replied a moment later. He said to come back. There are some protective enchantments he wants to add to them since you will be entirely on your own when it comes to the actual kill.

What kind of protective enchantments?

You're asking the wrong person. Knowing him, it will be something to do with blood magic, but he insists it's important. If it could help keep you safe while you're in that warded area with her, then I'm all for it. You know he's probably been researching this ever since the plan came together.

Hermione sighed to herself, but she knew Theo was probably right. Draco was not at all pleased that she was going to have to do this by herself, and if she was being completely honest she was nervous about it too. Her only close encounter with Nagini had nearly killed her, so if Draco had some way of giving her added protection while in her animagi form she would be a fool not to take it.

Fine, she said. I'm coming back now.

Thank you, Sis, said Theo with relief. Every single thing we can do to protect you should be done.

You're right, Theo. I'm heading back now.

Hermione flew back toward the balcony, where her friends were waiting for her. Draco extended his arm, and she settled onto it while Theo reversed the sticking charm and carefully removed each talon cover.

"They really are stunning," said Ginny thoughtfully, as she touched one. "I've never seen anything quite like them."

"It's true," agreed Luna. "You look like some sort of ancient goddess of war, Hermione."

Hermione ruffled her feathers at the compliment, and soon Draco was lowering her back to the ground, and she was transforming back into herself.

"Come along," said Draco. "Let's bring these back inside and cast the spell."

"What is it?" asked Hermione curiously as she picked up a couple of the covers and followed him back into her room.

"Blood magic from each of us," he said simply. "We will all contribute. Your Columba pendant will help protect you in your human form, but you need something for your animagus form too."

Hermione looked at him askance, but Draco just gave her a very stubborn look back.

“Another sacrifice?”

“Yes. How do you think protective jewelry is created? It’s always done with blood sacrifices. You will be doing this alone, Hermione. If you encounter some kind of dark magic while you’re in that enclosure with the snake, I want it to be repelled. If we’re very lucky, it might even help you get back through the ward without draining your magic to do it.”

Hermione pursed her lips, but at Draco’s fierce look she finally threw her hands into the air. “Oh fine! But I hope you all know what you’re doing.”

Draco seemed to exhale with relief. “Come along then,” he said, “this could be a little messy. Let’s do it in the potions lab.”

He picked up a talon cover, and they all followed Draco into his old bedroom as he placed it on a table in the middle. Draco moved to the bookcase to retrieve a very old, very small book and flipped to the correct page. Hermione glanced down and realized the entire thing was in Latin.

“You read Latin?” she asked in amazement. “More than just spell-casting I mean?”

He scoffed a little. “Of *course* I read Latin.”

Hermione harumphed, which made Draco smile a little before he found the correct passage.

“Alright,” he said, “this ritual is an offering to Hermione. We must each inscribe a protective rune on the object and offer a blood exchange. The greater the number of people who contribute, the more powerful the spell.”

“Can I contribute?” asked Hermione.

Draco shook his head. “Not for this version of the spell. It’s stronger when it’s made for a specific person, instead of an enchantment that could be applied to anybody. It’s better if it’s us five.”

“What if we gathered a few more people before we do this?” asked Theo. “Would that enhance the protective magic even more?”

Hermione swallowed hard, as Draco looked wary. “Nobody but us knows about this.”

“Of course not,” said Theo. “But they don’t need to know details. Surely there are a few other people who would make a blood offering to keep Hermione safe if we tell them it’s for a mission against the Dark Lord.”

“Most of the Order would do it,” pointed out Blaise, but Draco was already shaking his head.

“No, it can’t be just anybody. They need to be connected to Hermione in some way, through deeds or blood. I’ll admit the Weasley’s could probably do it and maybe McGonagall, but—”

“What kind of deeds?” asked Ginny thoughtfully.

Draco shrugged. “Protective acts, mostly, and it’s best if Hermione is the one who has done the protecting. Then the blood offering could be payment of a debt, and that makes it stronger. It can also be people she would make sacrifices to protect in the future. The magic is subtle.”

“I haven’t protected *you* though,” she pointed out.

All five of her friends rolled their eyes at the same time.

“First of all,” said Draco in an unnecessarily bossy voice, “You have. All three of you girls have protected the secrets Theo, Blaise, and I have entrusted you with. You could end us at any time with the amount of information you have about us, and you haven’t done it and won’t do it.”

“Well by that argument then Blaise is right, and the whole Order qualifies.”

“No,” said Draco, shaking his head. “Because there are degrees, aren’t there? And you would let an Order member die to advance the plan, we both know that. But you wouldn’t let it be one of *us*. Anybody can make an offering, but it won’t be that strong unless you have protected them or would go out of your way to protect them in the future.”

Hermione stilled, as she realized Draco was correct. She would let nearly any member of the Order die before a hair was harmed on any of their heads.

“Alright,” she conceded.

“And for Theo and me, the magic is very strong because we are also related to you,” pointed out Draco. “And mine should be the strongest of all because we are also tied, and I vowed to protect you during that ritual.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Okay,” she agreed. “But I still think having it from five people is—”

She cut herself off as Draco was shaking his head. “No. No, Theo is right. If we can find a few more we should.”

“I have an idea,” said Ginny. “I can go fetch her right now.”

“Me too,” said Theo.

“And me,” said Blaise.

“Likewise,” added Luna.

“Yes,” said Draco, “as do I. Alright, let’s all gather our contacts and meet in the ritual room downstairs in an hour. That could enhance the magic in any event, and I’m not going to open our wing to visitors.”

“Ritual room?” asked Hermione in confusion.

Draco just smirked. “You’ll see, little dove.”

An hour later, Draco arrived back at her room to help lead her through the blood wards in their wing.

“There’s no need to disguise yourself. Everyone who is gathered knows you are alive.”

“Who did you ask?”

His eyes twinkled. “You’ll see.”

“Draco, I don’t like this.”

He paused and turned to face her, before cupping her face in his hands. “I know you don’t, my darling. But this is *so* important. And I think you will see that you are really quite popular. We have more volunteers than I was expecting. But we must go now, it’s dangerous for us to assemble like this for too long.”

He hesitated for just a moment and then darted to her jewelry box to retrieve her ring.

“Here. You should wear this. There’s going to be a lot more blood than I originally anticipated.”

Hermione furrowed her brows as she slipped it on her finger, and immediately her anxiety began to ebb.

This is important.

She knew he was right. Her Columba necklace would be effective at shielding against the hexes and jinxes that most of the Death Eaters would still be able to cast, but she had no such protection she could wear as Aquila. When it came down to it, killing the snake would be entirely on her. If there were willing volunteers for this, she wouldn’t object. She knew that she would do the same thing for any of her friends if they had a similar mission.

She swallowed and nodded, as she let him lead her through the wards and then down a staircase and several corridors until they made it to a sealed door that looked positively ancient. Hermione thought she could hear the din of voices on the other side.

“It’s through here,” said Draco simply. “Many of the old families have ritual rooms for magic like this. It’s built directly on top of the main ley line. Technically the Malfoys have two: one on the interior and one on the exterior where—”

“Where we tied,” said Hermione softly.

Draco smiled a little. “Precisely. Ties are enhanced by earth magic, so traditionally they are done outdoors. But most houses this ancient have an interior room too, in case the ritual needs to be private.”

Hermione nodded a little.

“Then let’s do this,” he said, as he opened the door.

Hermione had to stop herself from gasping.

It wasn’t just a few people. It was...

“Twenty-two of us,” he said, as he strode in. The crowd fell silent, but Hermione was gaping.

There were her friends, of course, but also most of the senior Order members, Bill and George Weasley, and the boons she had raised.

“They know about me?” she asked, spinning around to look at Draco in confusion as Hannah Abbott, Cho Chang, and the others converged upon her, nearly toppling her with a group hug.

“Yes, they passed their most recent occlumency test with me,” she heard Draco’s voice say in amusement, though she couldn’t see him while buried underneath the crowd of people who were hugging her.

“Hermione,” breathed Hannah, as they pulled back and stared at each other. “I am so *happy* they were telling the truth!”

Hermione gave an awkward chuckle as she was finally released and looked around at the others. Only now did she notice a small group standing off to one side that was made up of Nita, Snape, Narcissa, Andromeda, and...

“They’re children!” she declared, looking at Mary, who for some odd reason was standing next to Andromeda and holding baby Teddy. Teddy was ignoring everyone and looked positively enamored by Fawkes. Only now did it register that Fawkes had made his way here too, and he was blinking serenely while Mary helped Teddy pet him gently.

At Hermione’s words, Mary straightened up.

“I’m old enough to decide for myself!” she declared.

“And we can numb Teddy’s hand,” said Andromeda. “He will be just fine. This sort of thing isn’t that unusual for purebloods, you know.”

Hermione felt herself choking up as Draco squeezed her hand. Theo stepped forward and embraced her. "It will be fine, Sis," he whispered to her.

Then he stepped back and turned to Draco. "We're doing the same thing for you, mate. We've all agreed."

Draco blinked. "But—"

"Oh don't you start too," said Ginny, rolling her eyes. "*Honestly*. This is far too important. Everyone knows it's going to be just you at the end. You both need the protection we can provide, and we're already cutting ourselves open for Hermione aren't we?"

Draco swallowed, but then just shut his mouth and nodded.

"Good," said Theo with relief. "Now Draco needs a magical object he can wear too, so—"

"He has a ring," Hermione said, jumping in. "He can wear it that day."

She exchanged a glance with Draco and gave him a knowing look.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I do have a ring."

"Let's use that then," said Theo. "Well just have to make the runes small on yours, mate."

Draco slipped off the ring with the Resurrection Stone in it and placed it on the table next to Hermione's talon cover. Several people furrowed their brow at it.

"Wasn't that Dumbledore's?" asked Susan Bones.

A muscle in Draco's jaw twitched. "It was, yes. I retrieved it after Hermione told me how powerful it is. Let's just say it should help me confront him. That's why Dumbledore had it in the first place, but he never had a chance to use it."

Hermione felt the anticipation thickening in the room at this statement, and Draco cleared his throat. "Right then. I have a diamond-tipped needle that will carve into goblin metal. You'll each carve a rune that means the most to you and then offer the blood sacrifice to seal it. I've copied out the spell for each of you. It can be done wandlessly."

Everyone nodded, and then Theo jumped in.

"I'll go first."

He picked up the needle and Hermione's talon cover and began to draw a rune on it as he started to chant. He repeated the words over and over again as he then picked up Draco's ring and added the same rune to it. Then he took a knife that Blaise handed to him and sliced his palm open without flinching. He covered both in his blood, and the objects glowed brightly for a moment, especially Hermione's talon cover. She remembered what Draco told her: that Theo's magic would be particularly strong for her since they were related. The blood was absorbed into both objects, leaving nothing but pristine metal behind.

Fawkes gave a low trill and fluttered forward to lay his head against Theo's hand. A single tear fell, and in a moment Theo's hand was healed, without any scarring.

Hermione heard the others murmuring at this magic, but Theo just smiled at Fawkes and stroked his head before stepping back.

Hermione's breath caught when she saw the rune he had chosen for both of them.

Brother.

Blaise stepped forward next, and he repeated the process. The rune he offered for them both was *Equality*. Like Theo's offering the objects glowed, but this time the glow was dimmer for Hermione than Draco. She realized the magic must have sensed the historic protective acts performed between the person making the offering and the person receiving it. No doubt Draco had saved Blaise on the battlefield before.

She sensed Draco swallowing hard as he read the rune Blaise left for him, but he said nothing as Fawkes healed Blaise's palm and Ginny stepped forward next.

The rune she offered was *Sister*, and Hermione felt her heart twinge. Draco seemed a bit taken aback, but gratified by her choice.

To Hermione's slight surprise, the glow for Draco was stronger this time too. Hermione supposed the Vow Draco had made to place Ginny under his protection had something to do with it.

Luna's offering was *Friendship*. Hermione smiled softly as the glow lit Luna's face, far more powerful than Hermione would have expected.

Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped forward next. He offered *Leadership*, and though Hermione internally grimaced a bit, she understood why. Everyone but Hermione and Draco seemed surprised by how bright his offering glowed for Hermione.

She knew it was because she had saved his life by taking him off of Draco's list. Shacklebolt didn't even know he owed her a life debt.

The same thing happened for Minerva McGonagall when she stepped forward and offered *Knowledge*. She raised a knowing eyebrow at the intensity of the glow for Hermione and nodded cordially to her, as if in thanks.

Then it was the Weasleys' turn.

Molly and Arthur stepped forward together.

"There are so many runes we could offer," said Molly. "But while Draco was upstairs fetching Hermione, I had a chat with Narcissa about this. The offering we make must be done together, and it's stronger if the couple is married."

Hermione frowned in confusion, but Mrs. Weasley turned to the table and cast a *geminio* to duplicate the needle so they could carve at the same time.

Molly offered *Mother* and Arthur offered *Father*.

Hermione smiled sadly at this and then glanced at Draco to see his stunned face as they did the same for him. The glow was equally strong for them both, and Hermione knew why: Draco had saved them when he evacuated them from the Burrow, even if he had then proceeded to burn it down. Hermione then saved them from Draco's list.

When Fawkes had finished healing them, Molly turned to address Draco. "I would never claim to replace your real mother, my dear, but as Hermione knows I have a tendency to adopt the friends and significant others of my children. Arthur does too. You belong to Hermione. You protected Ginny. You will always be welcome in our home as one of our own."

Arthur chuckled at Draco's expression and reached up to clap him on the shoulder. "I'll second my wife in that sentiment. I raised six boys and Harry by extension, I suppose. I would always welcome another in the fold."

Hermione thought she caught a glint of longing on Draco's face as Molly and Arthur moved away. She slipped her hand into his.

"They mean it," she whispered in his ear. "Truly."

Draco turned to place a kiss on her head as Bill and George stepped forward next.

"My offering is a reminder that sometimes we have to work with those who are different from us to achieve remarkable things," said Bill, as he offered *Alliances*.

Hermione smiled a little, remembering the goblins.

"Mine is the thing we are looking forward to when that arsehole is finally dead," said George as he offered *Joy*.

Hermione stepped forward to hug them both.

"Let me know if I ever need to hex him for you," whispered George, and Hermione held back a laugh as she pulled away.

The boons Hermione had raised stepped forward next.

Hannah offered *Escape*.

Susan offered *Vengeance*.

Cho offered *Gratitude*.

Katie offered *Protection*.

Sally Anne offered *Hope*.

Margaret offered *Healing*.

All of them glowed with equal brightness for both Hermione and Draco. Hermione was trying not to become emotional as Mary handed Teddy back to Andromeda and stepped forward.

“My turn,” she said firmly. Hermione stared down at the young girl. She was so brave, so strong. Hermione knew she was bookish and magically talented. Mary had been busy at Grimmauld Place brewing large quantities of polyjuice potion, confusing concoction, veritaserum, and healing potions. Draco had been keeping her lab stocked, and her industriousness had been nothing short of stunning as she worked through an extensive list of potions to bolster the Order’s supply. Even Mary’s mother was helping with research in the Grimmauld Place library to find other brews that could be prepared in time.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Hermione with concern.

“I’m absolutely positive,” said Mary stubbornly. She reached for the needle and began to chant, before opening her palm to add her blood. Like most of the others she didn’t flinch.

When she stepped away, Hermione saw her offering: *Sanctuary*. Hermione swallowed back tears, and she felt Draco reach up behind her to stroke her neck.

Grimmauld Place *was* a sanctuary. It had housed the Order, then Hermione and the boys when they were on the run, then Hermione again when she was at odds with Draco, and now Mary and her mother.

It was perfect.

“And now for us,” said Nita as she stepped forward with Andromeda, Teddy, Narcissa, and Snape.

“My offering is something you will need when the time comes.”

She began to chant as she carved *Cunning* into Hermione’s talon cover and Draco’s ring. They both glowed more brightly than Hermione had expected.

Perhaps it’s the Veela magic.

Fawkes made a unique sound when encountering her. Rather than trilling, he almost *hummed*.

“He’s your emissary,” said Nita softly as she held out her hand for his tears. “He has been calling me and others.”

Hermione’s eyebrows flew up at this, and she exchanged a look with Draco that told her he knew precisely what Nita meant. But she said nothing more as she stepped away, and Andromeda stepped forward next.

“I can make an offering on behalf of Teddy,” she said, as she handed him to Draco to hold. Draco clutched at the child, who cooed happily, and he cast several numbing charms over Teddy’s palm. Draco was fussing over the baby in precisely the same way he always fussed

over Hermione. She glanced around the room and saw quite a few of the others gaping at him.

She suppressed a grin as Andromeda began to carve a rune for Teddy and chant.

The cut on his palm was very small, and he didn't seem bothered by it at all. He waved his hand around and accidentally blooded Draco's cheek as Andromeda coaxed his palm open and placed it on top of the runes. When they pulled away, Hermione finally saw it clearly.

Guardianship.

Hermione sucked in a breath, and Draco seemed to squeeze the baby more firmly.

When Fawkes cried onto Teddy's palm, the little boy squealed with delight. "Ba!" he said, waving at the bird.

"That's right! It's a bird! You're starting to talk, aren't you?" crooned Draco.

Again, most of the others looked at him in disbelief, but Hermione just smiled to herself. Her gaze was pulled to Narcissa who was watching Draco intently. As far as Hermione was aware, Andromeda and Narcissa had not reconnected before this very afternoon. She had not seen them speaking, but Hermione thought Narcissa's expression was softening as she watched Draco brush his lips across Teddy's forehead, while Andromeda stepped forward to take her turn.

"My offering is a wish for what will come next. All of the steps you have taken and all the things you must do to achieve your goal may weigh on your hearts. It may lead to resentment from others. It may slow down the process of healing. But there is one thing that will resolve all of it. Perhaps not right away, but with time."

Then she began to carve and chant. The glow from her offering was bright, strong, and Hermione felt something click into place when she saw it.

Forgiveness.

"There is always room for forgiveness," said Andromeda, as she eyed her sister knowingly. Narcissa's expression faltered for a moment, before she took a hesitant breath and nodded.

Andromeda reached out for Teddy, and Draco turned him over reluctantly as Snape stepped forward.

"Like Nita, my offering is something you will need if you really intend to take him out."

Hermione barely resisted rolling her eyes. The only thing that stopped her was the thing that he said next.

"You both already have it. You have both demonstrated it over and over again. You must not let this side of you go before you reach the end."

His offering was *Ruthlessness*. Hermione felt Draco's magic thicken next her, as he nodded to his godfather and Narcissa stepped forward.

"My offering is something I have tried to take from both of you in the past. I was frightened, and I was wrong to do it. Please let me give it back to you now. You will need it for the things that are coming."

She made her offering, and Draco's in particular glowed so brightly that Hermione had to squint. She could see on Narcissa's face that she understood the meaning behind it: Draco *had* tried to protect her from his father, though no child should ever be tasked with something like that. His motivations to kill Lucius had not been entirely driven by Hermione. He had also done it for Narcissa.

Hermione thought she saw some regret on Narcissa's face. The necklace she always wore now glinted a little in the low light, and Hermione knew that it was helping her finally see the situation with her son more clearly. Draco would never harm his mother. Not ever.

When Narcissa stepped back to reveal her offering, Hermione knew that Narcissa had finally seen the error of her ways.

Power.

Draco surprised them all by turning to his mother and embracing her. Narcissa gasped a little, but then tentatively reached up to hug him back. When they stepped apart, Hermione saw tears welling in Narcissa's eyes. She cupped Draco's cheek for a moment before melting into the crowd, and then Draco turned to Hermione.

"There are two more," he said, "before I offer you my own."

Hermione furrowed her brow as she stared around at the group. Every person had made an offering except for Draco and herself. She knew precisely what she would offer to *him*, and she was sure he would offer the same thing in return. But she wasn't certain what he meant by two more.

Hermione watched curiously as Ginny approached Mrs. Weasley, who rummaged in her robes and pulled out something small to hand to her. Ginny turned and walked back toward them with a determined expression and handed the small thing to Draco.

He cleared his throat and cast what Hermione thought was a slightly apologetic look toward all the Weasleys, who looked oddly sad, but also resolute. Arthur Weasley nodded to him a little and then Draco took a deep breath to proceed.

"The next offering is from Ronald Weasley."

Hermione gasped, but Draco did not let her interrupt as he reached for the needle and picked up the talon cover. He began to chant as he worked, before turning to his own ring and doing the same thing. He pulled out the thing Ginny had handed to him, which turned out to be a small vial. He unstopped it and poured the contents over both objects.

Ron's blood.

Somehow, the Weasleys had collected Ron's blood. Hermione didn't know if one of them had done this in the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts or if it was done by the Weasley's themselves when Ron was a child. Hermione knew that the pureblood families often performed obscure blood magic for protection, so perhaps it wasn't that unusual to collect samples from each family member to store for the future.

The glow on Draco's ring was a little below average, but Hermione's talon cover glinted brightly.

"His offering is *Loyalty*," said Draco simply. Hermione's heart squeezed. She knew Draco must have called him with the Resurrection Stone to ask him about it.

And now she also knew who the second person was.

This time, Draco pulled the vial directly out of his robes. "This next offering is from Harry Potter," said Draco. The room had gone totally silent as they watched.

Draco began to carve again, just above *Loyalty*, as he started to chant. When he poured the second vial of blood over the runes the light from Hermione's talon cover was so bright that most of the room flinched. Even Draco's ring lit up brightly, and Hermione knew why. Draco had tried to delay the Death Eaters that day at Malfoy Manor. Draco had tried to intervene when Crabbe was determined to kill Harry in the Room of Requirement. Draco and Harry had a long and negative relationship, but Draco had tried to help whenever Harry was about to die in front of him – until the very end. And Hermione, of course, had saved Harry just as often as he had saved her. There were too many times to count.

"Harry Potter has offered *Sacrifice*," said Draco. Hermione heard a few sniffs at this, and her own heart cracked just a little.

"How did you get his blood?" asked Hermione softly.

"It was that night in the woods," said Draco under his breath, "just before he died. He asked me to take care of you, and I said I could do it if I could find you in the skirmish. I told him I was an expert with protective magic, especially blood magic. He asked if his blood could be helpful, and I said it might be. He gave it to me to keep before I took him to the Dark Lord."

"Oh Harry," sighed Hermione. It was so like him.

It was so like them *both*.

"And now it's my turn," said Draco.

"And mine," insisted Hermione.

Draco glared at her a little bit, but she just looked stubbornly back, and eventually he sighed in defeat.

"Fine. But I want Fawkes to heal you first."

Fawkes let out a trill of understanding as Hermione picked up one of the needles and Draco picked up the other that was left behind by the Weasleys. Together they chanted and carved into each other's objects, and Hermione gritted her teeth through the blood offering.

This time the light from both was so bright that the whole room had to shield their eyes.

They had saved each other. They had kept each other's secrets. They were related to one another and also tied with one of the strongest bonds they could have chosen. They had made multiple magical vows with each other by this point. This was just one more, but Hermione felt Draco's power mesh with hers in that familiar way as the light slowly faded and the blood absorbed into each object.

Draco nudged her to hold out her hand for Fawkes to heal.

The phoenix tears seemed to heat her up from the inside, but it took only moments before her skin was smooth once more. Only when Draco's palm was healed too did Hermione glance down and see that they had indeed chosen the same rune for each other.

Love.

It was the most powerful one. Dumbledore had always insisted that love would be the thing that conquered Voldemort in the end, and Hermione was sure that it was true. It was love that brought them there that day. It was love that set off the chain of events leading to Draco becoming the Master of Death. It was love that bound Hermione to him and set them on a course to finish this together.

"Now all we need is the basilisk venom," whispered Draco into her ear as the guests started to break up and move to the Manor's main floor.

"We'll do that next," said Hermione, "and then we'll practice."

Draco leaned down to give her a deep kiss before stepping back and looking at their friends who had gathered around, after saying farewell to the visitors closest to them. There were only a few people left to see the six of them disappear together once again.

"Come along," Draco said, as he cast a glance back at Narcissa and Andromeda, who were talking tentatively to one another, with a giggling Teddy in between them. "Let's give them space. We're going to finish this."

Indeed they were.

Chapter 41: Finite

Hermione was perched in the middle of a group of hooded raptors, waiting for the hunt to begin. She was not wearing her talon covers today because they were ready for Nagini.

As soon as all the guests left after making their blood offerings, Hermione, Draco, and their friends holed themselves up in the lab in Draco's old room and began the arduous process of extracting basilisk venom and imbedding it into the tips of the talon covers.

It was finicky because they were all wary of touching it. The basilisk fangs still had some venom, but there wasn't very much left in an accessible place. That meant they had to carefully chip away at the fangs to release deeper pockets of venom so that the tips of Hermione's talon covers could be coated in it.

When that was complete, Draco produced an astonishing array of goblin-made throwing knives that he, Theo, and Blaise had all collected from their vaults at Gringotts. Hermione already had the knives from Aquila that Draco gifted to her, but the others all spent time playing with the ones on offer to find their favorites. They decided it would be too suspicious to go back to the goblins for custom blades after they had just made the talon covers and the perch for Fawkes. They decided to use what they already had available, and it turned out they had quite a collection when the wizards made a point to actually look.

Once they found their favorites, those knives were all loaded up with venom too. The plan to destroy the horcrux Voldemort was wearing was rather rough, and all six of them needed to be prepared for it.

"We could take out most of wizarding Britain with these," muttered Blaise, as he threw one of the venom-laced knives into a target and watched it begin to dissolve.

Their holsters were all modified to accommodate the blades to ensure they touched nothing: every time the tips scratched something, the venom began to disintegrate that thing, and Fawkes would have to step in to neutralize it.

"It's lucky we have a phoenix, isn't it?" commented Ginny, when she poked herself with her new knife and Fawkes came to the rescue.

Soon after they had finished lacing Hermione's talon covers and their blades with basilisk venom, it was time to return to Nott Castle. Theo had smuggled in Hermione, Ginny, and Luna the previous night. This time the girls had a single objective: spying. All three would spend most of the weekend in their various animagi forms, keeping a close watch on the Death Eaters to gauge just how far their magic had drained. It would be the final weekend of revelry before the tying ceremonies taking place on the Solstice less than two weeks away, and Draco and the others were determined that the Death Eaters' magical weaknesses would not be exposed to Voldemort at this late date.

They were all on edge with the promise of another revel tonight. Draco, Theo, and Blaise all intended to take part in the prisoner torture portion of the evening to hopefully speed it along and cover for the others who could no longer cast the necessary spells. Draco assured Hermione that if they could just get through the weekend without exposure, they would have a clear path to the Solstice.

The girls couldn't spy for the entire weekend, however. Voldemort expected a repeat performance from Aquila in particular, and Draco couldn't very well swap her out with a different bird. So here she was, waiting to be launched into the sky for another round of hunting.

I'm never doing this again after this weekend.

Even as an eagle her stomach was clenched, though she had to admit she was more relaxed this time. She recalled what Draco had once said about everything being hard the first time you did it, and she knew that he was right about that. Hunting game still wasn't *easy* for Hermione, but it wasn't nearly as distressing as it had been the first time.

I'll make it fast, and then I'll be free for the rest of the weekend.

It was true. Each of the witches would have the opportunity to drift among the Death Eaters without the wizards present at some point or another. Even Ginny's horse form was valuable for this, because evidently most of the Death Eaters visited their horses periodically through the weekend, and many of them *talked* to their horses while they did it. The last time she had been transformed and in the stables she overheard some gossip that helped the wizards narrow the selections for the Death Eaters who would be tied to the boons.

Every single one of them was going to be incapacitated, so it was important to get it right.

This time Ginny decided to spend virtually the entire weekend in the stables, even volunteering to sleep there, much to Blaise's dismay.

"It will be worth it," she insisted. "I heard plenty last time, and I was only there for a couple of hours. Imagine how much better it will be if I barely leave."

Hermione knew that Ginny was stationed there now in case any Death Eaters were preparing their horses early, while Hermione was tasked to put on another show for Voldemort. Luna was accompanying Theo, who was at the falconry field too, since that was where many of the Death Eaters would be gathered to watch.

Hermione glanced down and saw Luna wagging her tail as she wove among the Death Eaters, drifting slightly away from Hermione, Draco, and Theo. Like most of the Death Eaters' dogs, Luna was completely ignored. They roamed the castle freely, and it gave her a perfect opportunity to put her excellent hearing to good use and discover if any of the Death Eaters were talking about the things that were happening to them. Hermione's turn to spy would come later, while Ginny and Luna were both preoccupied with the mounted hunt.

"You know what to do, fierce girl," said Draco under his breath. "You don't have to give me three kills today, but aim for at least two."

Hermione ruffled her feathers in acknowledgment.

“Straight up into the sky and do it as fast as you can. The bigger the better, but as long as you collect *something* it will be enough to prove to the others that the last time wasn’t a fluke.”

Hermione ruffled her feathers once more, as Draco stroked the back of her neck and then stepped forward with his arm extended.

She hopped up and held her breath.

“Launch!” cried Voldemort.

Hermione flew into the air, higher and faster than any of the others.

It was time to hunt.

“Draco, we’re meeting the others in less than thirty minutes,” breathed Hermione as he pushed her against the wall of his room, after casting a cushioning charm on it first of course.

“I don’t fucking care,” he groaned as his hand dove under the hem of her shirt, and his lips attached themselves to her neck. He started to suck, and her knees went weak.

Hermione was being consumed by him. She had successfully completed two kills at the hunt this time, one of which was actually a young deer. She had spotted it at the edge of the woods and managed to chase it out. The deer was far too large for her to carry, but she had painstakingly herded it toward the crowd and finally brought it down almost directly in front of Voldemort. He had been transfixed by the violence, and once again Draco was declared the clear winner and hailed for his masterful training of her.

Draco was almost as stunned as Voldemort, and as soon as the hunt was called, he wasted no time arranging to liaise with the others to learn if Luna or Ginny had overheard anything of use before summoning her back to his room. As soon as she flew through his window and transformed back into herself, she was pushed against the oddly squishy wall, and now she found herself being practically devoured.

“That was so hot,” he groaned as he pushed his hardness into her. Hermione’s head fell back, and her legs naturally opened for him.

“It was just a deer,” she breathed.

“It was incredible. I think I have a thing for competency. Every time you show off, I get hard and have to take you.”

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at this, and she caught a flash of Draco's grin before his mouth descended on hers, and she lost all sense of herself. It wasn't long before she felt his hands tugging on her shirt, and Hermione raised her arms so he could lift it over her head.

"Beautiful," he murmured as he nibbled on her ear lobe, making her gasp.

"Draco..." she groaned.

He just gave a wicked chuckle as he whispered to her, "I've been fantasizing about bending you over and taking you from behind. What do you think, my darling? Can you be a brave girl for me again?"

Hermione's heart stuttered a little, and she knew Draco sensed it because he was stroking her neck with one hand and cupping her breasts with the other.

"Alright," she said. "But I'm a little nervous."

He pulled back and looked down at her seriously. "I know. But it will feel so good for you. If you don't like it, you know I'll stop."

"I know," she breathed, and then she closed her eyes and turned herself over to him.

She felt Draco exhale as he coaxed her trousers and underwear down until she was naked for him. It still made her falter just a little, but with every encounter she got more and more comfortable. It wouldn't be long before she would be able to prance around in the nude in front of him, she was sure of it. And Draco, being Draco, was just as patient with her as he had always been. He never hid his eagerness from her, but he also never pushed too far.

She was nervous about doing it the way he described, but she trusted him. If he thought she was ready for it, then she believed him.

His hands were skimming over her, light enough to make her shiver, but intentional enough that she knew he was in complete control.

"Get on the bed for me," he said. "Hands and knees and then shake that arse in the air."

Hermione huffed a small laugh at this, and he grinned again as she moved over to the bed and climbed gingerly on it. She felt a bit foolish on her hands and knees like he requested, but she looked back over her shoulder and saw him staring at her arse, his hands already stroking himself as he studied her.

"Hot damn," he muttered. "Arch your back, sweet girl. All the way until I can see your cunt."

Hermione's face was aflame, but she gathered her courage and presented to him. It was oddly empowering watching his eyes turn dark and his nostrils flair. He was staring at her without blinking, and she could see that he was stiff and ready.

"I'm not going to last," he muttered to himself. "I'll need to take care of you first."

Hermione let her eyes flutter closed as he approached her and ran one hand over the globe of her arse. He gripped it and massaged it a bit as his other hand worked its ways between her legs.

“Gods, you’re wet like this,” he said with satisfaction. “In fact…”

Hermione’s eyes flew open in surprise when she felt his mouth on her, and she instinctively pressed herself back into his face.

Draco made an indistinct sound, but gripped her harder and lowered himself to get a better angle as his tongue started to do those things that drove her utterly mad. Before she knew it, Hermione was lowering herself onto her elbows, and she began to shake as she felt her release growing closer.

Draco must have sensed it too because he suddenly pulled away, causing Hermione to cry out in dismay. But soon he was on the bed with her, gripping her hips from behind, and then she felt that moment of intrusion that still made her stomach flip but that was becoming more comfortable with each encounter.

It felt different this time. It felt tighter, harder, and Draco released a great groan as he pushed forward into her.

“Goddammit you are so nice and tight,” he gasped, before he pulled out partway and then jerked her back toward him.

The sensation caused something deep and almost electric to jolt through Hermione. He was hitting her in some spot he had never reached before, and she instinctively arched and nearly collapsed onto the bed in front of her.

“Just like that,” he agreed. “I’m going to go fast and hard for you, my darling. Be a brave girl and take it for me.”

Hermione said nothing, but nodded her head, and then Draco made an almost triumphant sound as he rammed his hips back into her center.

Over and over, faster and harder, Hermione felt herself shattering, but it wouldn’t stop.

It just wouldn’t stop.

She barely felt his own release as he came with a grunt and buried himself into her body as far as he could go. She collapsed, almost boneless, and he let her do it before falling onto the bed next to her with a soft grunt.

They were silent for a few seconds, and all Hermione could hear was heavy breathing. It was as though they had both run a race. At long last she found energy to turn her head to the side to discover Draco sprawled out with his arm flung over his face.

“I think you killed me,” he muttered.

She huffed a laugh of disbelief. “I rather think that the reverse was true.”

She caught the flash of a grin on his face as he turned to look down at her. Something about her exhaustion must have sparked concern, because he suddenly looked a little hesitant.

“Are you alright? Did I overdo it?”

Hermione let herself relax into the bed, as she nodded. “I’m alright. I don’t know that I want it like that *all* the time, but...”

“But?” he prompted.

“But it was rather effective. I don’t think I’ve ever come that fast in my life.”

“You haven’t,” agreed Draco.

Hermione just looked at him askance, but he assumed an arrogant expression. “Have you forgotten? I’ve seen every one of your orgasms, my darling. Every last one. We set a record today. Whenever we need a quickie, that’s how we’ll do it. You came for me within seconds.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at this, but Draco looked very pleased with himself.

Hermione opened her mouth to give him a snarky retort, when a knock at the door made her blanche.

“Who is it?” called Draco in a bored voice. He didn’t seem at all perturbed by the fact that they were both naked and there was a visitor outside their door.

“It’s us,” came Theo’s voice.

“Shit!” hissed Hermione as she rolled off of the bed and nearly stumbled and fell in her haste to make it to the loo before they walked in.

The sound of Draco’s laughter and a knowing groan from Theo on the other side of the door followed her as she slammed the door shut.

Sometimes Draco Malfoy was a true pain in her arse.

It took Hermione several minutes before she had cleaned herself up, taken the necessary potion, and then felt composed enough to exit the loo and face her friends. By the time she did, Draco was dressed as though nothing had occurred and Theo and Blaise were lounging on some threadbare chairs with Ginny and Luna in their laps due to lack of seating.

“My apologies for being late,” said Hermione primly.

All five of them rolled their eyes at her, and she just huffed.

“It reeks of sex in here,” said Ginny bluntly. “You two are not that subtle.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped in mortification, but Draco looked almost proud of himself.

“It’s our own private room. What did you lot expect?” he said. “Tea and scones? Besides, don’t act like you aren’t doing precisely the same thing in *your* chambers.”

“Well seeing as how I *just* returned from spending all morning in the stables, no, I haven’t,” retorted Ginny.

Draco rolled his eyes but did not look at all abashed.

“Fine. We’ll try to resist our sexcapades until we’re turned in for the night. Tell us, then. Did you or Luna hear anything?”

Ginny and Luna exchanged a glance.

“I heard nothing that suggested the Death Eaters are losing their magic,” said Luna. “They are all being very careful in front of each other. That doesn’t mean there aren’t a few who have compared notes, but none of them were talking about it at the hunt just now.”

Draco nodded, and Hermione felt a rush of relief at this.

“Ginny?” asked Blaise. “What about you?”

Ginny nodded. “Four Death Eaters came in to check on their horses while the falconry was going on. I saw two of them try to do magic, and they were struggling with it. It wasn’t all that advanced either – one was casting a *scourgify* on his horse and the other a *reparo* on some tack. Both of them managed it eventually, but it took a few tries. They looked worried.”

Draco’s eyes gleamed at this. “Excellent. Those spells are far less powerful than most hexes or jinxes, let alone any type of dark magic.”

They all nodded in agreement.

“They might still be able to do some creative damage with simple spells,” pointed out Theo.

“Theo’s right,” said Hermione. “Ron knocked out a mountain troll with *wingardium leviosa* when we were first-years. Their magic won’t be entirely gone by the Solstice.”

Blaise pursed his lips at this, but shook his head. “There’s nothing we can do about that, though. Even if they can do damage with simple spells, it won’t be instinctive. They will naturally try to stun or shield – they’ve been trained that way, and in the heat of battle they will cast what they were trained to do first. If any of them *do* manage to get off a damaging spell, then that’s what the phoenix tears are for. Most Death Eaters aren’t well-trained in hand-to-hand combat or knives. They lean heavily on magic.”

“That’s right,” agreed Draco, as he started to stand. “We’ll keep an eye on it. And now we need to get ready for the mounted hunt, and it will be Hermione’s turn to spy from the air. Let’s reconvene once it’s over and see if there is anything else she learns.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and the others rose to leave, but not before Theo cuffed Draco on the head for shagging his baby sister so blatantly.

“Do that again, and I’ll lower her dowry,” said Theo wryly, as Hermione rolled her eyes and Draco smiled broadly.

“I don’t view that as a disincentive at all,” he said, ducking a quick *crucio* Theo threw his way as he headed out the door.

“I will never understand your relationship with Theo,” said Hermione after the door closed.

Draco shrugged. “What’s a *crucio* or two between best mates?”

“It’s appalling,” she countered.

“We like to think of it as character-building.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Both of you are impossible.”

“But you love us.”

“Unfortunately, I do.”

Draco grinned again as he pulled her to him and nuzzled her neck. “Now where were we before they so rudely interrupted? I believe you were naked and satisfied. I, for one, have fully recovered and could absolutely go again.”

Hermione just shook her head and leaned into him. “Later, Draco. I have to go spy now.”

His face fell, and he pulled back to look at her seriously. “You’ll be careful.”

“Of course.”

“And call for Theo if you need anything.”

“You know I will.”

“I hate this.”

“I know you do, Draco. But I’ll be in the air or hidden in the trees. It will be just fine, and I’ll meet you here once the hunt is over.”

He reached up and tucked a few curls behind her ear.

“Good. Be safe, my darling.”

She smiled and extricated herself from his lap. He let her go reluctantly. "I'll see you in a few hours, Draco."

He smiled as she transformed into Columba and fluttered to the windowsill.

"Most of the hunt will be in fields or along the edge of the forest. Fly over it for the bits that are through the forest. I don't want you encountering any other creatures there."

Hermione let out a soft coo of acknowledgment, and Draco stroked the back of her neck affectionately before unlatching the window and opening it for her.

"I love you, Hermione. I'll see you in a few hours."

Hermione cooed one more time before launching herself into the air. Her eyes were already set on the stables in the distance. As she banked left to head toward them, she saw Draco watching her, his eyes never straying.

She did not notice a different pair of eyes also watching her from the fourth floor.

Draco Malfoy was ridiculously handsome while astride a horse.

This was Hermione's prevailing thought as she hovered on the very edge of the treeline, waiting for the hunt to begin. It was busy and far more crowded than the falconry had been. Luna was weaving between horses and dogs, while Blaise was giving Ginny a pat on the nose before mounting her.

Hermione was fluttering from branch to branch, listening in on conversations to see if *any* of the Death Eaters were discussing the curious thing happening to their magic. As usual, she was entirely ignored, being above eye-height for all of them.

Only Draco seemed attuned to her location, and Hermione couldn't help but gape at him as much as a bird could to see him in riding breeches, tall boots, and a coat. She knew he was being idiotic by not wearing a helmet to ride, but his blonde hair gleamed in the sunlight, and it made the overall effect even more arresting than it otherwise would have been. He was riding that same grey horse he had brought to Nott Castle the last time Hermione was here. Hermione now knew the horse was named Cosmos. He was a thoroughbred of course, and one of the most beautiful animals in the field. Draco's entire ensemble coordinated with the soft gray coat of Cosmos, which didn't have a single flaw to Hermione's untrained eye.

He really was far too sexy like this.

Bad, Hermione. Focus. You're not here to ogle him, even if those pants are hugging every single part of his.... No! Stop it!

It was very distracting, and she ruffled her feathers and forced herself to fly to an area that didn't have him in clear view when she saw him smirking at her. She settled on a branch and tried to refocus on the conversations she was hearing. Most of it was gossip about the Solstice, and to her relief, nobody was talking about their magic.

In fact, the few times spells were mentioned, the Death Eaters abruptly changed the subject.

All of the Death Eaters were keeping it a secret, just as they had planned.

Before long, the Death Eaters were all mounted, and Draco was passing by again. He glanced up at her, and then winked as he passed beneath her. She watched the blonde and grey disappear around a bend, with only a few others trailing behind him to the starting line. When they were gone, Hermione took a few minutes to compose herself before she stepped out onto the edge of the branch and opened her wings to prepare to fly.

She froze when a guttural voice growled, "*Finite animagi*," and Hermione felt herself growing rapidly as she was forced out of her animagus form.

It was the animagi reversal spell. She had once seen Sirius Black and Remus Lupin perform it on Peter Pettigrew to make him show himself. It was a simple spell and did not take much magic at all — it wasn't nearly as strong as the transfigurative magic to assume an animagus form in the first place.

She grew quickly, and she couldn't seem to make her magic work to transform back while the Death Eater's magic was upon her. She started to panic as the branch she was on snapped, and she fell, landing hard on her arm with a sickening crunch.

The pain made her stomach heave, and she knew her arm must be severely broken. She turned to the side to see the large form of Dolohov standing over her. Only now did she realize she had never changed her appearance before transforming into Columba. It was stupid of her, arrogant. She trusted her animagi forms so much by this point that she hadn't bothered this time. Right now she was Hermione, and she could tell that Dolohov recognized her. The expression on his face was feral, dangerous as he drew closer.

"So Draco's little dove is a mudblood after all. And I think she's been playing with some very dark magic to weaken the rest of us, hasn't she? Or was Draco the one who did it? It's no matter, really. You'll both be dead when the Dark Lord finds out. I'll claim your magic back as you're dying and restore myself with it. The Blacks aren't the only family who knows those spells."

Hermione felt a surge of blinding panic and cried *Theo!* as loudly as she could through her bond less than a second before Dolohov's boot hit her face. Hermione felt her nose and cheekbone break and blood start to choke her as it all went dark.

Draco had been having an exceptional morning. Hermione's performance as Aquila was, once again, entirely unmatched. Then he got to bend her over and fuck her into the mattress in a way he had only ever dreamed about. He wasn't lying when he said he had a thing for competency. Every time his sweet girl showed up everyone around her it made Draco painfully hard.

She was obviously perfect. She was the perfect fiancée. Soon she would be the perfect wife. Draco had no intention of waiting the customary two or more years to make their bond permanent. He was planning on a summer wedding at the very latest. In fact, Draco rather liked the idea of killing the Dark Lord on the Winter Solstice and then marrying his sweet girl on the Summer Solstice. Something about it felt nicely symbolic and well balanced. They could surely secure Draco's pardon, find her parents, and then plan a wedding in six months.

The hardest thing would be talking Hermione into it, but Draco would start working on her soon. They weren't too young, not after all the things they had seen and done. Maybe he would even get lucky, and she would fall pregnant. Draco knew she continued to request contraceptive potions from Posy, but after that first night he took her virginity he had never suggested it again. He saw in her dreams that she wasn't *that* scared by the possibility of an accident, and he decided then and there that any future contraceptive measures would be entirely on her from that point forward. Draco was rather hoping she would forget to take it one day, and then he'd plant a baby into her, and getting married quickly would become *her* idea.

Draco fucking loved babies. Or rather, he loved Teddy, and he was sure he would love his and Hermione's babies too. If he ever got that lucky then Hermione would be a little nervous at first, but Draco would take care of her. She would be prized, treasured, cherished. She would eventually embrace motherhood, and then they would have children who were just as perfect as she was.

Besides, she would be so adorable if she was pregnant. Her tits would get bigger, and she would grow a cute baby bump, and she'd probably threaten to hex his bollocks off if he irritated her. He once read that pregnant witches craved sex. Something about all the hormones, no doubt.

Draco certainly wouldn't mind *that*.

He idly considered tampering with the potions at the Manor to make them ineffective so he could hurry things along a bit. He would like to marry her *now*, and he thought he was being generous by waiting six months. If her potions failed maybe they could split the difference and marry at the Spring Equinox. She wouldn't be showing by then, not very much. The magic at an Equinox was just as strong as a Solstice, and it should be powerful enough to make their bond entirely unbreakable.

But no, he chided himself. *No, it's better if I just wait her out. I'll just keep fucking her and filling her, and one day she's bound to forget to take it. If it happens soon, we will marry in the spring. If it's a bit later, we can wait until the summer.*

Yes, that was probably a better way to baby trap her than *actually* baby trapping her. Draco was a patient man, and he could be patient when it came to this too. Nature could just take its

course. And maybe she would surprise him and be cooperative *without* a baby in her belly. Perhaps he should just edge her and lick her cunt until she was so weak for him she would agree to anything he wanted. He could withhold her orgasm until she agreed to a summer wedding.

Fuck, he was getting hard just thinking about it, even though he was riding Cosmos. It wasn't an entirely comfortable sensation to get an erection while astride a horse, and he shifted a little so his cock was better positioned for it.

There, he breathed a sigh of relief. *That's much better.*

He glanced up as he rode Cosmos under the branch where Hermione was hovering, and he threw a wink when he saw her little bird eyes glance down at his crotch. He doubted anybody but her would notice the bulge in his breeches, so he didn't bother to hide it.

That's right, sweet girl, it's all for you.

If he didn't know better he would say she was flustered, and he smirked to himself as he thought about taking her for a second time that day. He'd fuck her from behind again, maybe standing up this time. She came so fast and hard for him like that he could surely sneak in another round before the others arrived to debrief after the hunt. Then tonight he'd return after the revel and slip into bed with her. She would be asleep, curled adorably against the pillows, and Draco would quietly vanish her nightgown and knickers and then wake her up with his face between her thighs. She would make such sleepy, sweet sounds for him like that, he was sure of it. This one would be slow, unhurried until she broke gently for him. He wouldn't let her go right back to sleep after she came. No, then it would be his turn, and he'd straddle her face and coax those perfect lips closed around his cock while he buried himself into her throat.

He debated with himself about whether to come in her mouth or take her in the cunt for a third time, and he did some quick maths in his head. Her period wasn't due for about two weeks, so she was probably fertile right now, and the potions only lasted a few hours. Hermione typically took one after each encounter.

Cunt, then. She'll be so tired she might forget the potion afterwards. I shouldn't waste the opportunity, just in case...

Draco bit his bottom lip as the whole night played out in his imagination. He followed the other Death Eaters through the clearing to the starting point of the hunt, and now his breeches were rubbing in a rather pleasurable way against his cock. If he leaned forward just a little then Cosmo's natural gait set a good rhythm for him. If he closed his eyes he could almost imagine it was Hermione's hot little mouth wrapped around his—

“DRACO!” bellowed Theo.

Draco blinked, the image of Hermione quickly dissolving as he registered a note of suppressed panic in Theo's voice. He blinked a second time and saw that Theo was fucking *galloping* toward him around the outer edge of the large group of mounted Death Eaters, with Luna streaking behind him.

Draco went cold, and his cock immediately started to soften.

Blaise and Ginny halted progress too as they saw Theo thundering past, and then Ginny turned the opposite direction and nosed her way through the other horses until she had a clear path to canter and join them.

“What is it?” asked Draco as Theo came skidding to a halt.

“It’s Her– Columba,” breathed Theo as quietly as he could. The other Death Eaters were looking back at them in confusion, but Blaise quickly blocked their view as he came up behind Theo.

Draco’s stomach clenched. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” said Theo. “She just screamed my name through our bond, and now I can’t get to her. She’s not responding.”

Draco muttered a curse and pulled out his wand to track her. He felt the spell connect, and then he blinked as he felt the tug of magic with her location in his mind’s eye.

“She’s still in the woods,” he said, “Back in the clearing where we just were. I saw her there in her dove form keeping an eye on things, but it feels like she’s moving slowly back toward the castle...”

“Let’s go,” said Theo. “Something’s wrong, I’m sure of it.”

Draco and Blaise both nodded, and all three took off at a gallop, ignoring the shouts of confusion from the Death Eaters behind them.

Draco held the reins in one hand as he continued to cast the spell. She was moving faster now, and he glanced toward Theo.

“Can you reach her?” he called out. “She’s moving!”

Theo just furrowed his brow and shook his head, making Draco’s stomach plunge. That was a very bad sign. He cast the spell one more time, trying his best to push aside his fear and focus on what was happening to her.

“She’s turned, and she’s going in the direction of the Dark Lord’s tent at the finish line!” said Draco, and he leaned forward and willed Cosmos to ride harder. “She’ll be within visible distance of it soon!”

As he said these words, Ginny put on a burst of speed, and she galloped like her life depended on it, with Blaise standing slightly in the stirrups to help her. Draco blinked in surprise to see her pass Cosmos, but then again, Ginny’s breed was built for this very thing. Involuntarily, his mind was pulled back to that conversation when they all discussed the girls learning to become animagi in the first place.

“How is a horse useful?” Hermione demanded.

“Because it means she could run really fast and carry one of us if she had to,” replied Draco.

Ginny was doing precisely that. Hermione was practically her sister, and Draco knew that all of them sensed something very *very* bad would happen if Hermione was within visible distance of the Dark Lord’s tent before they reached her.

Ginny would not let that happen.

Their horses’ hooves pounded in the grass, and they rounded a curve to find a hooded figure carrying a body over its shoulder. It had emerged from the treeline near the stables and was just about to pass them. Within a few meters the stables would no longer be blocking the figure from the view of those Death Eaters who had hung back with the Dark Lord to wait for the end of the hunt.

Whoever it was had Hermione, Draco was certain of it.

“Go, go, go,” whispered Draco, as he pressed Cosmos forward, keeping his eyes peeled on Ginny and Blaise who were well in front of them at this point.

The figure turned in surprise at the sound of hooves coming up from behind him, and he flung the body he was carrying to the ground and tried to run toward the tree line. Draco squinted, but he couldn’t quite make out a face, though he was sure it must be a Death Eater based on the garb he was wearing. Draco swallowed hard as he recognized Hermione’s curls from a distance. He knew it was her, *in her regular form*. He had stared at her curls from the other side of the great lawn at Hogwarts for years. He would recognize them anywhere, regardless of the distance. She fell to the ground like a rag doll and didn’t move. Draco reached for her magic, and he was alarmed by how low it was. He could barely find it, and those golden bubbles he associated with Hermione’s magic were popping rapidly, going flat like a butterbeer that was stale and dying.

Dying...

“Theo, she’s really hurt!” he cried, as he turned Cosmos slightly to head straight for her. Draco saw Blaise glance behind, and he must have noted that Draco and Theo were heading for Hermione, because he shouted something to Ginny, who swerved past Hermione and kept galloping straight for the Death Eater.

“Holy fuck,” Draco muttered to himself as Ginny caught up to the Death Eater and fucking *trampled him*. The Death Eater let out a strangled shout, as he collapsed under the weight of Ginny galloping over him.

She slowed and turned back to him, just as Blaise slid off of her back. From a distance Draco saw Blaise pull out his wand to cast a few spells in the air. The wand movements told Draco they were privacy charms, and then he spun and began to stride toward the direction of the Dark Lord’s tent, walking at a clipped, but not frantic pace, presumably to head off the others in case they heard anything suspicious. Draco sent a silent prayer of thanks for Blaise’s cool head. He had always been very good in a crisis, operating several steps ahead of everyone else without having to be told what to do. It was the reason he had risen so high so fast. Whoever that Death Eater was, he was severely outnumbered and probably had most of his

magic depleted in any event. But if the others heard him shout and came to investigate, all six of them would be utterly fucked.

No, Blaise will distract them. Trust him to know what he's doing and just focus on Hermione.

The moment Blaise was away from Ginny, she reared up to bring her hooves down on the Death Eater once more, while Luna barked and went tearing into the fray too. Draco turned away at the now-muffled sound of the Death Eater's screams as Ginny and Luna did their worst. Draco would learn who it was in due course, and if he was alive when the girls were through with him, Draco and Theo would kill him very slowly. But right now, Hermione was more important.

Draco slowed Cosmos just enough to jump off of him before he sprinted toward Hermione's limp form, Theo close on his heels. He gasped, and his heart leapt to his throat when he saw the state of her. Half her face appeared to be smashed in, blood flowing freely from a clearly broken nose and cheek. One arm was bent at an unnatural angle, and it was clearly broken. She was deathly pale, having lost far too much blood already. Anger at the Death Eater who had done this to her blossomed.

I will keep that wankstain in my dungeon for months while I bleed him dry.

Draco pushed the errant thought aside and made himself focus on her. He checked for a pulse and could barely feel anything. He took no more time to think and just dove his hand under his own shirt and pulled out his personal vial of phoenix tears. He knew Hermione was wearing some too, but her body was so broken. He was afraid to jostle her at all to search for her stash.

He uncorked the vial with his teeth and held it to her lips.

"Will that work?" asked Theo skeptically. "Drinking it, I mean? I thought it was for external wounds."

Draco paused. "Do you have a better suggestion?" he muttered. "We don't know what all her injuries are yet, and we can't take her to a healer until we get her back to the Manor. As soon as we get her back, we can summon our personal healer and then obliviate them after they treat her, but we need to get her stable first. We can't risk it here. Even as Columba, she's not supposed to be here this weekend."

Theo hesitated, but then shook his head. "No. No, you're right, we should try it. It's phoenix tears. They can't possibly hurt her."

Draco nodded firmly and then tilted the entire vial into her mouth. He and Theo both waited anxiously as a curious golden glow began from her mouth and then slowly seemed to spread down her body as the cuts and bruising began to heal. The bleeding around her nose halted and even the bones seemed to be repairing themselves. Draco pressed a finger to her neck again and felt her pulse strengthening. Then he reached for her magic and felt it growing again, the bubbles becoming sharp and rising to the surface. He nearly collapsed with relief.

"It's working," he said. "Stay with her for a moment. I need to find out who that was."

Theo nodded and scooted close to her, casting spells to gently clear her face and clothing of blood as Draco rose and strode over to the form of the collapsed Death Eater, who was being guarded by Ginny and Luna.

“Thank you,” he said to them both as he approached. He brushed Ginny on the nose and gave Luna a pat on the head as he passed. Ginny snorted and Luna barked in acknowledgment as Draco then stared down at the Death Eater’s broken body. He used his boot to roll him over roughly and found himself staring at Dolohov’s pinched face. The rage he was feeling was otherworldly, but he was focused and oddly calm while he let himself feel it. This was good. Dolohov had always been on Draco’s list for a slow death, but this would mean weeks, no, *months* of drawn out torture for the bastard if he was still alive. Ginny and Luna had injured him severely, and Draco leaned down to check for a pulse on him too.

Faint, but present. Good.

“Ginny,” he said quietly, “Give me your phoenix tears, please. I’m going to take this fucker back to the Manor and cut him apart bit by bit. But I need him to be alive for it, and he’s almost dead. You girls did an excellent job on him.”

Ginny transformed back with a *POP!* and she fished her tears out from under her shirt. Draco saw fury in her eyes as she handed them across.

“You had better make it hurt,” she said harshly.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Surely you don’t doubt me. You and Luna are welcome to take turns too and join me if you wish. He can be our little project.”

A truly terrifying smile crossed Ginny’s face at this as she nodded once. Draco was just reaching for the phoenix tears when a flash of movement caught his eye. He tensed for a moment, but then relaxed again when he saw Blaise returning.

He looked a bit grim, but nodded once. “They heard a little before I cast the privacy charms, but I caught them just before they went to check. I told them Dolohov was thrown from his horse, and an elf alerted Theo since he’s the former master. I said the elf apparated all three of us there to help. The Dark Lord seems satisfied with that explanation.”

Draco exhaled, but nodded. It was a good cover.

“That will work. We may need somebody to polyjuice into him until the Solstice because he will never make it out of my dungeons alive, but that story should buy us a couple days to find somebody in the Order who can pose as him.”

Blaise nodded and then glanced down at the broken form of Dolohov before looking at his fiancée with a raised eyebrow. “Remind me never to anger you, *Bellissima*,” he said.

Ginny just smirked as she pushed the phoenix tears into Draco’s hand, before she transformed back into her horse form. Draco knelt and dumped the vial down Dolohov’s throat. Just like Hermione, the golden glow began to heal him slowly, and that was good enough to reassure Draco he would be alive and well in the Malfoy dungeons. Draco then

stood and stunned him for good measure. Draco didn't care if Dolohov was in pain, he just didn't want him to wake up until he was secured in Draco's dungeon and chained to the fucking wall.

"The edge of the wards are on the other side of that clearing," said Draco, now looking at Blaise. "Can you and Ginny take him? I'll be right behind you with Hermione."

Blaise nodded and levitated Dolohov onto Ginny's back, before pulling the bridle over her head and leading her into the woods.

Draco headed back to Hermione to find her groaning a little.

"Shhh," he said, kneeling down. "You've been through a terrible ordeal, my darling. Just rest, alright? You're safe now. Theo and I have you."

She sighed, but stopped moving. Draco wasn't sure if she was unconscious or just sleeping, but he checked her pulse again, and it appeared strong now. Nodding to himself he stood and mounted his horse.

"Levitate her to me," said Draco. "I'll carry her."

Theo carefully levitated Hermione into his arms, and Draco gathered her to him, cradling her until she was tucked into his chest and enveloped by him. She was so small like this, so fragile. His relief that she would be okay was warring with the rage he felt toward Dolohov. Every bit of sexual burn he had been feeling just a few minutes earlier had extinguished, replaced instead with a fierce need to protect her and care for her and murder Dolohov very slowly.

He had never been more grateful for Blaise. His quick thinking would give Draco the excuse he needed to stay away from the hunt today. He would have enough time to make sure his sweet girl was settled and safe and *healthy* before he returned with news that Dolohov had been injured, but that Draco and the others called a healer, and now he was recovering as a guest at Malfoy Manor.

Yes, that will work.

He shifted Hermione slightly, pressing his face down into her curls to breathe in her scent. His poor, brave girl. He wondered how Dolohov had gotten the better of her. Draco and the others weren't out of the clearing for very long before she called for Theo, so Dolohov must have caught her unawares directly after Draco and the others left. He must have cast a spell to force her transformation back into Hermione. There was no reason to think she would have transformed voluntarily.

But how had he known?

Draco was wracking his brain, and then it came to him in a flash: Dolohov was near the front of the audience the night of their tying when Hermione showed off her animagus form to the Dark Lord. He was sure most of the others hadn't gotten a good look at her distinctive markings in the dim light, but Dolohov had been close enough to see it. He was observant.

He would have noticed that her collar spanned her entire neck, unlike most collared doves. Perhaps he had even seen the Columba symbol on her chest. He must have made note of her unique characteristics and then kept an eye out for her.

He must suspect that she was the one who had cast the curse to drain his magic because Hermione was the one who exposed Astoria as a squib that night.

Draco went cold with the thought.

Would the others put it together too?

Draco chewed on his lip, but he knew there wasn't anything to be done about it now. He would simply have to make a point to be more brutal than ever with the prisoner torture tonight to convince any who were suspicious that it was too dangerous to confront him about it. And then he would need to keep Hermione locked away in the Manor until the Solstice. It was less than two weeks away. *Surely* she would understand...

He glanced down at his sweet girl, and his determination hardened. He wouldn't keep her as a *prisoner*; but he would not help her cross the blood wards in their wing until it was time to kill the Dark Lord. He would close the floo and put the most complex locking spell he knew on the windows and keep her safely away from the other Death Eaters until it was time. She would have to understand why he would insist upon it, especially after *this*...

Truly, all of them should maintain a low profile after this weekend and do the bare minimum that was required of them. The less they would be seen by the others the better. None of the Death Eaters would dare challenge him or Hermione in front of the Dark Lord unless they were absolutely certain that one of them had done something wrong. It would be tantamount to suicide to reveal weakening powers in front of him without proof of treachery. Draco and the others had been relying on it this entire time to execute their plan.

It didn't matter if the others were suspicious, as long as none of them could touch Hermione and take matters into their own hands.

The Solstice is less than two weeks away, he reminded himself for the thousandth time. Hermione will be okay, and everything will be fine.

Draco shifted her in his arms, and she nestled in closer than ever as they approached the edge of the estate.

"The wards are open," said Theo from behind them, and they all crossed onto the other side, as they prepared to get Hermione and Dolohov back to the Manor.

As Draco watched Blaise levitate Dolohov from Ginny's back, he hugged Hermione closer and began to fantasize about cutting him apart piece by piece.

He decided he would start with the eyes.

Chapter 42: Pansy

Chapter Notes

TW: References to domestic violence.

Hermione woke up with a splitting headache.

It took several seconds for her memory to catch up to her, but as soon as it did she went very still.

Am I imprisoned? Will he torture me as soon as I stir?

She forced herself to take stock and realized she was on a soft bed with dim lighting. She seemed to be wearing some familiar, light fabric that felt like one of her nightgowns, and she could tell her hair was mostly loose and only half tied back. The scent of cedar and spice was filling her nose, with a slight metallic tang that could have been blood, and in the distance she thought she heard the faint notes of phoenix song.

Draco. Fawkes.

Hermione's eyes fluttered open, and she winced.

"Hey," whispered Draco, as his thumb ran along her cheek gingerly. "How do you feel?"

"Awful," she confessed. "My head is pounding."

Draco's face swam into view, and only now did she realize he had wrapped himself around a nest of pillows he made for her. She was placed on top of the pillows very carefully, and Draco was enveloping her with his body. His expression was worried as his eyes trailed over her cheeks and nose and lips.

"We got to you soon after you called for Theo," he said. "I gave you phoenix tears, and you appeared to be doing much better. I even called a healer in, and they said you were perfectly fine before I obliviated them. Is it just a headache? Is it anything else?"

Hermione sighed and let her eyes flutter closed. "Just a headache. It feels like that time you did legilimency on me while I was unconscious at Hogwarts."

His thumb stilled on her cheek, and she opened her eyes again to find him looking at her guiltily.

“Draco,” she admonished him. “Did you do legilimency on me?”

“I needed to know what happened to you,” he insisted. “I needed to learn how that bastard caught you and the things he said to you.”

She sighed. “It couldn’t have waited until I was awake?”

“No,” he insisted.

Hermione groaned. “Well I suspect that’s the reason for the headache, then. My face is sore too, but I’ve had worse. I assume you caught Dolohov since you rescued me?”

“We did,” he said evenly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “And did you kill him?” she asked carefully.

“Not yet,” said Draco.

Hermione felt a lurch of fear. Dolohov terrified her. It wasn’t precisely like Cormac, but it was close. He had come very close to killing her twice now, and she would feel much safer if he was dead and out of the way.

Draco sensed it of course because he started making soothing noises.

“Hush, my darling. There is nothing for you to worry about. He’s chained to the wall in my cellar so tightly that the house elves will have to hand-feed him because he can’t do it himself. He will remain there until I’m finished with him, and then he will die. I promise you, he is never going to see the light of day or hurt you ever again.”

She was still worried and began to chew her bottom lip anxiously. Draco softened further as he twirled a curl and pulled her closer into him. She buried herself into his chest instinctively. The encounter with Dolohov had been very quick before she passed out, but it had hurt *so much*.

“Relax,” he said. “His magic is not strong enough to escape his chains, and even if it was I have him blood warded in. He’s not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” she asked. She hated how small her voice sounded, but it seemed to affect Draco as he began to pepper light kisses in her hair and forehead.

“Yes, I promise. He’s going to die eventually, but not before he suffers for every single moment of pain and fear he’s given you.”

“And Susan,” Hermione reminded him. “And Mary. He hurt them too.”

“Of course,” said Draco. “We can tell them he’s captured whenever you are ready.”

Hermione stilled as she thought about it. “Would you let Susan take a turn with him?”

Draco pulled back and looked at her curiously. “Do you think she would like that?”

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t know her very well, but her offering to us was *Vengeance*. She was his boon for months. I’m sure he hurt her much worse than he hurt me.”

A shiver went through Draco at these words. “He nearly killed you, my darling.”

“Still,” insisted Hermione. “I think Susan should be allowed to have some input into what happens to him.”

“And Mary?” asked Draco.

“She’s probably too young, but...” Hermione hesitated.

“But what?”

“Well I was thinking of her mother. Betty Walsh. She loves her daughter. Dolohov obviously wasn’t Mary’s first master – she belonged to Gibbon first – but evidently he traveled quite a bit. She was a prisoner but did not see him very much. Mary told me that Dolohov was much worse that one night he had her, and I think she told her mother the same thing.”

“We can give the Walshes some input then, if that would make you happy.”

“It would,” said Hermione.

He leaned down and kissed her softly on the forehead. “Then that is what we will do. We can discuss his future once things are settled after the Solstice.”

Hermione sighed contentedly and started to snuggle in again, but then frowned as Draco began to extricate himself and tuck her in more firmly.

“Where are you going?” she asked in confusion.

“I need to go back,” he said gently. “I had an excuse to be away from the hunt, but I am needed at the revel tonight. Theo and Blaise have already returned.”

“And Ginny and Luna?” asked Hermione as she started to sit up to get dressed. She winced slightly at the pain in her head. To her consternation Draco just placed a firm hand on her shoulder and stopped her.

“You will stay here,” he said sternly. “Ginny and Luna will be doing a bit more reconnaissance this weekend, and then all three of you will stay within the wards here at the Manor until it’s time for the Solstice. I’ve already spoken to Theo and Blaise about it, and they are in agreement.”

Hermione frowned as she took in his resolute face. “Draco...”

“It’s only for a few more days, my darling,” he said.

“No, Draco, I don’t want to be a prisoner! I can help, I can—”

“No,” he said with such firmness that Hermione automatically quieted. “First of all, you need to recover from the things he did to you. The phoenix tears healed you, thank Merlin, but you almost died, Hermione. I could literally feel your magic going flat and fading, and it was the scariest thing I’ve ever experienced. You’re still sore, and you need a pain potion and *rest*. Second, Dolohov caught you because he recognized your markings and suspected that you were the one who cursed him. He may not be the only one who has put it together. You can’t spy as Aquila, and I won’t have you around the rest of them as Columba, either. It’s too risky. We have less than two weeks before this is over, and we can’t risk one of the others doing precisely what Dolohov tried to do to you.”

“But what about you?” she asked anxiously. “If they suspect me, then surely they will suspect you too?”

Draco’s eyes seemed to burn as he sat on the bed next to her and brought her hands to his lips to kiss. “I can assure you, they will be too intimidated to breathe a word against me. The prisoners tonight are very unlucky. I’ve had a terrible fright today, and that means I have every motivation to ensure my position remains secure until the Solstice. It would be a risk to you if I didn’t put on an excellent performance. There is no amount of blood I wouldn’t spill to keep you safe.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked warily.

“You know me well enough to guess by now, but you shouldn’t think about it,” said Draco. “It will only make you worried and unsettled. You know I’m capable of handling myself.”

Hermione fell silent and lowered her eyes. She knew he was right. The night he tortured Justin floated through her mind and she shivered.

“Good,” said Draco, bringing her hands to his lips for one more kiss. He glanced down to examine them and then frowned a little before gently releasing them.

“What is it?” she said.

“Your nails. The polish has chipped. That means you’ve been working far too hard. This afternoon is going to be for rest and relaxation and a little pampering once you feel up to it, alright? I want you to stay in bed unless you are having a soak in the tub or you’re at your dressing table letting Posy and Poppy treat you.”

Hermione gave him a distressed look, but he put a finger to her lips to silence her.

“Please, little dove, give me this. You have no idea how terrified I was. You were broken, almost dead. I need to take care of you. Let me do it, alright?”

She sighed, but found herself softening. She knew how protective he was and how much paranoia and anxiety he had about her safety. No doubt he was pushed to his limit today when he found her. “Alright,” she agreed.

He gave her a gentle smile. “Very good. Be sweet and cooperate with me for a few more days. It won’t be long before he’s gone, and we can love each other openly.”

“And what should I do while I’m waiting for the Solstice?” asked Hermione with a small frown. “The plan is ready, and if I’m not going to be spying, there isn’t much else to do.”

At this question, Draco’s eyes seemed to gleam. “Perhaps you should start to think about what happens *after* the Solstice? Let’s assume we are successful, yes? Where do you see yourself in a year?”

Hermione blinked. Truthfully, she had not thought of the future very much because the thing they had to do to get there felt overwhelming.

“I don’t know,” she confessed.

He smiled a little bit. “Then perhaps you should think about it while we wait. There’s a trip to Australia in our future and perhaps a wedding or even a baby.”

Her breath caught. “I’m not pregnant,” she said, her eyes wide at the expression on his face.

“No, you aren’t, and more’s the pity,” he said as his hand delicately drifted down over one breast. He leaned in for a slow kiss and then whispered in her ear.

“But one day you will be.”

Hermione’s heart was racing as he pulled away and rose from the bed. “Be extra sweet for me, alright?” he said. “I’ll come home to you tonight, my darling. Don’t wait up, and follow all my rules while I’m gone.”

Hermione felt that familiar ache in her lower belly as he began to step away. In truth, it has been a long time since their dynamic had been precisely like this: Draco in complete control and Hermione soft and fully cooperative, doing anything he asked of her. Right now he wanted to know she was lazing about in bed, behind the strongest blood wards he could erect. He wanted her dressed only in the nightgown he had selected for her, letting Poppy and Posy fix her nails and hair and soothe the soreness on her face. He wanted to be the one on the outside, committing violence to keep her safe to process the fear he had felt for her that day. Then he wanted to come home and find her waiting for him, tucked safe and sound in bed, right where he left her. She knew it made him feel capable, *powerful* whenever he had her like this. He loved it when she asserted herself too, but right now she sensed he needed to be in charge. He had been terrified today — even more than she had been — and he needed to feel like he had everything under his control, including her.

Something about it made her feel nostalgic and wanting. Truthfully, she liked it too. Most of the time she wanted to be her own person and make her own choices, but it struck her that every once in a while she liked to turn all the decision-making over to him. Sometimes she craved being tucked away, pampered and treasured, without any fear or anxiety for her safety. She liked to know that Draco was taking care of things with the Death Eaters, out of her sight so she didn’t have to think about it too closely. Sometimes she even liked being left behind, waiting patiently at home until he came back to her, because once he did he would revere her and show her that she was the center of his world.

She took a moment to honestly assess the way she was feeling right now. She was sore. She was in pain. She had almost died. Her nails *were* chipped and her curls a bit tangled.

Fuck it, she would stay right here and trust that Draco wouldn't hold back tonight when it came time to put on his show for the others. She didn't need to see it. She would give herself a night off to be safe and cared for exactly like he wanted. It might do her some good. Perhaps she would even think about the future he had alluded to. She wasn't too sure about *babies* yet, but marriage? Were they too young? On paper they might be, but Hermione had aged so much because of this war. And once they were married, then maybe the other wouldn't be so frightening either...

Oh she had *plenty* of things to occupy her while she waited for him.

She silently sank back into the bed, and she saw a flash of pleasure and relief on his face as he watched her listen to his orders without further objection. He bent down to give her one more, reverent kiss and brushed her curls with his hand before stepping back.

"I love you," he said simply as he gave her a heated look as he headed back into his old room to floo away. She heard the rush of the fireplace, and automatically Hermione's hands began to trail down her stomach. Somehow he managed to work her up in the last couple of minutes with talk of the future and his expectations for how she was to conduct herself that evening. She was itching to relieve that pressure.

But no. She stopped herself.

I'll be extra sweet.

Hermione spent that afternoon being fussed over by the elves, and for once she didn't allow herself to feel any guilt over it. They gave her a pain potion before nudging her toward the bathroom, where she sank into the heat of the tub after Posy dumped a shocking amount of healing salts in it.

"Master Draco is saying you is to be getting anything you is wanting, Mistress!" she squeaked. "He is saying to make sure you is fully healed!"

Hermione didn't object and just let the salts and hot water work their magic. By the time she finally emerged her skin was pink and pruned, and her palms were going slightly numb from the number of times Draco had cast the tracking spell on her.

It told her just how worried he had been.

He tugged on her magic a few times as well to let her know he approved of wherever she happened to be in their suite. He sensed her relaxing in the tub and then reclining on the chaise lounge with one of her muggle novels and then letting Posy and Poppy fix her nails

and hair and skin. It was a multi-hour process given the number of products they used and the amount of time they insisted she wait between applications so that everything could soak in appropriately.

Her skin was soft, her calluses completely gone, and the whole suite smelled like orange blossom by the time she finally selected her nightwear. She wasn't sure when he would be coming back, but she knew it would be late. She had been worked up most of the afternoon, wanting nothing more than his hands and mouth on her. She thought he might be reluctant to disturb her if she was asleep when he returned, but she knew precisely how to ensure that he woke her up anyway.

She hadn't been in this drawer since their tying, and the white babydoll she selected from it was so sheer she might as well have not been wearing anything at all. It was very sexy, but still had an air of sweetness to it that she knew he would love. She made sure her curls were arranged and her matching ribbon in place before she nestled herself into bed. Eventually she felt her palms tingle one last time and that tug on her magic that told her Draco knew precisely where she was, and he was saying goodnight until he could return to her.

Hermione dozed off, and when she woke up again it was to find Draco straddling her while he cut off her babydoll with his knife.

"Draco," she groaned, but he placed his hand over her mouth to quiet her.

"No talking," he grunted. "You've been teasing me all night while I imagined all the things you were doing. And then I come home to find you in bed like this. You didn't touch yourself, did you?"

Hermione shook her head, and he grunted again in approval as he slipped his knife between her breasts and pulled it forward so the delicate fabric tore with a great *riiip*.

She arched as she felt the air hit her breasts, and gasped under his hand as he slotted the blade between her knickers and skin and then flicked his wrists to cut that off too before sheathing it.

"There. This is how I want you. Soft and bare and needy. How empty are you my darling?"

Hermione just groaned as his hand moved from her mouth to her throat.

"Yeah?" he asked, and she heard a kind of desperate breathlessness from him. "I was going to eat you out, you know, but I think you're wet enough already. And I've been hard all night. I've been thinking about this for ages. Now I want you to open up so I can fuck your mouth before I fill you up and hold it inside of you all night long."

Hermione was exhausted, but she felt herself shudder at his words.

Of course he noticed.

"Oh sweet girl, you need it inside of you. I know you do. And you want it to take, don't you? You've been thinking about it all night too."

“I don’t know,” she groaned, and he just tsked.

“Let’s see how you feel about it after sucking me off, then. Open. *Now.*”

Hermione’s jaw dropped on command, and then he was straddling her face. It was intense, and it should have frightened her, but he could never scare her. Not anymore. She felt his length nudge her lips, and she wrapped them around him, while he held the headboard with one hand and her curls with the other. He groaned and slumped over.

“Fuck, your mouth is so pretty,” he gasped. “It matches your tits and your cunt and now your nails, doesn’t it? Everything about you is pink and rosy and sweet. Take it all in, darling girl.”

Hermione could scarcely move, and she found herself just opening her throat so Draco could fuck her exactly as he wished. It made her eyes water and her jaw tight, but she didn’t want it to stop. She was soaking, *dripping*, and she squeezed her thighs together to give herself some friction.

Draco must have noticed because a moment later his hand was out of her curls and now cupping her cunt instead, drawing lazy circles around her clit that were driving her mad.

“You’re drenched,” he gritted out, as he moved his hips back and released himself from her mouth. She gave a great gasp as she took in more air. “When was the last time you were this wet, hmmm? Exactly a month ago, yes?”

He was staring down at her intently, as his cock bobbed against her chin, and her brain struggled to process the things he was saying. She was too tired, too aroused to have a truly coherent thought like this. But some distant part of her brain knew what he was implying.

“We’re too young,” she said weakly.

“Are we?” he asked. “Are we really? What experiences would we gain in the next few years that we haven’t already had? More death? More torture?”

“I don’t know, Draco,” she insisted, as she wriggled her hips against his hands.

He smiled down at her and brushed her face. “Well it’s entirely up to you, my darling. I’m never going to stop you from preventing, I promise you that, but you also don’t need my permission for it. The day you tell me I’ve fucked a baby into you will be the happiest day of my life, except for our wedding day of course. And I know you’ve been thinking about it, even if you don’t want to admit it. Of course you have. You don’t need to be embarrassed by that. As far as I’m concerned, if it’s meant to happen, it will happen. But whether it does or not, you’re still going to marry me, right? You’re going to let me make our bond permanent? Because that’s the most important thing to me. I want to marry you so I can take care of you for the rest of our lives.”

“Yes,” she breathed, and he rewarded her agreement by sliding down her body and slipping into her. The feeling of having him inside of her made her groan with satisfaction. This was what she needed, what she wanted.

“You’re going to let me marry you soon,” he insisted as he started to move. Hermione was barely listening to him. She was chasing that moment.

“Alright,” she said blearily.

“On the Spring Equinox,” he demanded as he licked his thumb and pressed it against her clit.

“I – *wha?*” she asked, as something in her brain told her she really, *really* needed to focus on what he was saying to her right now.

“Our wedding. We’ll get married on the Spring Equinox.”

“Next Samhain,” she countered. “It will be a year.”

“The Summer Solstice,” he immediately replied. “We’ll kill him in the winter and get married in the summer. The gardens will be at their peak bloom.”

“I – *aaaaagh,*” she said, as he rolled his hips into her harder than ever.

“We’re in agreement then?” he asked. “The Summer Solstice?”

“I – oh, alright,” she groaned, and then he was picking up his pace and snapping his hips into her.

“That’s right. You want to marry me too, don’t you? And now I’m going to fill you up, sweet girl, and I’m going to cast a spell that holds it inside of you all night. I promise I’ll eat whatever is left in the morning off the edge of my knife.”

Hermione groaned. He was so crass sometimes, but it never failed to affect her. She just arched toward him and let him pound her into the mattress, and before long she felt her vision wrenching as she cried out and broke all around him. He hissed as his hips stuttered a moment later, and she felt it all the way into her belly as he emptied himself into her. He waved his hand, and she felt a small tingle around her core as he slid out of her and pulled her to him naked.

“Sleep, my darling,” he said with a yawn. “You need your rest.”

Hermione reached toward her nightstand and fumbled around for one of the bottles inside of it. She gulped the potion and placed the empty vial on top while Draco just gave a disappointed sigh.

“Someday you’ll forget, you know.”

“Perhaps. But not today.”

The Solstice was only a few days away, and Hermione had finished reading every book on her shelf. Draco invited her to pick from his dark books collection in the upper study or ask Posy and Poppy for help collecting anything else she wanted from the library, but Hermione had wheedled a concession out of him.

“I want to browse the library myself, Draco!”

She had told him this with big eyes while wearing a nightgown that was slipping off one shoulder, and of course she got what she wanted in the end. Draco was not *thrilled* that she was out of the special wards in their wing, but she agreed to transfigure herself, carry her wand and knives, and go nowhere else without him or Theo guarding her. It was a bit overbearing, but he still got a haunted look every time Dolohov’s name came up, and Hermione couldn’t bring herself to object to his conditions.

As for Dolohov himself, Hermione wasn’t certain *exactly* what was happening to him. She knew Draco had already reported his death to the Order so that he would have plenty of time to continue torturing him after his pardon was granted.

“Kingsley has to give me a pardon within three days of the Dark Lord falling, or else he breaks his Vow to me,” said Draco. “I need Dolohov to stay in my dungeons much longer than that. I’m nowhere close to being through with him.”

Hermione had certainly not been down to the dungeons to visit, but Draco returned to her most evenings with that faint scent of copper underlying the cedar and spice, and occasionally she heard distant screams drifting up from the cellar a few floors away. Whenever she asked Draco about it, he deflected the same way.

“It’s nothing for you to worry about, my darling. He’s just being punished, that’s all.”

“And how much longer will you keep him alive? After your pardon is granted, I mean?”

“At least until the spring. He has months of this.”

Hermione asked Draco to please place a silencing charm on his cell because she found the sounds disturbing. Draco was very apologetic and assured he would take care of it with their next session.

“Of course, sweet girl, I should have realized the sound would carry. You shouldn’t think of it. I’ll make sure to cast a permanent silencing charm on the entire cell so you can forget all about him.”

That had been a few days ago, and Hermione mostly *had* forgotten all about him, though Draco warned her that ‘Dolohov’ would have to make an appearance at the Solstice itself.

“Mary has brewed polyjuice, and Susan Bones is impersonating him right now whenever he has no choice but to show his face. She has spent so much time around him she’s quite good at it. But of course she will be tied on the Solstice, so we will have to come up with something else for that day.”

Hermione really wanted nothing more to do with Dolohov, and other than the restrictions on her movements she had put him out of her mind. And after the first visit to the library, in which nothing notable happened except for Hermione discovering several new books she just *had* to read, Draco seemed to relax too.

“The Manor’s wards are impenetrable, Draco. I’ll still transfigure myself just in case, but nobody will come here whom you don’t know and mostly trust at this point.”

It was true, and that was why Draco had escorted her to the library that evening while he left to do some last-minute pandering to Voldemort with Theo and Blaise. All three of them had done their best to stay away as much as possible, but it couldn’t be avoided entirely, especially with the tying that would be taking place in just three days.

Hermione had enjoyed a relaxing evening buried in a comfortable reading chair near a roaring fire. The Malfoy library was enormous and filled with dark corners and moody lighting. Magic seemed to whisper through it, beckoning the reader to explore things that were best left unknown. It was almost addictive, and Hermione knew she could happily spend the rest of her life in this place.

She was determined to do just that.

Hermione carefully marked the passage on the book she had been reading and then closed it, placing it on a small stack she had collected for herself. She declined Draco’s offer to bring them back to their room, because she craved an excuse to be here instead. She loved the feeling of magic in this place, all manner of forbidden knowledge at her fingertips.

She checked her watch and saw that Draco was due to return soon. She rose to her feet and started to walk down the corridor with the library entrance to freshen up in the loo, when she heard a voice that made her halt in her tracks.

It sounded like a woman, and she was sobbing, gasping for air as though she couldn’t control herself. It was coming from a small parlor across the hall from the library that Hermione knew Narcissa used rather frequently.

Was it Narcissa?

Hermione touched her hair to confirm that her disguise was still in place, and then crossed the hall toward the parlor. She eased the door open and then stared in surprise at what she was seeing: Pansy Parkinson was sobbing into Narcissa’s shoulder, while the older woman stroked her hair and seemed to be murmuring to her.

At the sound of the door, Narcissa looked up and saw Hermione. They exchanged a tense glance.

The girls had begun to join the wizards for weekly dinners with Narcissa on and off ever since Hermione and Draco tied. It wasn’t every week, and things were still a bit stilted between them, but they had slowly been warming to each other as Narcissa processed her fear.

Hermione was struck by the look on Narcissa's face at that moment: it was strained, troubled, and Hermione thought she saw a glimpse of her old trauma stirring.

"Can I help?" asked Hermione softly.

At her voice, Pansy raised her head, and Hermione had to stifle a gasp. Her left eye was blackened, and her lip was split. Her normally perfectly-coiffed hair was in a snarled mess, and a chunk of it appeared to be missing. When she saw Hermione, her eyes flashed with a mixture of embarrassment, defiance, and urgency.

"I need Draco," sniffed Pansy.

Hermione glanced at Narcissa, whose lips were thinned. In a single look, Narcissa conveyed a message to Hermione over Pansy's head.

Draco can't know about this.

Whoever had done this to Pansy was dangerous, and it might make Draco lose control. He wasn't nearly as protective over Pansy as he was toward Hermione or even Narcissa, but she was still a friend. He was growing increasingly tense as the Solstice approached, especially after the incident with Dolohov. He had to be perfect just a little bit longer. Narcissa didn't know every detail about what was coming, but she knew enough to be worried. In fact, Hermione had the nagging suspicion that only *Draco* knew every detail of what was to happen on the Solstice, but for once she hadn't pressed him to tell her more than he had already shared, because she didn't want to distract him or argue with him this close to the biggest mission of their lives.

Draco couldn't become angry and misstep, not now. The Solstice was only three days away, and too much was riding on it. Hermione tried to tell Narcissa that she understood, and Narcissa's expression relaxed ever so slightly.

She approached Pansy as one might approach a frightened animal.

"Draco is with the Dark Lord," she said quietly. "He's going to be there for a bit longer still. Can you tell me what happened? Perhaps I can help instead."

The look on Pansy's face turned almost resentful as her dark eyes glittered and took in Hermione's appearance: her well-styled hair and expensive robes and jewelry that glinted around her neck and on her fingers. There wasn't a single blemish on her, despite the fact that she was tied to one of the most violent Death Eaters.

"You would never understand," said Pansy bitterly.

Hermione exchanged another glance with Narcissa as she halted in front of Pansy and then kneeled down next to her. She couldn't have said why, precisely, she was doing this. Hermione and Pansy had never seen eye to eye on *anything*. Pansy had bullied her far worse than Draco had, no doubt irritated by Draco's fixation with her. And yet, Pansy was a woman. Whatever had happened to her was entirely undeserved, Hermione was certain about that. And Draco cared about Pansy Parkinson. She was his friend. She had even been his

lover for a very brief period of time when he was trying his best to get over Hermione. He would never choose Pansy over Hermione or even Narcissa, but she was still on that short list of people who could make Draco feel.

Hermione took a deep breath and stared at her old nemesis.

“I understand better than you might think.”

Pansy scoffed, but Hermione raised a hand to stop her. “There is nothing good that can come from each of us trying to outdo the other when it comes to stories of violence and trauma. But I will say – for what it is worth – that there are things about me you do not know. I have been pinned to a wall naked, while a man beat me and tried to rape me. I also had my face smashed in and nearly died at Nott Castle barely a week ago. I know what fear feels like. And I know how much this must hurt. Here, you should take this.”

Hermione fished below her robes and pulled out her necklace with the three vials of phoenix tears on it. She still wore it at all times. She removed the necklace and unlaced one vial, which she handed to Pansy to drink.

“What is it?” asked Pansy skeptically, though Hermione could see from her expression that the stories she had just conveyed meant that Pansy was more inclined to listen.

“Phoenix tears. Drink one vial and then take another one with you to keep.”

Pansy’s eyes widened almost comically. “*Phoenix tears?* But they’re incredibly rare and inordinately expensive and—”

Hermione waved her off. “Let’s just say that I have a source. They are not that rare for me. Drink it. It will help heal your injuries.”

Pansy took the tears with an expression of disbelief. She hesitated for a moment longer and then uncorked and drank it, shuddering just a little as the magic began to work. Hermione watched curiously as Pansy began to glow a little, and soon her face healed and the bruises receded, and even her hair began to grow.

When the glow faded, Pansy was looking back at Hermione with gratitude. But the next thing that came out of her mouth was surprising.

“Who are you?”

Hermione forced her expression to remain neutral.

“I’m Columba Black.”

But Pansy was shaking her head. “No. No, I don’t think you are. There are too many things about you that are off – about *Draco* that are off. I’ve had a suspicion ever since I saw how he treated you at your tying, though I’ll admit I’m not sure how you got the Black family magic to work, and—”

Hermione cut her off with a raised hand.

“Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies. I can assure you that you will know everything very soon.”

Pansy blinked in surprise. “How soon?”

“Well that depends,” said Hermione. “Will you be going to the tying ceremonies at Nott Castle on the Solstice?”

“Yes, of course,” said Pansy.

“Then I suppose you’ll find out by the end of the party,” said Hermione blithely, ignoring the warning look from Narcissa.

Hermione couldn’t say what it was, exactly, but something told her that Pansy would not be a threat. She was purportedly a future Death Eater’s wife and daughter. She would go unnoticed, as most women did in Voldemort’s presence. And as long as she didn’t raise a wand to Hermione or anybody else who would be fighting that day, she should be unharmed.

Pansy fell silent as she contemplated this, and her expression turned brooding as she looked toward the small fireplace that was crackling and enhancing the shadows on her face.

“I don’t want to marry Marcus,” she finally said, without meeting Hermione’s eye. “I don’t love him, but I need fidelity from my future husband. I know he’s been unfaithful, and I can’t abide it any longer. I asked him to break our tie, and he told me he would break my neck if I asked again.”

A shiver of revulsion crawled up Hermione’s spine at this. Marcus Flint was a true bastard. She sensed Pansy wasn’t finished though, and she stayed quiet while Pansy chewed on her lip for a moment.

“I went to my mother first, and she told me I was a fool for expecting anything else from him. She said she raised me to know better than to expect fidelity from a husband like Marcus.”

Hermione’s heart started to truly break now.

“Surely Violet didn’t see you like *this*,” said Narcissa, who sounded very perturbed.

Pansy shook her head. “No. But now that I’m tied and the dowry is ready to be paid, I’m no longer my parents’ problem. I have three little sisters for them to focus on, and my mother is very worried that this next baby might be a girl too. She claims this pregnancy has been different from me and my sisters, but of course she won’t know until she gives birth.”

Hermione frowned at this. “Why does that matter?”

Pansy gave her another bitter look.

“Because while *some* pureblood Houses obviously let girls inherit when there isn’t a male heir, not all of them do. House Parkinson does not. My parents need a boy or else the estate will go to a distant relative when Father dies. They have made it clear that every extra girl is

just a burden because she requires a dowry. My match is done, and Mother says I should be grateful I'm marrying a man who can support me."

Hermione felt a strange rush of guilt at this. It wasn't like she had *asked* for the fortune Draco had bestowed upon her, and after their tying she had mostly stopped worrying about things like dowries and inheritances. She had gotten Draco, and that was all she cared about. She left the details about her new position as a member of House Black to Draco and Theo, who knew those rules much better than she did.

"But surely if you told your mother *this*..."

But Pansy was already shaking her head.

"What can she do? I already tried to break the tie, and Marcus wouldn't allow it. Mother is right that he can support me, but he also wants my dowry. He won't get it until the marriage is done. At least Father had the sense not to give it to him as soon as we were tied... but it does mean I'm stuck because he has a strong motive to force the marriage, whether he cares about me or not. My dowry isn't as large as yours, but it's respectable."

Hermione felt another squirm of guilt as she realized she had no idea just how much gold Theo was putting up for her. Again, it was something she had just allowed her brother and fiancé to arrange between them as soon as Theo insisted upon doing it. She had barely spared a thought for it since her tying, but now she realized the other witches must have been gossiping about it for weeks.

Hermione had been fortunate as a boon, and now she was realizing that she was very fortunate as a supposed pureblood too.

How odd.

Hermione silent as she thought about Pansy's dilemma. Then she chose her next words very carefully.

"Tell me how badly you want out of your tie," she said.

"More than anything," said Pansy instantly.

"And that's why you came here to fetch Draco? So he could kill Marcus for you?"

Pansy's eyes widened, and she gulped. Hermione studied her, wondering if Pansy had really even known *what* she was seeking when she came here. Did she want sanctuary? They could give her that. Did she want advice? They could give her that too. Or did she want Draco to turn violent for her? Did she want to send him out on yet another mission that ended in murder?

Hermione mentally objected to that last thing, not because she cared if Marcus Flint lived or died, but because of the timing. Draco could not be distracted, and they could not afford to have any more Death Eaters go missing. Every one of them would have to be replaced by

somebody in polyjuice during the Solstice, and Marcus Flint was rather high up. It would be Dolohov all over again, and it was too risky.

“I don’t know,” confessed Pansy. “Maybe.”

Hermione nodded a little. “He won’t be doing that, Pansy. Not quite yet.”

Pansy slumped, and Hermione’s heart softened.

“That doesn’t mean Flint won’t die soon,” she added.

Now Pansy looked up hopefully again. “Could he? Really? I know I shouldn’t ask, but—”

Hermione raised her hand to stop her. “You don’t have to explain it to me, nor to Narcissa. Believe me, I know what it feels like to wish the person who hurt you dead.”

Pansy swallowed hard and nodded. “What happened to yours, then? The ones who hurt you?”

Hermione exhaled and wondered just how much she should really share. But something about Pansy was drawing Hermione in. She sensed that perhaps they could warm to each other after this was all over, assuming they both survived it. Besides, she thought Pansy would understand as only a woman who had been hurt like this ever could.

“The man who tried to rape me is dead. The one who smashed my face in a week ago is currently being held in the dungeons here at the Manor, and I’ve gotten the impression that Draco is cutting him apart very slowly, though I haven’t been down to visit.”

Pansy blinked in surprise that Hermione would disclose this. Then she looked a bit wary again, but also hopeful.

“You said the first one is dead?”

“Yes,” said Hermione.

“And was it Draco? Did he kill him for you?”

Hermione cocked her head to study Pansy a moment longer. She glanced at Narcissa, who was listening intently too, but she no longer looked frightened. Her face appeared determined, and Hermione saw the glint of the necklace that told her Narcissa’s emotions would be under control.

“No,” said Hermione. “Or not entirely. Draco severely injured him for me, but then I did it. He was my first *Avada Kedavra*.”

Pansy sucked in a breath and stared at Hermione with wide eyes.

“Tell me how,” she pleaded. “Tell me how to cast it. None of the boys will.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, not entirely surprised at this turn of events. She glanced at Narcissa, who was shaking her head slightly, and Hermione sat back to contemplate Pansy for a moment.

“There’s an easier way,” she said. “All it requires is a little bit of wandless magic, and it will be untraceable. There will be no aftereffects for you either, other than the knowledge that you’ve taken a life.”

Pansy’s dark eyes were boring into Hermione’s now, and she nodded slowly. “Tell me how. Please. I can do a little wandless magic.”

Hermione smiled slowly and reached forward to grip Pansy’s hand. “Stay right here while I run to the loo, and then I’ll call an elf to fetch the supplies for us. And once I show you how to do it, you should stay with us for a few more days until the festivities at Nott Castle. Don’t go back to him until it’s time.”

Pansy looked at her gratefully, and nodded, as Narcissa began to stroke Pansy’s hair again. Hermione rose to exit the room, and as she reached the door Pansy’s voice called out to her.

“Thank you... Hermione.”

Chapter 43: Solstice

The Solstice was upon them, and Draco was on edge.

He had woken Hermione up that morning at the crack of dawn, and they lost themselves in each other one last time before they had to get ready for the things that were coming. Draco was uncharacteristically quiet while he worshipped her body and brought her to completion. There were just soft mutterings of “*I love you,*” over and over again as he took her gently, ardently, perfectly.

She knew what he was doing: he was leaving a memory for her in case he didn’t make it out today. Hermione, in turn, gave everything she could back to him for precisely the same reason. They were both going to be doing something very dangerous today because they were the only ones who could.

The plan that had finally been agreed upon by the six of them and the Order wasn’t *that* complex, but it relied on the element of surprise, and there were still a couple of things they would have to work out in the moment. Draco wasn’t the type who enjoyed leaving anything to chance, nor was she. But there wasn’t anything they could do about it.

Then again, at least they *had* a plan this time, and they would not be running in half-cocked and forced to react as everything went wrong around them. Hermione was determined this wouldn’t be another Battle of Hogwarts. She had been repeating words to herself all day as she waited for the time to arrive.

We have a plan this time.

The Death Eaters have hardly any magic left.

Draco is the Master of Death, and that will protect him.

We’ve both been given blood offerings, and that will protect me too.

We are going to end this tonight.

Over and over again, Hermione said these words to herself. But God, was she getting nervous as the minutes crept closer.

That might have been the worst thing about this plan, she thought: the waiting. Just like her tying with Draco, the ties on the Solstice would take place at sunset. The Solstice was the longest night of the year, so night would arrive more quickly than it had at Samhain. But they still had to wait *all day long* until it was time because their plan relied on the distraction from the celebrations.

Hermione couldn’t stop checking her watch.

At long last, the time came for the first phase of the plan to begin, which was *not* scheduled to happen at Nott Castle, but at Grimmauld Place.

“Are you ready?” asked Draco quietly, and Hermione nodded as they approached his fireplace together, and they floo’d directly to it. They stepped across the threshold to find that the others who needed to be there had already arrived by apparition.

It was a mixed group: Mary and her mother were there of course, but so was Ginny, Blaise, Molly Weasley, Andromeda, and baby Teddy. Blaise and Ginny had been sent out earlier that day with instructions to give Molly, Andromeda, and Teddy a note from Hermione with the address of Grimmauld Place on it so they could cross her *fidelius*.

“Did you destroy it?” asked Draco, without further preamble, and Hermione knew what he was asking.

Did you destroy the note with the address? Is Grimmauld Place still secure?

“Yes,” confirmed Ginny. “We destroyed it as soon as Mum read it. She was the last one.”

“I wasn’t sure if it would work for Teddy,” confessed Hermione, but Andromeda just smiled.

“He needed only to see the words, dear. He didn’t necessarily have to understand them. It worked perfectly well.”

Hermione nodded, and then Draco straightened up and looked sternly at his aunt.

“I really don’t like this part of the plan, Aunt Andy.”

She rolled her eyes, and Hermione knew why. Andromeda and Draco had been arguing about this ever since Andromeda suggested it. Draco had been overruled by virtually *everyone* in the Order and their group of six.

“It’s too late to change our minds now,” said Andromeda. “And anyway, I’m a rather good shot, you know. Nymphadora certainly did not get her dueling skills from her father, I’ll tell you that much. In any event, as soon as Hermione arrives again, I’ll disappear into the fray. That’s always been the plan.”

Draco’s jaw clenched. “But Teddy…”

“Will be perfectly safe here,” said Andromeda soothingly. “We have the ritual to transition Grimmauld Place to him if something happens to the two of you. And Mary and Betty here have promised to take excellent care of him while we wait, not to mention Posy.”

Hermione turned to look at Mary, who was bouncing Teddy on her hip. Hermione still wasn’t exactly certain how it had happened, but Mary seemed inordinately fond of Teddy, and Betty Walsh was smiling at the little boy too.

“He’ll be safe,” assured Betty. “Mary knows what to do to secure this house for him if we receive news that something has happened to you. I promise he will be cared for.”

Draco seemed to be swallowing a lump, and Hermione was too, but they all nodded.

“Now then,” said Betty, as she gestured behind her. “Mary has prepared single dose vials of that polyjuice potion for each of you. We also have the healing draughts you all requested. We have bottled everything she’s made, just in case you wanted to bring the extras with you.”

Hermione peered behind Betty to see an entire sideboard filled with small vials of muddy brown potion. Her eyes widened, and she gave Mary an impressed look.

“Your potion skills are something else.”

“Draco told me you brewed it in second year,” she pointed out. “I’m just trying to live up to the great Hermione Granger. And Mum helped, of course. You know she’s a chef, and she taught me to cook when I was little. There are a lot of similarities between the two skills.”

“It’s true,” agreed Betty. “Of course I didn’t do the actual brewing since I’m not magical, but Mary and I practiced the preparation together, didn’t we, dear? In my experience, preparation of ingredients is nearly as important as the actual cooking.”

She smiled kindly, and Hermione could see Draco relaxing a little as he took in the sight of Mary nuzzling Teddy, and Betty stroking the top of his head. Their godson would be safe here, in an ancestral home that would answer to him as the last male Black if Hermione and Draco both died. Anyone who was magical could perform the blood ritual on him to claim Grimmauld Place on his behalf, and the blood wards would remain precisely how Hermione had left them until he was old enough to change them on his own someday. The only people who could get into Grimmauld Place were those standing in this room, plus Theo and Luna. Even if Hermione’s fidelius charm became diluted and eventually failed, the blood wards would keep Teddy, Mary, and Betty Walsh safe.

“In that case, let’s do this,” said Andromeda, as she stepped forward to take eight small vials of polyjuice for herself, tucking seven in her pocket. It would be enough for eight hours of disguise, which was far more than they ought to need. Molly Weasley did precisely the same thing, and then the two women turned to look at Hermione and Ginny expectantly.

“I want to make it clear that I still do not approve of this,” admonished Molly, but Ginny just rolled her eyes and pulled eight red strands out of her head, while Hermione did the same thing.

“We’ve already been over this, Mum,” said Ginny with exasperation. “Hermione and I have to be in two places at once.”

It was true, and it had finally taken letting Molly Weasley in on the full scope of Hermione’s personal mission to get her to agree to the plan. The fact of the matter was, the Order only had four animagi, and Luna would be out of commission due to the fact that she was tying with Theo during the ceremony that evening. Hermione and Ginny were expected to be there too as the fiancées of Draco and Blaise, but they intended to kill Nagini while the tying ceremony was happening and Voldemort was very occupied.

That meant that somebody had to polyjuice into both of them.

They had gone in circles about who could do it, and eventually Molly and Andromeda both volunteered. Neither one of them were expected to be there as themselves. Both of them felt they could impersonate the individual they were polyjuicing into well enough to go unnoticed until the real Hermione and Ginny returned. Molly knew her own daughter exceptionally well, and Andromeda insisted that she could pretend to be a member of the Black family for an evening.

“I *was* born that way, you know,” she had said, with so much arrogance that Hermione had been immediately convinced.

So here they were, preparing for the two older women to transform, and then they would be escorted to Nott Castle by Draco and Blaise, while Hermione and Ginny left for the rendezvous point with the rest of the Order, which was a spot in the forest, just on the other side of the perimeter wards.

“Here are some extra clothes,” said Hermione, and she and Ginny both held out duplicates of the thing they were wearing.

“Excellent,” said Andromeda smartly. “Now give us a moment, we’ll just pop into one of the other rooms to change.”

The two women left, and Draco sighed deeply.

“It will be alright,” insisted Hermione in a low voice. “I know you care about her *and* Teddy, but Columba Black is really not supposed to be anything more than an accessory on your arm tonight. Andromeda can hold her own if it comes to it, but she swore she would disappear as soon as I returned to take her place.”

Draco said nothing, but his eyes were tight as he nodded.

A few minutes later, the women returned, and Hermione had the very odd sensation of looking at *herself* for the first time.

It’s strange, she thought, as she stared at the face that was hers and the curls that were hers. Their clothing was identical so that they could swap places with each other. Only Andromeda’s wand would be different, but she would keep it holstered and out of sight unless there was an emergency.

“Right,” said Hermione, as she approached Andromeda. “There are a few more things you will need to pull this off.”

Hermione reached a hand toward Draco, and he produced her beaded bag. Hermione rummaged inside of it and pulled out a few items: a basic silver necklace, a ruby ring, and a knife and holster.

“These aren’t magical like the real ones,” said Hermione as she began to transfigure them to mimic the things Draco had given her, “but they should fool anybody who notices them, and the transfiguration should hold up until the Solstice is over. I wear them all the time, and it would give away the game if you didn’t have them too.”

Andromeda nodded firmly and accepted the items from Hermione. Draco raised an eyebrow when he saw how easily she donned the knife.

“Oh please,” she scoffed. “Like you’re the only Black who knows knives.”

Hermione suppressed a grin at this as she then raised her wand and began to transfigure Andromeda’s face into Columba. Hermione had practiced this on Ginny under polyjuice the previous day, and it worked surprisingly well.

“Remember, your transfigured disguise will disappear if somebody throws a *finite incantatum* at you,” said Hermione. “But the polyjuice will still remain as long as you keep taking doses on the hour.”

“I’ve already set my wand to buzz every hour to remind me,” said Andromeda, nodding in agreement.

“Then let’s do this,” said Ginny with some false bravado. “And Mum, *please* do not kiss my fiancé while you’re pretending to be me.”

There was a round of wrinkled noses at this comment that broke some of the tension, and Blaise, Molly, Andromeda, and Draco all prepared to floo away.

“Keep Theo apprised of everything,” said Draco as he pulled Hermione in for one last kiss. “And Hermione... if anything happens to me...”

“I know,” she said softly. “I love you, Draco.”

“I love you too, my darling girl.”

“Then let’s kill him so we can let the world know.”

Draco gave her a final, covetous look, and then he turned to floo away.

Draco didn’t like anything about this. His aunt would be there. His *mother* would be there. His fiancée would be there. Fuck, even *Pansy Parkinson* would be there. And Draco found he cared about Ginny and Luna now too, much to his slight surprise and dismay, along with Theo and Blaise of course.

Every single person who held even the smallest piece of Draco’s heart would be in danger today, with the exception of baby Teddy. And somehow, Draco just knew things wouldn’t go perfectly to plan. They never did, and anticipating every single version of events was impossible.

During his calmer moments, Draco recognized the thing that worried him the most: Hermione's identity. He privately felt that too many people knew who she was. The entire senior Order had been aware of the fact that she was still alive for the last few weeks, and while he knew none of them would betray her intentionally, he couldn't trust them to hold her secret under torture or even active legilimency. And even if the Order managed to keep it to themselves, several people had accurately guessed who she was based on his historic behavior around her and her display of magic at Samhain. Draco knew her identity would not remain secret for much longer, but it needed to stay that way for at least a few more hours.

Hermione had brushed him off every time he mentioned these fears to her, pointing out that Dolohov was still chained to his dungeon wall with hardly any magic left, and she had followed his orders to keep her head down after that attack. Besides, if any others had guessed, what could they do about it at this point? Nothing. They had to stick to the plan, regardless of the risk that she had been discovered.

Draco knew she was right, but he didn't have to like it.

The other thing Draco didn't like was the huge gamble they were taking tonight by doing this during a party. They needed the distraction it provided, but it still carried risks.

Most of the Death Eaters might not be able to cast curses, but they could still disarm. They could still levitate heavy objects and hurl them. Most of them could probably manage a knockback jinx because it was a rather basic charm, and Draco had noticed more and more of them carrying knives like he did over the last few weeks as their magic drained. They wouldn't be harmless, and there would also be a large crowd of people there who were supposedly loyal to the Dark Lord. The six of them and the Order were placing an enormous bet that most of the observers would flee when the fighting broke out and few would actually raise a wand on behalf of the Dark Lord when it came down to it. But Draco was certain that at least a *few* of the people who had been invited to observe the festivities would surprise them.

In Draco's view, Hermione's curse against the Death Eaters had simply evened the playing field a little bit because the Death Eaters still had superior numbers, and many of them were battle hardened and not perturbed by bloodshed. And if the party guests raised wands against the Order too, then they would all be fucked. The thing Hermione had done had certainly not guaranteed the Order a victory.

Draco took one last look at his beautiful girl as he floo'd away with Andromeda, hoping beyond hope that it wasn't the last time he would ever see her. They still had so much to do together – an entire lifetime they still needed to live.

They emerged on the other side of the floo in his old bedroom at Malfoy Manor, and for the first time Andromeda and Molly got to see where Draco and the others had been living since the Battle of Hogwarts.

"It's blood-warded," said Draco tensely. "You won't be able to cross the wards outside of this wing, but my floo is connected to a few places, and one of them is Nott Castle. Theo and Luna should be meeting us shortly."

Blaise tugged on Molly's arm, and they slipped out for a moment so he could show her where Ginny had been staying and training.

Andromeda, however, just settled into a chair in their lab and looked at Fawkes' empty perch.

"Do you know where he's gone?" she asked curiously.

Draco's lips thinned as he turned to study her. "One never really knows with him. He's his own creature. But he is loyal to me, and I've gotten the impression he's been spreading the news."

"The news?"

"Of the Dark Lord's imminent demise."

Andromeda raised one eyebrow in a manner that looked so similar to Columba Black, Draco's heart pinged.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" he asked softly, biting his lip and looking out the window.

"She will," said Andromeda firmly. "I know I'm not privy to the whole plan, but what I know of her tells me she won't fail. She's more than capable of handling herself, and she has you to help."

Draco nodded a little and put his hand in his pocket, fingering the vials of rejuvenation draught that Mary had brewed for them. She would need his magic, and then he might need hers. He told himself they had prepared for this.

The door to his room opened, and Draco looked up to find Theo, Luna, Blaise, and Molly entering. Theo and Luna were both dressed to be tied, and Draco couldn't help but smile a little when he saw what they had chosen. Theo was in red, for power, just like Draco had chosen. And Luna was in blue for peace.

"Peace through power. That's what we are going to achieve today," she declared when she saw Draco eyeing her robes curiously. Theo just shrugged behind him as though to say, *she chose it, not me*.

Draco gave himself a moment to think of Hermione, of course. Would she have chosen blue if they hadn't tied during war? Draco didn't think so. For all of her crusading for the underprivileged, there had always been something in her that Draco saw, which others didn't. She had always craved her own version of power too in her own way.

No, Hermione was always destined to wear white in any timeline, because she had always been destined for Draco and the things he could give her.

Now it was time to use it.

Draco rose and gestured for Andromeda to do the same.

"It's time," he said. "Let's go."

They moved to the floor and moments later were exiting on the other side at Nott Castle, and Draco was immediately struck by the large crowd.

There were hundreds of people milling about, with several elves and even wait staff trying to organize the crowd to move them toward the large field where the falconry normally took place. Draco held out his arm and Andromeda gripped it, assuming a superior look as they slowly walked that direction, until Draco could see the tables spread out before them.

With seven ties tonight, the Dark Lord had ordered a feast. The boons who would be tying had already arrived, and Draco saw them seated near the front, while Theo and Luna made their way toward them to join.

“You chose them strategically,” murmured Andromeda, looking at the Death Eaters who were settling into the high table with them.

It was true. There was Theo of course, but the other six had been chosen for good reason. Mulciber, whose first wife passed away the previous year, would be tying with Cho, who was his former boon. Similarly, Yaxley, who had always been unmarried, was tying with Hannah. Both witches looked exceptionally pale to be seated next to the men who were their former masters, and Draco felt a rush of pity and deep respect for them that they were able to hold their heads high and play along. Dolohov was actually married, though his wife did not live in England, so Susan had been paired with Travers instead. Crabbe senior’s wife had mysteriously died after the boons had been raised, and Draco was sure he knew why: with Crabbe junior’s death, he no longer had an heir. His former wife was too old to have any more children, and he wished for somebody younger. Draco strongly suspected he had murdered her so that he could be given Katie. And finally, Margaret Belgrave had been given to Adrian Pucey and Sally Anne Perks had been given to Gregory Goyle.

All six of those Death Eaters would pay tonight, though they didn’t know it yet.

Draco’s eyes were then pulled to the other wildcard of the night: George Weasley, who was polyjuiced as Dolohov.

It was a risk, because Dolohov was a senior Death Eater and George did not know him well enough to impersonate him the way Susan could. It was also possible he would be injured by friendly fire from the Order if news that he was polyjuiced was not spread successfully in time. The Order’s leadership insisted on waiting until the very last moment to inform the others of George’s identity so that there would be no leaks.

Then again, it was the best plan they had. Draco knew that a few other Death Eaters had been replaced tonight as well, all much lower-ranked than Dolohov and therefore less likely to draw notice from the Dark Lord. It had taken virtually no effort to convince Terrance Higgs, Derrick Boles, and William Vaisey to stay away tonight and donate some of their hairs instead. The Order had snuck in Arthur and Bill Weasley that way, along with Aberforth Dumbledore. Kingsley, Draco knew, was meeting the others whom the Order had recruited to fight at the edge of the forest and would be directing them from there once it was time.

He took a deep breath and made his way to sit next to Theo so he could stay apprised of Hermione’s movements. Andromeda sat on the other side of him, and it wasn’t long before

Narcissa arrived to sit on the other side of her.

Draco picked at his food. He was far too worried about Hermione to eat.

“How is she?” he asked Theo quietly.

Theo paused for a moment and said, “She says they are fine. They are waiting at the meeting point until it’s time.”

“The others are with her?”

Another pause, and then Theo nodded once. “Yes. Apparently they have been recruiting heavily. It’s going to be a good show, mate.”

Draco exhaled in relief to know that they would have some real reinforcements once they were called. It just wasn’t time yet. Much like Draco’s tying, there would be a dinner and then the ceremonies and then finally an afterparty. The Dark Lord would be present for all of it.

“In that case, are you ready?” asked Draco curiously.

Theo looked a little pale, but nodded. “Yeah. I know this is going to be a shit show tonight, but... yeah. I’m finally tying with Luna. I’m really happy about that.”

Draco allowed himself to smile a little, and then he grew quiet, only saying a few things to Andromeda and Theo as they waited for the meal to end and the ceremonies to begin.

At long last night had fallen, and the field was being lit by torches, signaling the beginning of the longest night of the year. The Dark Lord clapped his hand and indicated that everyone should rise and move to a section of the field that was arranged for the ceremonies. Draco, Blaise, Andromeda, and Molly all rose and followed Theo and Luna to the front.

This had been intentional. Technically Yaxley and Mulciber were both higher ranked than Theo, so they would be going at the end. Theo, therefore, had angled to go first, since the ceremonies were taking place at his old estate.

Just like Draco’s tying there were chairs arranged in rows, and there were even goblets hovering near each chair, already filled with mead to toast the couples and the Dark Lord at the end. It was something Theo had suggested after telling the Dark Lord he should make a speech once all of the ties were complete. He could then be toasted as the leader responsible for heralding in a new era of magical marriages and progeny before the reception began. The Dark Lord had been quite taken with the idea, and the goblets were arranged to be suspended there, just waiting to be used by the guests.

The real purpose of the goblets, of course, was to give the boons who were being tied tonight something they could poison. All six of them were wearing Nita’s special rings.

Unlike Draco’s tying, there would be no procession for the witches tonight. With seven couples, they would be moving efficiently through the list to preserve time for the Dark Lord’s grand speech at the end, and there was some concern that the boons might try to flee if

they were given any opportunity to separate from their respective Death Eaters. So Theo and Luna immediately took their place at the front, while Draco placed his hand on Theo's shoulder and Andromeda did the same to Luna. Blaise stood behind Draco and Molly behind Andromeda.

As the words were spoken and their hands were tied, Draco's eyes were pulled to the Dark Lord, who was watching the ceremony intently. The glint of his buckle shone in the torch light, and Draco swallowed hard, his hand itching to pull out the basilisk blade that was holstered to his forearm to just end the fucking thing then and there, but it wasn't time.

No, Hermione has to do her part first.

Then his eyes traveled down the the Dark Lord's robes, and Draco froze when he saw the Dark Lord's wand – no, *Draco's* wand – because the Dark Lord was carrying the Elder Wand tonight, presumably in a show of power for the spectacle he was creating.

Draco's mind began to whirl as he considered it. The Dark Lord did not care for the wand very much, and he had put it away weeks ago. This was the first sighting of it since Draco had learned that it was significant. Could he get it? *Should* he? If the Dark Lord cast a spell at Draco with it, then what would happen?

Would it backfire?

Draco licked his lips, but snapped out of it as the final spell was cast, and Theo and Luna's tie was complete. Theo pulled her in for a deep kiss before stepping back, and all six of them moved to seats near the front as they swapped places with Gregory Goyle and Sally Anne Perks, who was looking pale but resolute.

"He has the wand tonight," whispered Draco under his breath to Theo, who sat up in surprise and narrowed his eyes to see for himself. Then he assumed the expression that he always wore when communicating with Hermione.

"Hermione doesn't think you should go for it," he muttered. "She thinks it will be too risky, and it probably won't work that well for him if he tries to use it on you."

Draco nodded once and stilled. If that's what his brilliant girl said, then that's what he would do. She knew wandlore as well as anybody, and he trusted her to be right about this. They had to trust each other. They had to play to their strengths.

Draco continued to watch, the anticipation building as Goyle and Sally Anne completed their tie. Then Margaret and Pucey stood and did the same thing, and Draco slipped a hand into his pocket to finger the ring that was nestled there, the one that he couldn't wear in front of the Dark Lord, but that was a key to their plan tonight. Then it was Susan and Travers' turn, and Draco continued to rub it a little while his legs bounced nervously.

The timing was absolutely critical.

Susan and Travers were followed by Katie and Crabbe Senior, and Draco exhaled to prepare for what was coming next.

When Cho and Mulciber finally stood to be tied, Draco plucked the goblet that was hovering in front of him and pretended to take a sip. He eased his other hand away from the ring and toward a vial of rejuvenation potion that was immediately next to it. Draco carefully worked the stopper off of it with one hand, and as soon as the binding spell was cast for Cho and Mulciber, he swiftly pulled it out and dumped it into his goblet. He breathed a sigh of relief when nobody but Theo and Andromeda next to him seemed to notice what he had done.

With Cho and Mulciber tied, they swapped places for the last time, and Hannah and Yaxley stood. Hannah looked pale, but fierce, and Draco was once again struck by the bravery of all the boons who had volunteered to serve as the distraction tonight.

As they moved to the front to take their turn, Theo closed his eyes and whispered, "I'm opening the perimeter wards."

Draco raised the goblet to his mouth and drank deeply this time, the potion working its magic to boost him, and he felt almost giddy as it strengthened him beyond what he would ever need as he just sat there, watching couple after couple tie. He sensed that Hermione was doing precisely the same thing on the edge of the Nott estate, and a surge of adrenaline rushed him.

The final spell was just being cast over Hannah's and Yaxley's hands when Theo whispered one more time, "Get ready, mate. She's flying."

Draco released the goblet back into the air. It hung there, suspended again, but Draco no longer needed it. He closed his eyes and now slipped his hand back into his pocket, finally placing the ring on his finger. He felt Hermione tug on his magic as strong as she ever had, and the ring seemed to heat as the protective magic that was now embedded in it swirled with his own. He pushed everything he had toward her and willed his power and the blood sacrifices that the others had offered to do whatever they could to keep Hermione safe and help her with her mission.

He felt another tug and went nearly breathless from their shared power as he felt it finally happen.

Hermione started to breach the snake's wards.

"Are we ready then?" asked Ginny under her breath as she checked her watch.

Just like Hermione, Ginny was feeling exceptionally nervous.

"Yes, we just need McGonagall to arrive," muttered Hermione.

The crowd that had been growing in the clearing just on the other side of the wards to Nott Castle was putting Hermione on edge. She recognized almost none of them, and she and

Ginny were both getting distrusting looks as they stood off to the side and kept to themselves.

Hermione was disguised as Columba for now, but she caught a few speculative whispers.

"Granger?"

"Dark now?"

"Malfoy?"

She tried to ignore it and not let it get to her. Draco had been warning her about this for days, utterly convinced that her disguise would not hold until the very end.

"If Dolohov guessed, then so could they."

"Dolohov didn't guess that I'm Hermione. He guessed that I was the one who cast the curse to drain his magic. There's a difference."

"But he could have! Too many people know!"

Hermione had not shared anything about Pansy's visit with Draco because she didn't want to see his reaction if he learned that yet another person had guessed who she was. Narcissa and Hermione had simply squirreled Pansy away into an empty bedroom near Narcissa, and Pansy spent three days there without Draco even being aware that he was hosting her. He knew she would be at the tying, but that was all.

Between the thing Flint had done to her and Pansy being living proof that Draco was right to be worried about Hermione's identity coming out, Hermione decided that Draco would be better off not knowing.

She would finally tell him once this was over.

She made herself ignore the mutterings of the lower level Order members. They didn't matter. As long as she made it through this first part of the mission then the secret could be revealed.

It was still uncomfortable though, standing apart with Ginny and trying to ignore the suspicious looks cast their way. With the exception of Kingsley – and McGonagall once she finally arrived – the Order members that Hermione knew best and trusted the most were all polyjuiced and inside the wards already.

Kingsley was moving through the crowd, spreading the word about the final aspects of the plan, as best he knew them.

"Do not curse the man who looks like Dolohov. He's an Order member who is polyjuiced. The same goes for Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, and Severus Snape. All of the witches are off limits too, except for Bellatrix Lestrange, unless they are actively cursing you..."

Hermione felt ill. There were just as many people they were trying *not* to harm as those they needed to capture or kill today, but she knew there would be some who were injured or perished anyway.

She just hoped and prayed it wasn't one of their six.

Suddenly there was a *POP!* and Minerva McGonagall materialized in the clearing, looking imperious and unruffled. She looked around until she caught sight of Hermione and Ginny.

"Ah! Miss Weasley and Miss... Black. Are we ready then?"

There were some mutterings from the other witches and wizards who were watching the exchange, but Hermione and Ginny just nodded stiffly.

"As soon as Mr. Nott opens the wards for us, then we will proceed," she said.

"And Hogwarts?" asked Kingsley, now turning to her.

"The Carrows left for these festivities a couple of hours ago, and as soon as they were gone, the teachers announced a surprise celebration for the Solstice in the Room of Requirement. The students will be there all night as a special treat. The house elves have provided plenty of food and drink, and they will be there too. Filius has sealed them in until this over. Nobody will be getting in, and nobody will be getting out until he hears that it's safe for them to emerge. He himself is warded into the Headmaster's office, as the senior most staff member who is left. The castle will answer to him if it comes to it."

Kingsley nodded firmly, and Hermione breathed a small sigh of relief. It was a good plan, and she doubted the students would even be aware that a battle was happening to the south of them that would hopefully kill Voldemort for good.

A moment later, Hermione felt Theo tapping on her bond.

The second to the last tie is about to take place. I'll be opening the wards soon. Let them know.

"Theo is about to let us in," she said. "Everybody get ready."

"How on earth do you know that?" asked Kingsley in surprise, as he began to move into position.

Hermione allowed herself a broad grin and decided it was finally time she could let a few others in on this little secret.

"Haven't we told you? He's my twin brother. We were separated at birth, but our twin bond is very well intact."

Everyone looked surprised, and even McGonagall's eyes widened at this, but her face settled back into a determined expression.

“Well that is quite convenient,” she commented. “We’ll have a means of communication then.”

“Yes,” agreed Hermione. “Now get ready.”

A moment later a portal shimmered into existence, and the anticipation in the crowd thickened.

“Remember,” called Kingsley, “wait until the signal!”

Hermione, Ginny, and McGonagall slipped through first and turned to the left while Kingsley led the others who had gathered to the right. Again, she saw curious and slightly suspicious glances cast her way, but with McGonagall there nobody tried to stop them from separating from the group.

Thank goodness.

“The enclosure,” murmured McGonagall. “Is it close?”

“Yes, just over here,” said Hermione. “We picked an entry point nearby.”

McGonagall nodded once as the three witches moved toward it, anticipation building between them.

“Let’s go over this one more time,” said McGonagall as they settled into step with each other. “I serve as the distraction to draw out the snake. Miss Granger kills her. Miss Weasley is our escape plan.”

“That’s all there is to it,” said Hermione. “Just don’t cross the wards or you won’t be able to get out again. The weak point in the wards is in the air. And I’m pretty sure the enclosure is fatal to humans, so you will be killed if you cross as anything but an animagus.”

McGonagall gave a firm nod as they approached the enclosure, and Hermione threw out a hand to stop them. “We should transform here,” she said. “The enclosure is just through those trees, and she has a connection to You-Know-Who, but I’m not sure how close she has to be to use it. We shouldn’t risk her seeing us in our human forms unless it is an emergency.”

All three women turned to look at each other.

“Hermione, you go first, so we can get the talon covers on you,” said Ginny.

Hermione nodded and pulled out a rejuvenation potion as she handed Ginny her beaded bag. She unstopped it, drank it, and then became Aquila as adrenaline began to flood her. McGonagall gave her Aquila form an appreciative look as Ginny rifled through Hermione’s bag to pull out the case with the talon covers.

“Very impressive, Miss Granger. This should work well,” said McGonagall.

“We need to secure these to her talons with a sticking charm,” said Ginny. “They are filled with basilisk venom on the ends so be careful.”

McGonagall nodded, and the witches made quick work of it. Aquila bristled under the feeling of her claws being contained, but Hermione pushed it away. This had to work.

“You next,” said McGonagall, now looking at Ginny. “We must saddle you up.”

Ginny nodded and pulled her tack out of Hermione’s bag before transforming into her horse form, and McGonagall smiled a little as she reached up and secured the saddle and bridle to her with surprising speed. “A beautiful form, Miss Weasley. You’re ready to go.”

Then McGonagall transformed into her familiar tabby cat, and nodded once as Hermione launched into the air, and the others began to creep forward, toward the enclosure.

As soon as Hermione was clear of the trees she could see it and reached out to Theo.

Tell Draco I’m flying. He needs to get ready.

Done. Go for it, Sis. And good luck.

Now Hermione reached out through her bond with Draco and began to pull his magic toward her. It was strong, almost vibrant, and her claw with the talon cover that contained the blood offering seemed to heat and pulse a little as she sensed Draco’s magic doing the same thing on the other end. They were connected like this, and it gave Hermione a much-needed boost of confidence.

She spiraled high into the air, eyeing the section of the wards with the weak point. She didn’t think she would be able to pass through them cleanly this time because she was wearing a weapon, and there would surely be a ward against metals to prevent any knives or other sharp objects from harming her. But with enough height and enough magic Hermione thought she should be able to force her way through that single weak point.

She kept a close eye on Ginny and McGonagall, who had come to a halt near the edge of the enclosure. Ginny was already positioned to make a run for it, as soon as this was over. Ever since coming up with the rough plan for Nagini, the boys had been slowly clearing a path for Ginny that was a nearly straight, largely unobstructed shot to the field where the ties would be taking place.

McGonagall, meanwhile, split off and walked toward the enclosure, as she began to flick her tail and pace back and forth in front of it.

Hermione held her breath to see if this would work. Sure enough, within moments the snake slithered out from under a rock and moved closer to McGonagall on the other side of the barrier. McGonagall was taunting it, coaxing her to move toward the spot that would roughly line up with the weak point in the wards, where Hermione was circling above.

Good.

Forcing herself through the wards would slow Hermione's dive, she knew, but there was nothing to be done about it. Seeing the snake in position, Hermione took one last breath, shoved the magic from her and Draco *out*, and then dropped.

She hurtled through the air down, down, *down* pushing as hard as she could with their shared magic, and to her surprise the talon cover was now so hot that it was almost burning her as she made impact with the wards.

Shit! she instinctively cried, and she felt Theo's nerves spike on the other side of their bond. There was some give in the wards, to be sure, and she felt herself sliding through them with far more ease than when she had escaped previously as Columba, but she had not accounted for how much this would hurt.

It was like landing on some pillows scattered on the ground after jumping out of a third floor window.

Hermione!

I'm alright, she gasped through her bond. *I just didn't break my dive. Probably should have thought of that...*

She refocused on pushing her magic against it, and a moment later she was on the other side, fluttering to right herself and slightly dizzy from pain.

I'm in, she said, and she decided to give herself a moment since diving toward Nagini from very high in the air obviously had not worked quite as well as she hoped. She stayed as high as she could and saw McGonagall watching her with narrowed cat eyes, but Nagini did not seem to notice that her enclosure had been breached.

Right, thought Hermione. *So this will be a bit more challenging than I originally expected.*

The enclosure's wards were high, but not *that* high. She probably could not get enough height to manage a hundred mile per hour dive within it.

It will be fine, she told herself. *I don't have to be that fast. I only need to be faster than the snake.*

Hermione circled the very top a few more times to line herself up. Nagini was pressing against the wards with futility, as McGonagall sat back on her haunches and just stared at her with the most disapproving look Hermione had ever seen on a cat.

Hermione took one last breath, said a little prayer, and then dropped.

The back of Nagini's neck was hurtling into view, but as Hermione flared her wings at the last second, Nagini sensed her presence and turned her head.

Argh! cried Hermione again, as Nagini's fangs sank into her body, just above one leg. Hermione felt the talon cover grow painfully hot as she wrenched herself away, flapping as hard as she could. She gained a little bit of height and tried again, aiming to get her own claws into the snake, but she wasn't sure if she had done it.

Her body was feeling oddly sluggish as the venom moved through her on the one hand and her talon cover was burning her on the other. She felt herself slowing down in a truly alarming way, and Nagini managed to bite her again, this time near her neck.

Hermione thrashed and managed to break free, but her vision began to swim as the talon cover started to glow and smoke slightly, as pain radiated through her foot where it was attached.

Just kill her first. Kill her first and then you can pass out or die. You have to get her first though. You're the only one who can do this.

Hermione dove in once more, and they were struggling now, fighting each other, and Hermione distantly wondered what it must look like: a snake and an eagle in battle with each other. Hermione's entire body was riddled with pain and heat as they thrashed.

Nagini lunged for her again, and Hermione tried to flutter out of the way, and as she turned she barely registered that McGonagall had transformed back into a human on the other side of the enclosure and was shouting wildly while frantically casting spells toward it.

There's no point, Hermione wanted to say, *You'll never figure it out in time.*

But she was growing lethargic, and she thought the only thing keeping her awake now was that talon cover that was so hot it was scorching her.

She turned back to McGonagall again, but she had disappeared and Hermione thought she caught a glimpse of McGonagall sprinting toward Ginny and quickly removing her tack, but then Hermione lost track of them as her attention was forcibly pulled back to Nagini, who tried to strike once more.

Hermione fluttered weakly to the side, and Nagini was slithering toward her again, when a rumbling in the distance caught her attention: it was Ginny, and she was bare now as she galloped *through* the wards.

Hermione wanted to tell her to stop, but she couldn't. And unlike Hermione, Ginny was no longer wearing any metal, so she was not slowed at all as she encountered the edge of the wards and then passed cleanly through them, before she *trampled* the snake.

Hermione blinked in surprise to see Ginny doing an odd little dance with her hooves on the snake's body. Nagini was biting her too, but Ginny was much larger and was not slowed down like Hermione was by the venom.

Do it, Hermione! Use the distraction!

She couldn't worry about the fact that Ginny was trapped here, not right now. She made herself ignore the pain and the venom that seemed to be pooled in her leg and spreading through her neck and chest. She couldn't think about the burning talon cover and how much it hurt as she fluttered toward the only piece of Nagini she could reach: her tail.

She finally sank her claws deep into the snake's flesh, and immediately it began to burn. Nagini spasmed, and Ginny's hooves found purchase as she stomped on the back of the snake's neck to hold her down, letting the basilisk venom do its job as it slowly worked its way up her body and disintegrated it as though it was being dipped in acid. Hermione pulled away and felt herself swaying a little. She wouldn't be getting out of here, she knew that. She had no energy left to fly, let alone push back through the wards. She belatedly realized that the talon cover must be slowing the venom's passage through her body. She should have been dead already, and it was the only thing that kept her alive through all of this. But the venom was too strong, and Hermione didn't think it could be stopped entirely.

It didn't matter, though. The snake was dying. Hermione had done her part.

Theo, she said weakly. We got her. Nagini's almost dead. You should keep on with the plan. Tell Draco I love him. I love you too.

Hermione! What happened? What's going on?

But Hermione didn't answer him, as she collapsed and everything went dark.

Chapter 44: Beyond

Hermione woke with a jolt to the sound of an alarm blaring.

“Wha?” she said inelegantly as she struggled to push herself up to a sitting position.

Only now did she realize she was a human and staring at Minerva McGonagall’s face.

“Professor?” she asked weakly, though over the sound of the alarm she could hardly hear herself speak.

“You did it!” shouted McGonagall. “You and Miss Weasley both! And as soon as the snake died, the wards fell, and I could get to you! One of your talon covers was smoking, so I took them all off and forced you back into your human form so you could drink this! You’ve only been out for a few minutes!”

She blinked in surprise and saw McGonagall holding an empty vial in her hand. Her talon covers were scattered uselessly in the dead grass nearby.

“Phoenix tears?” asked Hermione more strongly as she stood on shaky legs and turned to find Ginny drinking a vial too, though she was doing it of her own volition.

“Yes!” shouted McGonagall again over the wail in the woods. “How do you feel?”

“I’ve been better, but I’m alive!” shouted Hermione. Then she turned to Ginny, who winked at her.

“You’re crazy!” commented Hermione.

Ginny just grinned but said nothing.

“Yes, and now we *must* go!” called McGonagall over the din of the alarm. “They can probably hear this all the way to the tying! They will send somebody to check on the snake very soon!”

Hermione nodded just as Ginny transformed back into her horse. McGonagall saddled her quickly while Hermione grabbed her beaded bag and carefully placed her talon covers back in their case, and then she levitated Hermione up on top before climbing up herself behind her.

“Drink another rejuvenation draught!” called McGonagall in her ear as she poked the beaded bag in Hermione’s hand. “I’m going to transform to make it lighter for Miss Weasley!”

And a moment later McGonagall was replaced with her tabby cat, as she delicately climbed over Hermione’s lap and settled in front of her near the pommel.

Hermione fished in her bag for a rejuvenation draught and uncorked it, drank it, and then nudged Ginny with her heels.

“Go, Gin!” shouted Hermione, as she pulled McGonagall closer to her, and Ginny took off with a burst of speed.

Only now did she register Theo urgently tapping on her bond.

Hermione? Hermione, what happened? I can tell you aren't dead, but Draco's panicking, and he's about to blow the entire plan apart to come find you!

I'm sorry! The snake got me before I killed her, and I passed out for a minute. But she's dead, Theo! The wards fell when she died! McGonagall was able to get to me and healed me with phoenix tears. I'm a little worse for the wear, but I'll be fine! Can you hear the alarm?

Faintly. The Dark Lord has sent a few Death Eaters to check on it. Blaise and I volunteered, but he wouldn't let us leave.

That's alright, we'll be there soon! Tell Draco I'm okay!

A moment later she felt her magic tug experimentally and her palms tingle. She thought she sensed pure relief on the other end of it, as Ginny thundered through the woods.

Hermione really wished at that moment that she had learned how to ride a horse properly before that night. She had taken a single lesson on Ginny with Blaise and Draco, and it had gone so poorly that they finally reduced it to ‘stand a little in the stirrups and hang on for dear life.’ She did just that, clinging to the reins with one hand and her wand with the other. McGonagall was pressed against her leg, and Hermione was doing her best to wrap her body around the tabby cat to ensure she didn't fall as Ginny galloped far faster than Hermione had ever seen her run.

The journey from the enclosure to the stables, which had once taken them nearly an hour at a stately walking pace, now took less than fifteen minutes as Ginny pounded along the rough path cleared for her that would take them straight to the tying.

They were just approaching the edge of the clearing when Hermione heard a shout and saw a flash of spells that she couldn't immediately identify, and Ginny reared on her hind legs in surprise and an effort to avoid whatever they were throwing at her.

Hermione gasped as she was thrown off balance and flew back, hitting the ground hard behind Ginny. The wind was knocked out of her and she was slightly stunned by the impact. She distantly heard McGonagall give a great *MREOW!* and Hermione glanced up just as the little cat pivoted in midair to land on her feet, before immediately transforming back into McGonagall.

Bloody hell, thought Hermione as struggled to catch her breath and clear her head.

“*Stupefy!*” Hermione heard McGonagall's voice cry. “*Incarcerous! Protego! Bombarda!*”

Hermione stifled a groan as she rolled to her side. Ginny was still in her animagi form and using her legs to kick toward three cloaked men, though all three had drawn knives and were trying to head her off while throwing spells at McGonagall too. In the fray, Hermione couldn't immediately identify them to know if they were the Death Eaters whose magic she had stolen or not, but Hermione heard one of them shout the killing curse toward McGonagall, and she decided not to risk it.

She gritted her teeth in an effort to ignore the soreness from her fall as she pushed up on her hands and aimed her wand at the feet of one who was dodging McGonagall's spells. She sought Death in her heart, pulled on Draco's magic, and cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Her spell hit true, and Hermione felt his magic extinguish as the Death Eater dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The wizard next to him spun to find Hermione scrambling to her feet. She recognized him and realized it was Jugson. She had stolen his magic, so he wouldn't be able to kill her directly, but he seemed to realize that as he began to levitate a large rock next to her. Hermione was just ducking out of the way when McGonagall's voice shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*" from behind him, and he fell too. With his magic cut off, the rock dropped uselessly next to Hermione, who dodged to get out of the way. The third wizard, clearly realizing he was outnumbered, turned to run, but Ginny charged him, and he was brought down too, as Hermione and McGonagall rushed toward him.

"Yours or mine?" asked McGonagall tersely, as she stared down at the man who was groaning.

Hermione didn't recognize him. His magic was fully intact, and he was young. He was most likely a lackey or just a very intimidated young man who had been pressed into service, but they couldn't risk it. Draco, Theo, and Blaise had spent a significant amount of time coaching the girls about this: any person who dared to raise a wand against them or any other key Order member during the battle needed to die. The plan was too important to risk a prisoner waking up at an inconvenient time. The Order's tendency to stun instead of kill had been a major weak point at the Battle of Hogwarts, and they would never get another chance to go after Voldemort again once Draco, Theo, and Blaise exposed themselves. During the few planning sessions she attended with the Order, Hermione knew that the Order was split about this. Snape certainly agreed with the boys' view on this, and McGonagall seemed to be on the fence. However, most of the Weasleys, Aberforth Dumbledore, and Kingsley Shacklebolt had found it to be distasteful. After several rounds of fruitless debate, their six had finally decided they would simply use the approach that worked best for them, rather than trying to bring the entire Order on board with it.

Hermione glanced at McGonagall and saw her face was pale. Evidently she had finally moved off the fence about this and had come around to their way of thinking.

"Mine," said Hermione curtly, as she aimed her wand, closed her eyes and said the words one last time. "*Avada Kedavra.*"

She felt her soul crack and split, and she pulled on Draco's magic, which was practically tingling as it sensed the spell she had just cast.

Hermione, are you alright? came Theo's voice.

Yes. All the guards that came to check on Nagini are dead.

There was a pause, and then Theo reached out once more.

Draco says to tell you 'good girl.' And he also says you should confront it as you ride toward us. He thinks he can help you with the aftereffects.

I will, said Hermione as she brushed the dirt off of her clothes and rolled her shoulders back before mounting Ginny again. McGonagall climbed up behind her, and they exchanged a look.

"It was necessary," said McGonagall. "Mr. Malfoy was correct that we can't risk him waking up and raising the alarm."

"Yes," agreed Hermione. "You must confront the thing we just did while we ride. If you don't, the aftereffects will be worse."

McGonagall gave her a piercing look at this, but she nodded once and then transformed back into her tabby cat. She lightly hopped over Hermione's leg and settled in.

"Let's go, Gin!" cried Hermione, and Ginny took off once more. As she felt the first wave of the aftereffects hit her, Hermione followed Draco's instructions as she faced the thing she had just done.

I am Hermione Granger. I am a murderer. I killed one man to save McGonagall. I killed the other to finish the job. I don't regret it. I would do it again. I sent them through the veil, and I'm glad for it.

She felt an odd, answering presence as she made herself acknowledge it. And then, incredibly, she felt the fissure in her soul begin to knit itself back together.

I've accepted them into the next world and will call them when it's time. They answer to me now. You did well, my darling.

Hermione wasn't sure how she heard him say this to her. Their bond didn't typically work that way. It was very faint, just a whisper of magic, and Hermione shuddered as it passed through her. But instinctively she knew what was happening: the Master of Death sensed them on the other side and approved of the thing she had just done. Their magic was connected, and Draco was using his magic to heal her soul.

There would be no more aftereffects for her. Draco could control it, and he would never let her feel them again.

Hermione found herself smiling broadly at the realization, just as Ginny approached the edge of the forest, getting closer to the torch light that Hermione could see through the tree line.

And now, Hermione decided it was time for the next distraction.

“Finite incantatum,” she whispered, as she pointed her wand to her face. She felt Columba’s features disappear, and her curls materialized around her head and began to fly in the wind.

It was time for Hermione Granger to come back from the dead.

Draco was barely holding it together. He was nearly breathless as he felt Hermione breach the wards of Nagini’s enclosure, and then he waited to feel her magic activate again. It took a few minutes, but then the ring on his finger began to burn hotter and hotter, and Draco clenched his fist in his pocket as he waited for news. He instinctively pushed his magic toward her, sensing that she needed it. But then it grew so hot, that he started to get worried, and he reached out for her magic again to feel it.

The thing he discovered terrified him. It was precisely like that day with Dolohov, when the golden bubbles he associated with her magic were popping in front of him. Draco reached out and seized Theo’s leg.

“Theo!” he hissed, just as the final spell for Hannah and Yaxley were cast.

“What?” he whispered back.

“Check on her!” he demanded. “It’s going wrong! I can tell!”

Theo furrowed his brow and reached out too.

“She’s still there, but it’s faint,” he said worriedly. “We have to hang on, mate. Trust her that she can do it.”

Draco fell silent, watching Theo’s face closely as the Dark Lord stood up and began to make his speech. Draco was scarcely listening, as he watched Theo’s brow furrow and then his eyes widen in fear, and then he glanced at Draco guiltily.

“What?” he demanded. “What is it?”

“She says she loves you,” said Theo softly.

Draco’s grip on Theo’s leg tightened so much Theo winced.

“I’m going,” said Draco quickly.

“No!” hissed Theo, now grabbing him to hold him in place. “No, she’s still there! It’s just faint. Wait for it!”

Draco was sick with dread as he waited and waited and...

“And now a toast!” declared the Dark Lord. “Let us drink!”

Draco automatically reached for his goblet and pretended to drink, while his nerves spiked and his ring burned. Around him the six other Death Eaters who had been paired with boons for their tying were drinking too, but Draco couldn't tell from his vantage point if the boons had been successful or not. If everything went according to plan, the poison that the boons should have released into the Death Eaters' goblets would take around twenty minutes to take effect. They had scoured the library for something that had a time delay for the Death Eaters, but would work very quickly once it finally began. It had been Betty Walsh, of all people, who finally located the perfect brew in one of the more obscure books at Grimmauld Place.

Draco would never forget the determined look in her eye as she shoved the book under his nose and insisted that they brew it. She wanted all of the Death Eaters to pay for what they had done to Mary.

Draco just hoped that all of the boons had managed to spike their Death Eaters' drinks. The Order didn't know this part of the plan because he knew they would probably object to it, but Draco and the others decided that none of the Death Eaters who were tying with a boon should make it out alive tonight. All six boons they had rescued agreed with this position, and they had enthusiastically volunteered to help Draco murder them.

It was the best revenge he could possibly give to them.

The crowd was just replacing their goblets after the toast when suddenly a faint alarm started to blare in the distance. Draco stiffened, and his gaze was pulled to the Dark Lord, who froze, looking in the direction of Nagini's prison.

No. The wards shouldn't be sending off an alarm...

But they were, and now Draco knew they needed a distraction.

Once again, Blaise seemed to be three steps ahead of Draco, because he was already standing up, having obviously concluded the same thing.

“My Lord!” he called, “allow me to go investigate the cause of that sound! Perhaps there is an attempted breach on the perimeter?”

“And me!” said Theo quickly, as he used Draco's shoulder to stand, while pushing Draco down firmly in his chair so that he wouldn't volunteer too.

“No,” the Dark Lord hissed. “No, I think not. I wish for you both to remain here with me. You are too skilled and valuable to me if there is indeed something wrong. There has certainly been a breach of some sort... that is the only thing that could cause the alarm, unless... but no... Surely it was just an *attempt* that has failed...”

He seemed to be talking to himself as he mulled over the spells he had cast and all the things that could trigger his wards to set off an alarm. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

"Jugson! Pritchard! Wallace! Take the path into the forest from the large boulder over there at the edge of the clearing and then immediately return to report back what you find! If we have any visitors who are not already dead, then you will kill them!"

Jugson and two Death Eaters who were so junior that Draco was sure Hermione had not bothered to steal their magic all immediately stood and started to head toward the edge of the field, where the large boulder that marked the beginning of the path to Nagini was located. Draco knew it intersected the straight path that he, Blaise, and Theo had carved out for Ginny in several places, and he hoped that none of the witches would be caught.

Theo sat back down next to Draco, as Draco whispered, "Fuck." His nerves were truly spiraling now.

"And now we wait," said the Dark Lord. "Nobody is to move until I receive a report! I do not care how long it takes."

He lowered himself to his throne, eyes peeled toward the edge of the forest, and all of the guests waited silently too. Draco was chewing his lip, trying not to let his anxiety grow any worse, but he could scarcely help it. He registered the heat in the ring starting to dissipate as it began to cool.

"She's okay!" whispered Theo under his breath, and Draco nearly collapsed with relief. "The snake got her, but she says McGonagall healed her with phoenix tears. When the snake died the wards fell. That's the alarm we're hearing."

"Shit," whispered Draco. "Is she able to ride?"

Theo nodded slightly.

"Then tell her about the others who are coming to meet her. She should do whatever it takes."

Theo nodded again, and they both fell silent as Draco reached out with his magic to find hers. It was bubbling again, growing stronger as the phoenix tears worked to heal whatever damage the snake had caused. Draco closed his eyes and tried to calm his thoughts. His darling girl had done it. She had killed the snake, and he suspected the protection ritual they had done had kept her alive long enough for the wards to fall and McGonagall to get to her. Thank Merlin they had actually gone through with it, because now she was healthy enough to ride on the back of Ginny just as they had planned. The alarms on the wards were an unwelcome surprise, but Draco told himself that Hermione would appear before Jugson and the others made their way back.

And if they happened to run into each other, Hermione would kill them. Jugson's magic would be drained and the others were not nearly as magically adept as she was.

She can do it. She won't hesitate.

It took another ten minutes before Draco felt it: that tug on his magic, but this time it felt different. It was darker, harsher, and he stifled a gasp as she seemed to reach deep inside of

him and tap an ancient well of power that Draco was still only discovering for himself.

She was calling Death.

He knew it as well as he knew his own name. She had just cast an *Avada*, and that meant she had run into the Death Eaters the Dark Lord sent. But just as he knew she had cast the spell, he also knew it was successful. Draco sensed her victim joining the countless others on the other side of the veil.

One down, two to go.

It was curious, indeed. Draco had not cast an *Avada* since becoming the Master of Death, and he certainly had not sensed other souls transitioning. But when he sought them out, he could always find them, hovering close by. And now feeling that *Avada* come from Hermione, who was so closely entwined with his own magic, he knew the moment the spell connected and the Death Eater she had killed was brought to the other side.

He pushed his magic toward her again, willing her to take out the others.

There was a pause, and then he felt it again: her magic pulling on his to help her cast an *Avada*, and then the feeling of the Death Eater she had just killed joining the other plane.

Within moments, Theo was whispering again. “She says they are okay.”

Draco closed his eyes with relief. She must have gotten two out of the three then. Perhaps McGonagall or Ginny got the third.

“Tell her I said ‘good girl,’” said Draco. “And she needs to confront it while she rides toward us. I think I can help her manage the aftereffects.”

Draco caught a curious look on Theo’s face, but he nodded and fell silent again, as he communicated this to Hermione. Draco reached out his magic to find hers, and sensed it altered just a little bit. She had killed again, and her magic and soul were both reacting to it.

No. No, her soul will remain pristine.

Draco couldn’t have said how he did it, but he let his magic wash across hers, finding every little crack and fissure from the things she had just done. His silver filled in the cracks of her gold, and he felt it melt into place as the bubbles started to rise again just like they normally did. Even before he became the Master of Death he had killed so many times that the aftereffects rarely bothered him anymore. But now he sensed that he would never feel them again, and he was ensuring that Hermione – who shared his magic – would be treated in precisely the same way. He was the Master, but she was his. He would never let her soul become burdened by taking a life. She could command Death nearly as well as he could, and he was more than happy to share that power with her.

I’ve accepted them into the next world and will call them when it’s time, he thought to himself. They answer to me now. You did well, my darling.

He felt an odd joy resonate on the other end, and Draco relaxed for just a split second, until several things happened all at once that pulled his attention back to his immediate surroundings.

Crabbe Senior, Yaxley, and Mulciber all choked and collapsed in their chairs at nearly the same time. They were soon followed by Travers, Goyle, Adrian Pucey, and – to Draco's utter shock – Marcus Flint.

The Dark Lord stood in alarm, but then froze as the sound of phoenix song echoed across the field, which was immediately followed by a deep rumbling that seemed to shake the earth.

As if on cue, the entire audience and the Dark Lord turned to look toward the trees where the sounds were coming from.

Andromeda and Narcissa used the distraction and winked out of sight under the Invisibility Cloak that Narcissa had smuggled in, while Luna dropped to the ground and turned into a dog, slinking out past Theo, Draco, and the two empty chairs where Andromeda and Narcissa had just been seated.

And finally, Hermione Granger chose that precise moment to burst out from the woods on the back of Ginny, looking like some sort of divine avenging angel as the rumbling grew louder still.

Upon seeing her in the flesh, Draco turned the ring on his finger three times and closed his eyes to summon an army of the dead, to be led by his fierce girl at the very helm. He pulled on her magic and reached across the veil to pluck them out, and they emerged from the woods behind Hermione, growing brighter and brighter as they continued to appear.

There was Lupin and Tonks and Ted and Colin Creevey and Hagrid. Next came Fred and Lavender and Neville and Justin. Sirius Black, Regulus Black, and James and Lily Potter all arrived together, along with the Prewett twins, Marlene McKinnon, Dorcas Meadowes, Amelia Bones, and Alastair Moody. He called upon Charity Burbage, Cedric Diggory, Bathilda Bagshot, Bertha Jorkins, Marvolo and Morphin Gaunt, Merope Gaunt, Tom Riddle Senior, and Frank Bryce, before quickly continuing down the list of every other named person Hermione and Draco knew of whom the Dark Lord had once killed or had executed, including Moaning Myrtle. There were more than four dozen as he summoned them to Hermione's side, certain that the Dark Lord would recognize most of them.

And then Draco began to call on the Death Eaters too: Wormtail and McLaggen and even Tiberius Nott and Lucius. Then he reached for the Death Eaters whom Hermione had killed in the woods and those who had just been poisoned and found that most of them had transitioned already. He called on them too, and then he called Abraxas Malfoy and then all the way back through the Malfoy family tree, which he had been forced to memorize as a child, until he reached Aquila Malfoy herself. He did the same thing with the Blacks, starting with Walburga and Orion, and continuing back until he reached Columba. She and Aquila shone like the stars as they flanked Hermione and surged forward to keep pace.

And then he called the final three: Ronald Weasley, Albus Dumbledore, and of course Harry Potter. They followed directly behind Hermione, the others falling back slightly so that those

three, Columba, and Aquila, all illuminated her in a halo of light as she galloped toward them.

Hero or villain, magical or muggle, they all answered to Draco now when he commanded them to follow, and within moments, Hermione was leading his army as the rumbling grew so loud that it transformed into a roar, and the ground began to shake.

“What is this?” cried the Dark Lord, as he recognized Hermione and the countless others he had killed. He turned now to look toward Draco and Theo to demand an explanation, fear and shock etched on his face, but they were both already moving.

They sprang to their feet at precisely the same time, as Draco aimed for the Dark Lord, and Theo aimed for Bellatrix. In tandem they unsheathed their venom-laced knives and threw them, Theo aiming for Bellatrix’s heart, and Draco aiming for a much smaller target: the last horcrux on the Dark Lord’s person.

To Draco’s slight surprise, Bellatrix ducked in time, but the Dark Lord did not, and Draco’s blade struck true, as a dark, almost tar-like substance oozed out of it.

The Dark Lord’s eyes widened in shock, and then he *exploded*.

“*WHAT?!*” he bellowed, as the force of his anger became too much, and a pulse of magic blasted everyone back.

As Draco was thrown backwards, he could see Hermione tumbling off of Ginny in the distance. All around him, guests were picking themselves back up as they began to panic and fighting started to break out as the glowing figures of the dead swiftly approached, with the cavalry behind them. Draco saw Kingsley Shacklebolt running into the fray, leading the lower-level Order members he had gathered. Then to Draco's left, George Weasley, still disguised as Dolohov, turned his wand on several nearby Death Eaters.

Severus, too, stood and began to mow down everyone around him, as he fought to move toward Draco and the Dark Lord. In a split second Draco saw flashes of green erupt from his wand over and over again, and soon the guests were scrambling out of his way.

The other Order members who were polyjuiced stood too and began to let spells fly, though they were red and not green.

Draco's lip curled. He had been arguing with them for *weeks* about their approach. They were perfectly happy to use Draco, Theo, Blaise, and Severus to do their dirty work for them, but none of them wanted to get their own hands dirty. The Order's leadership hid behind piety and self-righteousness, and it was the entire reason they had lost so many people at the Battle of Hogwarts in the first place.

Now they were doing it again - aiming to stun and not kill - but Draco pushed his feelings about it aside. He knew that Theo, Blaise, and Severus would not be so generous, nor would Ginny and Luna once they arrived. Hermione had already killed twice tonight, and he knew she wouldn't hesitate to do it again if it became necessary, though for this next part she really needed to *hide* so he could concentrate.

Despite the weakness of their spells, the Order was making slow progress as they tried to clear the crowd. Draco ducked down, hidden for a moment in the mass of bodies and panic as he eyed the Dark Lord and began to crawl toward him.

As he approached, he saw that the boons had gotten to their feet too, all six of them grabbing the wands from their former fiancés, all of which bent to their will without question. They had each murdered the wands' former masters, and just as Hermione had predicted, those wands had shifted loyalty to each of the boons without any hesitation whatsoever. They began to fight with the Order, and Draco was shocked to see Pansy fighting as well in his peripheral vision, the figure of Marcus Flint next to her slumped and clearly dead. To Draco's enormous relief, the spells leaving the boons' wands were green. They weren't a strong green - in a single glance it was obvious to him that none of them had successfully cast an *Avada* before - but the others around them were taking note and were scrambling to get out of the way.

Draco knew the boons were done. They were all just *done* with the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord and being treated as nothing better than a hole to fuck. He caught a flash of Pansy's face and could see that she felt precisely the same way, though in her case he wasn't certain why.

I'll need to ask Hermione about that, he thought as he winced a little. His side was aching from the blast.

Fawkes cried out once more, and then Draco glanced up, and he finally saw it: the source of the rumbling.

Fawkes had promised Draco this, in that odd way they could communicate. He had been traveling far and wide, alerting the magical creatures that the Master of Death had been found and would soon be challenging the Dark Lord, who had ruined the balance of magic in the forests and glades. He told Draco that the creatures would arrive, but even Draco had not been expecting this. The source of the rumbling were dragons, which were casting an orange glow across the field as their flames lit the sky. And astride the dragon in the very front was a man with shocking red hair.

Fawkes had finally found Charley Weasley.

From another side of the forest emerged the centaurs, which were led by Draco's former Divination professor at Hogwarts, and the Veela came from the northern side, with Nita in front. Finally, Luna Lovegood had transformed back into her human form, and she was flying through the air, astride something so dark it appeared to be nothing more than a shadow. Draco sensed that these creatures would answer to him with almost as much loyalty as Fawkes because they connected to Death so closely.

They were thestrals of course.

Draco had only seconds to marvel at Fawkes' resourcefulness before his attention was pulled back by the Dark Lord, whose eyes were locked on Draco now and striding toward him.

"*TRAITOR!*" he bellowed.

He raised the Elder Wand to cast a spell that emerged in a poisonous green, and Draco instinctively rolled and ignored the screaming pain in his side as he leapt to his feet, pulling his hawthorn wand from its holster as he did so.

They began to duel, their spells being cast in a rainbow of colors – some of which Draco recognized, and others which he did not. The ring with the Resurrection Stone began to heat, as the Dark Lord's spells seemed to miss him by a hair's breadth. Draco didn't know if it was because the blood magic on the ring was protecting him or if it was the fact that he was the true master of the wand the Dark Lord was wielding. Whatever the cause, it was giving him enough of an advantage that Draco was holding his own.

They continued to parry, until Draco's attention was pulled by a duel taking place just in his peripheral vision: it was Theo and Bellatrix, who were dueling viciously, green *Avadas* being thrown around by Bellatrix with reckless abandon.

"You tortured my sister, you bitch!" he heard Theo cry, before he aimed a *cruciatius* at her, which she deflected with a sneer.

"What sister?" snarled Bellatrix, and Draco sensed the Dark Lord's attention being split as well, as he listened for the source of this betrayal, while still casting a furious string of spells at Draco as he did it.

"MY TWIN SISTER!" Theo bellowed. "HERMIONE GRANGER!"

A look of shock crossed Bellatrix's face, as Theo shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Bellatrix dodged at the last possible moment, and the spell hit one of the guests on the edge of the fighting, whom Draco thankfully did not recognize.

"You're a mudblood!" cried Bellatrix, and to Draco's slight surprise, this seemed to enrage her more than Theo's attempts to kill her in the first place. She picked up her pace, and Draco could see Theo slowly being forced to back away as her spells started to overwhelm him, until Blaise jumped in from nowhere and began to duel next to Theo.

Just like the Dark Lord and Draco, Bellatrix was evenly matched with Theo and Blaise together, and both duels were now taking place in the center of other, smaller skirmishes, as the Order and the magical creatures subdued the other Death Eaters and herded the bystanders into a huddled mass, many of whom Draco saw had their hands up in surrender.

Charley and the dragons were soaring around the perimeter, cutting off any point of escape with a ring of fire along the edge that nobody would be able to cross while the antiapparition wards were up. The centaurs were firing arrows into the crowd, and Draco could see a few of the Death Eaters who were trying to get to the Dark Lord fall. Luna and the thestrals were diving from the air, encircling the guests who were eyeing the flames as though they might risk running through them to flee.

And growing ever closer, was Hermione, who was on foot now, the bright light of the dead that Draco had summoned closing in all around the two duels taking place to separate them from any other fighting closer to the perimeter of fire.

Draco willed Hermione to stay back, as she had promised, and he gritted his teeth and bore down on his duel with the Dark Lord. He had to trust that Blaise and Theo could manage Bellatrix two against one, because he could not afford any distractions, as spell after spell missed their target.

Draco could scarcely believe just how skilled he was. He knew the Dark Lord was powerful, but he had never seen *this*. He dueled almost effortlessly and called on magic that was unrecognizable, though surely deadly.

But Draco had skills too, and between his natural abilities and the way he had stacked the deck for himself with the Hallows and blood magic, he was well matched. The Dark Lord was clearly growing frustrated as his spells also failed to land. They were in a stalemate, and Draco sensed it would only be broken by a moment of distraction from one of them, and he just prayed it would not be him.

But no sooner did Draco have the thought than his concentration was shattered by Bellatrix, who cast an *Avada* that flew so close to Blaise, Draco cried out in alarm.

A spell that was as cold as ice grazed Draco's bicep, and he gasped as the ring instantly began to heat, fighting whatever thing the Dark Lord had just done to him. He felt his arm becoming increasingly useless as he tried to keep pace. Draco made an effort to refocus on his own duel, but it became impossible between the searing pain in his arm and Nita, who had been rushing toward their duels, with the Veela behind her.

She reacted violently to the spell that had just nearly killed her son.

With a great screech, Nita sprouted wings and a beak, as did several of the other Veela near her, and together they began to summon balls of fire to throw toward Bellatrix.

Blaise and Theo scrambled back as the Veela closed in, but it was the cry of two familiar voices that truly pulled Draco's attention away from his own duel.

"Hey! Bella!" came the voice of Columba Black, who was pulling the cloak off of her and Narcissa as Bellatrix whipped around.

Oh fuck, Aunt Andy and Mother are still here.

"Say hi to Father, won't you?" sneered Narcissa, as together she and Andromeda - who was still polyjuiced and transfigured - raised their wands.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" they shouted together. They were so close they could not miss, and less than a second later Bellatrix finally fell. The Veela descended upon her and began to tear her body apart, as the Dark Lord spun around in rage and hurled a spell toward Draco's mother and aunt. It was blocked only by Severus, who burst out from nowhere and shoved them out of the way as he cast toward the Dark Lord wildly. The Dark Lord snarled at this second betrayal and began to duel Severus, who was drawing him away from Narcissa and Andromeda.

His aunt and mother were on the ground in a tangle of robes and limbs, but they soon managed to extricate themselves, and then Narcissa grabbed the Invisibility Cloak and threw it over both of them. They disappeared from sight once more. Breathing a small sigh of relief, Draco used the moment of distraction from Severus to quickly down some phoenix tears he had been wearing to counteract whatever magic was making his wand arm go limp. He felt it tingling and begin to heal, just as the Dark Lord landed a violent blue spell on Severus that Draco didn't recognize. Severus crumpled, and Draco's stomach lurched. He didn't care about Severus Snape, not really. He had never been warm, and listening to him condemn Hermione in the Order meeting that day had destroyed whatever fondness or loyalty Draco had for the man, or so he thought. But seeing him save his mother and aunt and then fall in their stead dislodged something inside of Draco.

It hurt far more than he expected it to, and Draco instinctively reached for him on the other side to see if he had transitioned.

Severus wasn't there.

He's still alive, then. It wasn't instant.

Nearly the moment he had the thought, the Dark Lord turned back to Draco with a snarl. As soon as his back was turned, Draco saw Severus disappear into thin air behind him.

Mother has him.

He forced his concern for Snape out of the way. Narcissa and Andromeda were both wearing phoenix tears just in case, and Severus was wearing some too. If they could force a vial down his throat before he died then he would make it. And if not, there wasn't anything Draco could do about it at the moment. There was a much bigger problem facing him than the death of Severus Snape.

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed red in the night, and they began to duel once more.

It was just them, now, and Draco willed every other person to stop fighting and just stay away. He reached for Hermione's magic and found it still bubbling merrily, so that meant she was alive and standing back to give him her power, just as they had planned. His mother and aunt were still alive under the Invisibility Cloak, and out of the corner of his eye he could see that Theo and Blaise were now being guarded by the Veela. He had to trust that the people he loved were as safe as they could be because he could not afford any more distractions.

He had to finish this.

Almost as if sensing that the end was nearing, the Dark Lord's spell work picked up. He began to hurl spells at Draco so quickly that the Elder Wand was a blur, and Draco was forced to duck and dodge while parrying, and he could scarcely get his own spells in.

"She's coming!" came Theo's voice from behind him, and Draco tried not to let his heart fail at this.

No! She couldn't come! She's supposed to stay safe and hidden for this part so I can use her magic!

Up to this point she had been doing exactly as she was told. She came barreling out from the woods and gave him the distraction he needed to destroy the last horcrux. Then she had led the dead to them, which helped separate the duel with the Dark Lord from innocent bystanders who were terrified of what they were seeing. The brightly lit souls of the dead that Draco had summoned were slowly circling the duel between Draco and the Dark Lord, and though they were not physically *there*, they were doing an excellent job of keeping nearly everybody else out.

From the moment the dead arrived with her, she was supposed to *stay away*. They had fought about this part of the plan bitterly, but Draco had won in the end when he pointed out that *he* had the best shot of ending it, and *she* would be his biggest distraction if she was in danger.

But of course she was going to break their deal and intervene. Draco couldn't see her in the dark, but she could surely see him, illuminated by the internal light of the dead all around them. She must be able to see Draco's energy flagging, and even if the Dark Lord would not be able to *Avada* him with the Elder Wand, he could obviously cause real damage with it. And as soon as the Dark Lord realized that the wand was the problem, he could simply pull out his yew wand and take Draco out that way instead.

Draco tensed as he waited for her to run through the barrier of the dead and join him at his side.

But of course his darling girl had other plans instead, and if Draco hadn't been so exhausted he probably would have thought of this himself.

As the night air was lit with the dragons' fire to keep the fighting contained and the glow of the dead all around them, Draco had an excellent view of her as soon as she came within eyesight. This time, Hermione was not hemmed in by wards above her, and she used the height to her advantage as she came hurtling down from the air as Aquila so fast she was nothing more than a blur.

The Dark Lord, of course, did not know that she was Draco's eagle, so he saw nothing coming as she hit him from above, flying nearly two hundred miles per hour. As the Dark Lord extended his wand toward Draco to cast another spell, she sank her talons into his wand hand and *ripped*.

The Dark Lord gave a bellow of pain, as she pulled off a piece of his hand and fingers that were clutching the Elder Wand. Draco only had a split second to register the fact that her talon covers were missing, before she flew toward him and dropped the wand near Draco. Then she took a few more great flaps to get airborne again.

Draco's heart seized as he realized what she had just done: the Elder Wand was now *right there*.

Draco dove for it, but before he could grab it, he heard the thing that made him freeze with fear.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” cried the Dark Lord, and Draco looked up to see that he was now aiming his yew wand with his non-dominant hand not at Draco, but at the form of Hermione, who was flapping hard to gain height.

“*HERMIONE!*” bellowed Draco, as the green spell flew toward her.

With a flash of fire, Fawkes appeared immediately in front of it, and the spell hit him, instead. He disappeared with another flash, and Draco blinked in surprise. He reached out and still felt him there, but he was younger now, and he would be of no more use in a battle like this until he grew up again.

“Get her out of here!” Draco shouted, hoping that Theo would hear him. He reached out for her magic and found it again, as he threw himself toward the Elder Wand and grabbed it for the first time.

The moment his hand closed around it, there was a rush of power, and wind began to blow through the field, making the flames from the dragons on the perimeter grow bright. Time seemed to stand still as Draco felt it connect, and suddenly he knew that this would end within moments.

The Dark Lord was pointing his yew wand at Draco, but he had fallen silent and was oddly frozen, his red eyes wide as Draco slowly stood. The army of the dead that had been circling them came to a halt, and Draco sensed Potter and Dumbledore step forward to flank him on either side.

“It is time, Tom,” said Dumbledore calmly.

The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed. “How?” he hissed.

“Oh, just a bit of magic,” said Dumbledore blithely.

“You’re dead,” he declared, and he glanced around at the others. “All of you are dead.”

“Certainly,” said Dumbledore. “It’s not so bad, you know.”

“Though I imagine Malfoy will be sending you some place far away from us,” chimed in Potter. Then Potter turned to look at Draco. “*Please*, Malfoy... don’t send this arsehole to us for all of eternity.”

Draco just broke into a slow smile. “For once, Potter, we are in agreement.”

The Dark Lord opened his mouth to say something else, but before he could utter another word, Draco pulled Hermione’s magic as hard as he could and struck.

He called upon Death, not with an *Avada Kedavra*, but as Death’s own Master. His instructions were simple: take the Dark Lord with you and send him to a place where the others will not be disturbed.

Finally aided by the Elder Wand, Death answered Draco's command. Each of the dead that Draco had summoned with the Resurrection Stone now walked into him, and as they passed through him he felt them – not their bodies, but their souls.

He felt Potter's bravery and Dumbledore's intellect and Fred's mischievousness and Ronald Weasley's desire to belong. Even the Death Eaters who walked into him left something behind, and he felt Wormtail's regret and McNair's thirst for blood and Lucius's arrogance.

It happened in seconds as they rushed him, and Draco saw a flash of each of their lives as they moved inside of him, and then pushed outward through his wand.

The thing that emerged from the Elder Wand was Death itself, an enormous creature that spilled forth, bright white and made up of the souls that Draco had summoned for this task. Together they formed a monster, something fierce and grotesque, and it enveloped the Dark Lord, who was screaming as they began to consume him.

Draco felt it the moment it happened: when the Dark Lord transitioned to the plane where Potter and Dumbledore dwelled.

But Potter had made a request, and Draco intended to honor it. He and Potter had almost never seen eye-to-eye while the other wizard was alive, but over the past weeks Draco had called upon him rather often. They talked about the plan and the Hallows, theorizing together the best way to take the Dark Lord out. In doing so they had gained a mutual respect for one another as they confronted their shared goal and their love for Hermione that linked them. Harry Potter had only asked Draco for two favors, once in life and now once in death: to take care of Hermione and to send the Dark Lord someplace else.

Draco was committed to making sure the Dark Lord would never disturb the living *or* the dead again.

It was instinctive magic, and Draco would never be able to say how he did it, but he felt something crack behind the veil. It was a chasm, so deep and dark that anybody who fell into it would be lost in the Beyond. Draco sensed that could send every bit of the Dark Lord there if he wished: his physical body, along with his soul, and even his memory. He could make it as though the Dark Lord had never existed. Draco debated it with himself for just a split second, but then settled on just sending the soul.

Draco concluded that the Dark Lord's body and memory could be useful, after all. The first would prove he was dead. And the second would ensure that a wizard like him would never rise so high again.

In the land of the living, the summoned who had become Death itself passed into the Dark Lord and took his soul across the veil with them. And once they arrived, Draco opened that chasm to the Beyond, and Death pushed the Dark Lord into it. His cries as he fell grew fainter and fainter, until he was nothing more than his body and memory on earth. Draco sealed the Beyond to keep him there forever, and then his eyes flew open as he gasped.

He found himself flat on his back, staring up into the night sky. Hermione was hovering over him, her hands gripping his face, her eyes terrified as she stared down at him worriedly.

“Draco?” she said frantically. “Draco, can you hear me?”

“Of course, little dove,” said Draco cordially, before magical exhaustion consumed him.

His last thought before his eyes rolled back was of Hermione.

I did it for you, my darling.

And as soon as the thought passed through his mind, he submitted to the weariness pulling him under.

He gave a deep sigh, and then Draco Malfoy fell asleep.

Chapter 45: Pardon

Hermione was clutching Draco, cradling his head in her lap as tears rolled down her cheeks. She didn't know if they were from relief or fear.

The last few minutes had shocked everyone, even her. Hermione knew that Draco could recall the dead – the plan hatched between them was that Hermione would lead however many Draco could raise, as though he was summoning an army. They were sure it would give him the distraction he needed to pierce the horcrux. They had *hoped* it would be enough of a distraction for an *Avada* too, but there was no such luck. As soon as Voldemort realized his horcrux was gone, his magic blasted everyone back, with a ripple effect that reached all the way to Hermione and Ginny. Ginny stumbled, and Hermione was thrown *again*, before they both found themselves gasping for breath in the dirt.

Only McGonagall landed on her feet.

Without even talking about it, McGonagall and Ginny both transformed back into themselves, and they entered into the fray, while Hermione made a beeline directly for Draco. She saw him dueling fiercely in the distance as she shoved her way through the crowd. The dead had come with her, and they helped clear her path until Draco called them to surround him and Voldemort, effectively cutting off anyone from helping.

It was only then that Hermione had noticed Theo and Blaise dueling Bellatrix, and her heart was in her throat.

Through all of it, Hermione was not hiding as she was supposed to. She soon found herself side by side with Ginny, McGonagall, and George Weasley whose polyjuiced form made her shudder. Together they guarded the perimeter that had been formed by the dead and cut down anybody who approached, until Blaise had such a near miss from Bellatrix that Ginny gasped, and the Veela intervened.

This they did not try to stop. They couldn't have done it even if they wanted to, and for once Hermione did not mind the blood as she watched Narcissa and Andromeda appear from nowhere to kill Bellatrix before feeding her body to the Veela.

It had been both horrifying and cathartic to witness, but Hermione did not have the time to dwell on either feeling because then it was just Draco and Voldemort. Their fight was fierce, but they were too well-matched. She could see Draco's energy being sapped, so she did the only thing she could think of: she became Aquila once more and dove for the wand that would have the power to end things.

The moment Fawkes saved her, Hermione had nearly fallen out of the sky in surprise, and as she held Draco near her, she cradled baby Fawkes too, who was nestled into her and singing in a high-pitched coo.

But as surprising as Fawkes' intervention was, nothing had prepared her for feeling Draco's power bloom as soon as the Elder Wand was in his hands. It was dark, ruthless, and utterly controlled. Hermione felt it bleed over through their bond, and it made her feel almost drunk on the residual power he seemed to shed. It was strange, but the moment it happened her fear for him evaporated.

She knew he could end Voldemort. He wouldn't even need to land a spell on him to do it. He finally had the Hallow that could call Death in his grasp, and he could have taken as many lives as he wanted with it in a single instant.

She thought it showed remarkable restraint and maybe even a little personal growth that Draco only aimed it toward a single person.

When he finally opened his full power and pulled on Hermione's too, her vision swam, and she fell to her knees. She barely felt Theo holding her up as Draco channeled everything into pushing Voldemort *out*.

Where he went, she couldn't be certain – but she could sense enough of Draco's power to know that it was someplace dark, permanent, and inescapable. It was not a place he would ever send her, nor any other person.

It was Beyond death, and the void that opened up in her chest as soon as it happened was terrifying.

And then she felt that void slowly close, and the moment it was sealed, Hermione opened her eyes to find Draco falling to the ground.

"DRACO!" she screamed as she shoved Theo aside and scrambled to her feet, running to get to him before anybody else could.

She flung herself on top of him and clutched his face.

"Draco?" she said frantically. "Draco, can you hear me?"

"Of course, little dove," he said, just as his eyes rolled back, and he fainted.

That had been more than twenty minutes ago, and Hermione was still here, clinging to him, checking his magic every minute or so to make sure he was alright. She hoped it was just exhaustion and nothing more serious. She took the wand from his hands and hid it in her robes. Then she settled in with his head in her lap and stroked his hair, giving fierce glares toward anybody who looked like they wanted to interrupt.

Standing over her were Theo and Blaise, both of whom had their wands drawn. They were facing out and guarding them. In the distance, Hermione could see the dead being gathered in one section of the field and the injured in another. She caught a flash of Susan Bones' face among the dead, and her heart clenched. Susan had helped them. Susan had been brave. Susan had died.

It wasn't fair, and almost just as bad was the guilt she felt for the sheer *relief* to know that the five people she cared about most had made it through.

Ginny had checked in for a few minutes and brought more news - the Weasleys had all made it this time, but the Order had suffered a few surprising losses, including Dedalus Diggle and Hestia Jones. Hermione tried to care about it, but she couldn't. She was too worried about Draco, too *tired* to feel anything for anybody except a dull sadness for Susan.

Ginny then moved off, and Hermione watched her help direct the evacuation effort with Luna, who was still astride her thestral. In another section of the field, Hermione could see members of the Order interrogating guests, handing each one small vials of something to drink.

It was veritaserum – large quantities of it, which Mary had been brewing for the duration of her stay at Grimmauld Place. The border of fire the dragons provided had been unexpected, but Hermione knew it was perfect for what the Order had hoped to accomplish tonight. Every single person there who was not already an Order member would be interrogated to determine their loyalty to Voldemort before being released. Those who were Death Eaters and others who had committed crimes in his name would be apprehended. There was no way out other than by air, and Hermione's heart lifted to see Charley Weasley in the distance keeping the dragon fire border intact, while Luna and Ginny were managing the thestrals. Only those who had been cleared by the Order would be allowed to fly to the other side of the fire.

The Veela and the centaurs were in a group nearby, giving Draco some distance, but still keeping watch. They had come for him. All the magical creatures had come for him, and they would pose no threat to him, nor to her. Draco had made some cryptic statements about Fawkes being very busy in the lead up to this day, but she suspected that even he was surprised by how many arrived.

She was pulled out of her reverie by the sounds of shouting.

“I AM NOT A DEATH EATER!”

She squinted, to make out the forms in the flickering light, and then she gasped when she saw Pansy Parkinson being apprehended.

“Stay with him,” she said to Theo and Blaise, as she gently maneuvered herself out from under Draco and rose to stride over. She caught Theo and Blaise exchanging looks as she moved past them, but to her relief they stayed by Draco's side.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Hermione as she strode forward. Pansy looked up at her with wide eyes and a tear-streaked face as magical cuffs glowed on her wrists. Hermione could see her clothes were dirty and her lip cut, as though she had been part of the fighting.

Two members of the Order Hermione did not recognize looked at her with wide eyes.

“She's engaged to a Death Eater,” said one of them. “She's—”

“Helped our side by eliminating him,” said Hermione coldly. “Or didn’t you ask her the right questions?”

“But—”

“Release her now, or I will do it myself.”

“You don’t have any authority to—”

Hermione felt something inside of her snap. The fear, the worry, the sheer exhaustion of the last few hours just pushed her beyond reason as she drew the Elder Wand out of her robes and aimed it right at them both.

“This wand just sent Voldemort to some place that was beyond Hell,” she hissed. “And it will answer to me because I am bonded with its master. Now listen to what I am saying because if you do not follow my instructions *right now*, I will open the void and send you there to be Voldemort’s entertainment for all of eternity. I am certain I can do it.”

Their eyes were huge, and Hermione sensed them trembling, but she didn’t care.

“You will release Pansy Parkinson,” she said coldly. “And you will inform Kingsley Shacklebolt that she is to be cleared of any crimes, as she was an undercover Order operative that turned for our side and eliminated a dangerous Death Eater at great personal risk to herself. If I hear even the slightest rumor that she is being harassed for the things that happened here today, I will assume you are both personally responsible and make good on my threats.”

They both swallowed hard, but nodded once.

“Good,” she said. “Now tell me your names and then release her.”

“Paul Bryson,” said the smaller of the two men.

“Harold Pierce,” said the other.

“Thank you,” said Hermione cordially, though she hadn’t moved the wand at all. “Now let her go.”

The man named Paul stepped forward and tapped his wand on the cuffs to release them. Pansy stepped toward Hermione, rubbing her wrists a little, and Hermione reached out with her free hand and took one of Pansy’s to pull her close.

“Now get back to what you were doing,” said Hermione. “And next time you need to ask better questions before you arrest an innocent woman.”

The two men scowled at her, but said nothing, as Hermione tugged on Pansy’s hand and led her back toward Theo and Blaise, who had been watching everything cautiously.

“Thank you,” said Pansy stiffly.

“Don’t mention it,” muttered Hermione.

“They were part of the Order,” said Pansy, now sounding both awkward but also a little intrigued.

Hermione shrugged. “I have a love-hate relationship with the Order. I’ll admit that using the dragon fire and veritaserum to interrogate everyone isn’t the worst idea they’ve ever had, but they are spread too thin. I’ll need to have a word with Kingsley about it, in case any others are being treated like you. They will need to do a more thorough questioning of anybody they arrest later on.”

They had just approached Theo and Blaise, as Theo threw a grateful look toward Hermione.

“Alright, Pans?” he asked softly.

Pansy was looking between Theo and Hermione, her brow furrowed.

“I heard what you said to Bellatrix,” said Pansy. “Was it true? Are you two really siblings?”

Theo flashed a grin and linked arms with Hermione.

“Muggleborn twins, separated at birth thanks to my mother and the Malfoys. My mother’s biological son was stillborn, and they took me to replace him.”

Pansy blinked in surprise, but then looked thoughtful. “So how did they do it, then?”

“Adoption,” said Hermione instantly. “And Draco did the same thing to me for the Blacks. It’s rather dark blood magic, but it just goes to show that being a so-called pureblood is a load of shit. Who knows how many other families did the same thing that Theo’s did?”

“So you’re really a Nott?” asked Pansy, and Theo nodded.

“I sure am. And now that I have my castle back, I think some renovations are in order.”

Pansy’s eyebrows flew up. “I thought you gave it to the Dark Lord?”

“I retained a reversionary interest,” said Theo, with a grin. “If he ever kicked it, the castle reverted back to the head of the Notts. And yes, that’s still me, even though I’m muggleborn.”

“Merlin,” muttered Pansy, as she looked down at Draco. The others followed her gaze. “Is he alright?” she asked softly.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment to check for his magic, and then nodded. “Yes. I think it’s just magical exhaustion. That spell at the end...”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Pansy in a quiet voice.

“He had a magical artifact that did it,” said Hermione promptly. “It used to be Dumbledore’s, but he didn’t have a chance to use it before he died. He passed it to Harry who also didn’t

have a chance to use it. Draco and I recovered it a few weeks ago.”

Pansy nodded slowly.

“And now that it’s done, it’s useless,” added Theo. “Though I expect Draco will keep it as a trophy.”

“Almost assuredly,” said Hermione with a small smile.

“And the wand?” asked Pansy, eyeing the wand in Hermione’s hand a bit cautiously.

Hermione shrugged. “It’s Draco’s. It would work for me, but I was just bullshitting those two back there to get you free.”

A wry smile passed Pansy’s lips. “Who did you learn that from?”

“Who do you think?” asked Hermione, with some amusement.

Pansy’s face fell again as she looked around. “So what happens now? Will the Order be like the Dark Lord? Will all of us who were on the fringes be imprisoned or killed?”

Hermione hesitated. “That’s not the plan, no. There will be a lot of activity at the Ministry soon, because Kingsley Shacklebolt will step into power shortly.”

“What about these three?” asked Pansy, now casting a keen eye over Theo, Blaise, and Draco. “I mean, it’s obvious they were working for the Order, but they were also Death Eaters.”

“They have pardons arranged, as does Narcissa,” said Hermione promptly. “Kingsley made an Unbreakable Vow with each of them.”

“And what about you?” asked Pansy. “Or me? I’m a murderer now, despite what you told those two back there. And I know you are as well.”

Hermione froze, as she stared at Pansy.

“I...” she trailed off and looked down at Draco’s sleeping form a bit uncertainly.

What happens to me?

Somehow, she had never once asked herself this question.

“She’ll be pardoned too,” said Theo instantly.

“Will I?” asked Hermione softly, as she continued to study Draco’s form a bit pensively. “I don’t have a Vow like you do.”

Theo’s eyes widened. “Surely you don’t think... you were part of the Order, and...”

Hermione raised her eyes to find Theo watching her with a bit of fear now. Then her eyes slid past him to see the figure of Aberforth Dumbledore approaching their circle, leading a

small group of people Hermione thought were aurors.

“Theo,” she said slowly, “I think they’re about to detain me.”

Theo spun around to see the group approaching, and he sprang into action.

Hermione felt something shift in the air, and immediately Aberforth and the aurors halted their progress, as though colliding with an invisible barrier.

“They aren’t going to detain you,” said Theo firmly. “Because you’re my sister, and this castle’s wards answer only to me now.”

Hermione felt her heart swelling and she reached forward to grip his hand.

“Thank you,” she said, “but I still think I should leave. Let me take Draco with me. The boons should also leave and Pansy and Andromeda. We might as well fetch Narcissa too. Round up everyone and then come for us at Grimmauld Place.”

Theo nodded, and Hermione pulled out her own wand to send a patronus to Luna and Ginny, both of whom immediately flew their thestrals over to the bubble that was now surrounding their group. Hermione saw Aberforth shouting and gesticulating as Ginny and Luna were let through. He tried to break through the wards, but his efforts were fruitless. The wards at Nott Castle were ancient, and he had no hope whatsoever of getting through them while the ward's master was actively controlling them. Ginny and Luna slid off their thestrals and looked at Hermione curiously.

“Ginny, Luna, can you two please round up the other boons, Narcissa, and Andromeda and evacuate them to Grimmauld Place? Pansy and I will be leaving with Draco too. Once you find them we should all hide out there until the boys can sort a pardon for us. I have a feeling that not everybody in the Order will want to give us one.”

She gestured toward Aberforth, who was casting spells toward the barrier now, to no effect whatsoever.

Both of their eyes widened, and then narrowed.

“Yes,” said Ginny curtly. “It’s better to be safe than sorry. Come on, Luna, let’s get the others.”

Luna nodded, before putting her fingers in her mouth and whistling. To Hermione’s surprise, a thestral without a rider flew over and circled them slowly before landing in their bubble with a soft *thud*. Blaise helped Ginny and Luna mount their thestrals again, and they took off in search of the other boons, as Theo tracked their progress carefully.

“Come on, Pansy,” said Hermione. “Hold onto Draco for me, alright? I’ll fly next to you.”

Pansy looked at the thestral with some trepidation, but she swallowed and nodded as Blaise stepped forward to help her mount him. Hermione crouched toward Draco again and brushed his hair back from his forehead.

“We’re taking you to my house,” she said softly. Then she looked down at Fawkes, who peered up at her, ruffling his gray feathers a bit. He was already a little bigger than he had been when he was first killed. “Fawkes, I need to take Draco with me to Grimmauld Place. Can you meet us there?”

Fawkes gave a tiny trill, and Hermione smiled down at him before stroking his head for a moment.

“Then let’s do this,” she said, and she waved her wand to levitate Draco in front of Pansy. She wrapped one arm around his midsection firmly, as she clung to the thestral’s mane with the other. Hermione closed her eyes and turned into Columba, as she fluttered into the sky with Pansy’s thestral taking off beside her.

Hermione glanced down to find an outraged Aberforth watching her disappear into the night, and she grinned to herself as Theo followed them both with a look of concentration, as he adjusted the wards in flight to hold a bubble around them both. As soon as they crossed the fire barrier, Hermione reached out to him.

We’re on the other side. We should be safe now.

Be careful, and let me know when you arrive.

We will.

Hermione and the thestral banked right and flew for several more minutes until they reached the section of the woods where the portal to the other side of the antiapparition wards were located. They flew to the ground, and as soon as she landed, Hermione transformed back into herself and pulled out her wand to levitate Draco.

Pansy slipped off the thestral’s back, and as soon as she was free of it the thestral launched back into the air to join the others.

“Just through here,” said Hermione, leading the way through the wards. “We will go to my house because I control the wards there. It’s under a *fidelius*, and nobody in the Order can get in except for a few I trust implicitly. I’ll lock it down for us until the boys can sort this out with Kingsley.”

Pansy nodded, and Hermione gripped Draco in one hand and reached out for Pansy with the other. Pansy slipped her hand into Hermione’s, and Hermione turned, pulling them through the darkness, until they arrived at the steps of Grimmauld Place a moment later.

“Hermione Granger’s address is 12 Grimmauld Place, London,” said Hermione, and she saw Pansy’s eyes widen as the house appeared.

Then she reached out to Theo.

We’re here.

“Come along,” said Hermione, pulling on Pansy’s hands and reaching out to the wards to allow Pansy through. They climbed the steps, and Hermione let them in through the front

door.

“There are two other women here,” said Hermione softly. “Mary Walsh, who was a first year when we were in sixth, and her mother Betty, who is a muggle. They helped behind the scenes and have been taking care of my godson.”

Pansy nodded as Mary flung herself around the edge of the door, a wand pointed at them both. Her eyes widened when she saw Hermione without her disguise, and Draco’s form hovering in midair.

She lowered her wand and called behind her, “It’s them, Mum!”

Betty came hurrying out from the next room.

“Is he...?” said Mary hesitantly as Hermione lowered Draco onto the sofa in the sitting room.

“He’s alright,” said Hermione. “It’s just magical exhaustion. He defeated Voldemort.”

Mary gasped and then turned to fling her arms around her mother, as she dissolved into tears. Hermione found herself smiling a little, as Betty Walsh hugged her daughter back, and caught Hermione’s eye over the top of her head.

“Teddy is asleep,” she said, as Mary broke away and moved to hug Hermione too.

“Good,” said Hermione, after she pulled away and then turned to Pansy. “This is Pansy Parkinson. She helped us eliminate one of the Death Eaters, and the Order tried to arrest her. We think it’s best if she hides out here for a little while until the powers that be sort everything out. The surviving boons and Andromeda will be arriving soon for the same reason. I think Narcissa is coming too.”

Mary and Betty nodded.

“Posy!” called Hermione, and her elf appeared with a *POP!* and then a squeal when she saw Hermione was alright.

“Mistress did it!”

Hermione smiled down at the small elf. “It was Draco who did it. He needs some rest, but we will be hosting quite a few visitors in short order. Do you mind putting out some snacks and drinks for a dozen or so people? And then we will have to figure out where everyone is sleeping...”

Posy straightened up and looked nothing short of *thrilled* at these orders. “Right away, Mistress!” she squeaked before disappearing with another *POP!*

Hermione turned back down to look at Draco. She inhaled in surprise when she saw he was stirring.

“Draco?” she cried as she flew to him and dropped to her knees, clutching his face just like she had done in the immediate aftermath of the battle. “Draco, can you hear me?”

He groaned, but his eyes fluttered open, and after a moment seemed to focus on her.

“There’s my sweet girl,” he rasped.

Hermione couldn’t help herself. She had been holding it together so well since he collapsed, but she had been worried about him. Seeing him wake up made her strength crumble, and she found herself sobbing into his shirt.

“Shhh,” he said, threading his fingers through her hair. “None of that, my darling.”

“I was so worried!” she sniffed. She sensed, rather than saw, a slight smile pass his face.

“Because you love me,” he said with some relish.

“Always,” said Hermione simply, as she laid her head on his chest. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Betty Walsh shoo’ing Pansy and Mary out of the room to give them both some privacy.

Draco just sighed with contentment, and Hermione let herself feel it too. They had done it. *Draco* had done it. There was more yet to do, but the biggest hurdle was past them now, and they had made it to the other side.

“I’ll always love you too, Hermione.”

Hermione was pacing their room.

It had been three days since Voldemort fell, and it was now Christmas Eve. Over the last three days there had been a whirlwind of sweeping change at the Ministry of Magic, while the Order publicly claimed power, including installing Kingsley Shacklebolt as the brand new Minister of Magic. Hermione had been cooped up in Grimmauld Place since she fled Nott Castle, and she was feeling caged and agitated.

Grimmauld Place was sizable, but it was playing overnight host to more than a dozen people at the moment. As soon as Ginny and Luna arrived with the others, Hermione adjusted the wards and gave them her address to let them all through, and nobody had left. She and Draco had holed themselves up in the primary bedroom and had barely emerged. She sensed that Draco was perfectly content to spend all of their time together, but Hermione was growing impatient. It was very much like the early days of her captivity at Malfoy Manor, when Draco did not allow her out of her room.

“What was the point of defeating him if I still can’t go outside?” she asked in exasperation.

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but she just cut him off with a scowl.

“Don’t answer that. Obviously I’m glad he’s dead. But this is just... *ugh!*”

She flopped down in one of the armchairs in the bedroom and stared out the window moodily.

“I told you I would handle it,” said Draco calmly. “Kingsley’s meeting with me very soon.”

Hermione bit her lower lip nervously. “It’s just... what if he doesn’t agree?”

Draco’s expression turned solemn.

“Hermione, listen to me. I’ll make it happen. And if I can’t, then we’ll leave.”

She glanced at him in surprise. “Leave?”

Draco nodded. “We’ll flee the country. I have a home in France we can use. It wouldn’t have stopped the Dark Lord from finding us so it was never an option before now, but it *will* stop the Ministry of Magic. They have no jurisdiction there.”

She pursed her lips and looked out the window again, nerves and disappointment warring with each other.

“That’s not what I want.”

“No, and I really don’t think it will come to that. There will be public outrage if I’m pardoned and you’re not. But it *is* an option, and it’s a viable one. Grimmauld is connected to my old bedroom at the Manor, and my old bedroom is connected to our French estate. It’s just two quick floo trips to get there.”

She frowned as she thought about this. She *hated* the idea of just running away. England was her home, and she had friends and now family that lived here. Then again, the person she cared about the most was Draco. And Hermione refused to spend the rest of her life in hiding.

“Why haven’t we done that yet, if it’s an option?”

He shrugged. “I think it’s better to stay in the country until we no longer can. I can’t guarantee they won’t be monitoring the floo traffic from my room very soon, now that the Dark Lord is no longer in power. But the Ministry is in a shambles at the moment, so if Kingsley refuses, I feel certain we can get you and the others out tonight.”

She slumped, knowing that she had little choice. “Fine. But promise you’ll try? The only thing I want is to be able to visit Diagon Alley again.”

Draco softened as he stood and approached her to kneel down in front of her.

“I promise, my darling, I will do everything in my power – and you know it’s considerable power – to give you this.”

She gave him a tight smile, and Draco rose to give her a firm kiss. He cupped her face.

“Chin up. I’m going to call Poppy to spoil you a little tonight, alright?”

She nodded.

“Good. Now tell me one more time the most important thing.”

Draco had been making her repeat this every time her frustration got the better of her over the last three days.

“He’s dead, and we’re not.”

“Precisely. And we *will* live openly together very soon, either here or in France. Starting tomorrow, one way or the other, we’ll be able to go out in public with no disguises. The first time we do it I’m going to snog you in the middle of a street full of people we don’t know.”

A small smile broke out on her face at this. Tomorrow was Christmas, and she knew Draco wanted to spend it at the Manor with their friends, along with Teddy, Andromeda, and his mother. Hermione wanted precisely the same thing. But the fact that he would give all of that up for a chance to live openly with her warmed her heart. He was right, and the most important thing was that Voldemort was dead and they were alive.

“Alright. I’ll try to be patient.”

“Thank you. Now I need to be off. I don’t know how long this will take, but don’t wait up if it starts to go late. Tomorrow is Christmas, my darling. We’ve made it.”

She smiled a little as he stepped away and cast one last glance at her before striding out of their room.

Trust Draco to fix it.

She would. She did. And he was right that tomorrow was Christmas.

Poppy arrived moments later and beamed at Hermione.

“Master Draco is ordering Poppy to give Miss a bath and manicure!”

Hermione found herself relaxing into the first real smile since Voldemort fell.

Draco will always take care of me.

The urge to murder Aberforth Dumbledore and every single auror who had dared approach Hermione right after the Dark Lord fell was bubbling over inside of Draco. He was angry –

far angrier than he had let her see – because if there was a single person who deserved to be pardoned for everything she had been forced to endure, it was Hermione Granger.

Privately, Draco thought – or maybe just hoped – that Aberforth had been acting alone as the Order’s second-in-command, rather than following Kingsley’s directive. Based on what Theo had told Draco, it was certainly possible. None of them had been able to get close enough to Hermione to speak to her about it, so whether they intended to detain her or not was uncertain.

Still, there had been aurors prowling around the perimeter of Malfoy Manor, and Draco thought he saw one or two near Grimmauld Place as well. Hermione had not been formally summoned yet, but he was certain it was only a matter of time if he and his friends could not cut a deal tonight.

“Ready?” asked Draco, as he took in the grim expressions of Theo and Blaise.

They both nodded, tension feathering their jaws. They had just as much interest in these negotiations as Draco did. While he felt certain that Ginny and Luna were not as at risk of arrest as Hermione was, he suspected that none of them would stay in England if this did not go well tonight. They were bound to each other irrevocably.

They took the floo to Draco’s room, which was still the only connection for Grimmauld Place. Draco had locked the floo down soon after becoming its master a year earlier, and Hermione had never asked him to change it. The Manor, for all of its blood wards, was not *quite* as secure as Grimmauld Place because it did have a public floo parlor.

Draco, Theo, and Blaise all pulled out their wands – Draco was carrying the Elder Wand for this – and together they moved to the public floo at the Manor to make their way to the Ministry.

They arrived to find a shocking number of people bustling about in the atrium, given that it was late on Christmas Eve. Draco knew it was only because of the regime change that there was so much activity.

As the three of them moved through the atrium, quite a few people stopped and stared at Draco with fear when they saw him. Draco only gripped his wand harder, fully prepared to cast a spell against anybody who would prevent them from getting to Kingsley Shacklebolt. To his relief and slight surprise, the crowd seemed to part for him, and in fact several people scrambled to get out of his way.

Good.

They strode down several hallways and corridors until they arrived at the Minister of Magic’s office. There were two aurors guarding the outside, and they looked at Draco warily.

“We have an appointment with the Minister of Magic,” he said arrogantly.

They narrowed their eyes, but one cast a patronus that slipped under the door. Within seconds it was opening, and Shacklebolt was ushering them inside. Draco tensed when he

saw Aberforth Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, and Severus Snape in the room too.

“Come in,” said Kingsley cordially. “I have the pardons for you three and already filled out on my desk, and I owed Narcissa’s pardon to her earlier this evening as you requested. I’ve signed them, and we just need you to countersign for them to take effect. Narcissa has already sent hers back, and it arrived seconds before you did.”

Knowing that his mother was safe now was some relief, but it wasn’t enough for Draco. Then again, hearing that a countersignature was required had just given him an idea.

“Why do we have to sign them too?” asked Theo. “Don’t pardons come from the Minister of Magic unilaterally?”

Kingsley’s eyes shifted a little. “No, pardons always require a countersignature. It’s simply an acknowledgment that it’s for past acts and future acts will not be covered by it.”

Draco, Theo and Blaise all narrowed their eyes.

“Let us see them,” said Blaise.

Kingsley moved behind his desk and handed the documents to each of them. Draco scanned his quickly and saw that everything was there. He was receiving a full pardon for all crimes committed from the day he entered the Dark Lord’s service through 24 December 1998. His signature at the end was an acknowledgment that his pardon would not extend to any acts beyond that date.

He glanced at Theo and Blaise, and they nodded a little. Draco turned to look at Kingsley squarely.

“I’d like to see the pardons for Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Pansy, Andromeda, and the six surviving boons we rescued before we sign these.”

Kingsley froze, and tension seemed to thicken.

Draco heard McGonagall mutter, “I told you,” while Severus snorted a little in what Draco hoped was agreement.

“They didn’t have a deal,” said Aberforth, now jumping in. “Everything they did was outside the purview of the Order. They went rogue. Their actions will be examined and weighed just like everybody else who played active roles without the Order’s consent! It’s only fair!”

“Bullshit,” said Theo angrily. “You all were more than happy to accept their help with creating a distraction and incapacitating the Death Eaters for you.”

“*Incapacitating*, not killing,” insisted Aberforth. “Murdering them all was *never* part of the plan, and it means we lost valuable informants for rounding up the others.”

Draco saw Severus roll his eyes at this.

"You already *have* valuable informants," he drawled, gesturing toward himself, Draco, and his friends. "Keeping the others alive would have done nothing except create yet more administrative work for the Ministry and risk freedom on parole if they didn't rot in Azkaban first."

"But it wasn't part of the plan!" said Aberforth, now standing. "You *know* it wasn't part of the plan!"

Draco scoffed. "Please. Don't act like you were unaware our views about this. Some of the boons were fucking *tied* to the men who raped them over and over again to give the Order a distraction! And Hermione and the others simply did what they had to do to ensure the rest of the plan went off without a hitch. We *all* did what we had to do."

Aberforth scoffed, but Minerva seemed to nod a little in agreement. Draco glanced at her because *she* had killed during the battle as well. Hermione had told him all about it, but the only witnesses were Hermione and Ginny.

Obviously McGonagall hasn't informed Kingsley or Aberforth about this.

Draco wasn't above using it if he had to, but he sensed she was on their side in this. It would be best if he went straight for the kill.

He handed Kingsley his pardon and took a step back.

"What are you—" asked Kingsley, and then just as Draco predicted, he began to choke.

Draco had timed this meeting strategically. It was shocking that Kingsley hadn't figured out why.

And he calls himself a Slytherin.

"That's your Unbreakable Vow triggering," said Draco calmly. "You swore to give me a pardon within three days of the Dark Lord falling if I would turn spy for you."

Draco made a show of checking his watch.

"And he died precisely seventy-two hours ago," he added.

Kingsley was gasping for air, clutching at his throat, and looking panicked, while Aberforth lunged toward Draco.

To Draco's shock, it was McGonagall who cried, "*Impedimenta!*" and Aberforth froze in midair. Severus simply leaned against the wall, watching the encounter with a small smile on his face.

Draco then twisted his ring with the Resurrection Stone on it and focused on Kingsley. He reached out to Death and halted it temporarily, but he did not pull it all the way back. It was still pressing in on Kingsley, invading his personal space, and Draco knew that Kingsley was aware that Draco was the one controlling it.

Kingsley took a gasp of air, but he was looking at Draco with fear and panic on his face.

“I’ve stopped it for now,” said Draco softly. “But you will give us this or all three of us will refuse to countersign. You’ll break your Vow to us, and you’ll die right here.”

“Hermione's turned dark,” gasped Shacklebolt. “You changed her. She’s... she’s *corrupted*. The things she did during the battle... the threats she made after the fact... Aberforth says that people are terrified of her...”

Draco narrowed his eyes and let Death encroach into Kingsley’s space a little bit further. He gasped as he felt it.

“You’ll want to be careful what you say about her. She is perfect, and I have not corrupted her at all. My Hermione has always had a streak of ruthlessness in her. The Order simply failed to see it. I identified it in her years ago, and all I did was give her the security she needed to explore it for herself. She has spent years taking care of other people. Once I finally stepped in to take care of *her*, then her true nature could emerge. It is stunning and perfect and *just*. She does not seek power, nor do I. All she wants is to be left in peace, and all *I* want is for my sweet girl to be content and happy. You will give this to us. You will also give it to Ginny, Luna, Andromeda, *all* the boons who survived, and Pansy Parkinson too. It is the very least you can do to thank them for helping us end that bastard.”

Aberforth looked furious, but he was still locked in Minerva’s spell. Kingsley looked torn, and Draco allowed Death to creep just a little closer, which made his face turn ashen.

“Alright,” he gasped. “Alright, you leave me no choice...”

“Good,” said Draco. “Duplicate these pardons for the list of women that Theo will give to you. The Ministry will not be able to bring charges against them as soon as they are countersigned, yes?”

Kingsley nodded quickly as Theo stepped forward and held out a list. Kingsley was shaking as he quickly duplicated Draco’s pardon nine times. He tapped his wand on each to change the name at the top, and then signed them with a shaky hand.

“Blaise?” said Draco, and Blaise stepped forward to collect the pardons, tucking them away in his cloak before moving back toward Draco.

Draco nodded to Theo and Blaise, and they both countersigned. Their pardons glowed a little as they became binding and magically split into two copies, one for the Ministry and one for them. They tucked their own copies into their cloaks. Then Draco stepped forward to do the same thing.

“It was a pleasure doing business with you,” he said, as he signed his name at the bottom with a flourish. “Once the others have countersigned, we will owl the Ministry’s copy to you. We wouldn’t want your records to be missing anything critical, would we?”

Draco collected his own copy once it magically duplicated, and then he pulled Death back from Kingsley.

Kingsley gasped and fell to his knees, looking up at Draco with fear and not a small amount of loathing.

“If you ever try to cross me again...”

Draco just rolled his eyes. “As I said, my wishes are simple. Hermione wants to be free to live in England, and I am making sure she has that opportunity. You and I will have no further quarrel if you leave us in peace.”

Kingsley glared, but said nothing more as Draco stepped back and cast one final, appreciative look at Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape.

“Thank you both,” he said. “Professor McGonagall, you saved Hermione's life after Nagini. And Severus, you saved my mother and aunt from Bellatrix. I don't forgive easily, but I think with a little more time I will get there with both of you. I don't see that ever happening for these two,” and at that, he gestured toward Aberforth and Shacklebolt.

Minerva gave him a thin smile and Severus inclined his head in acknowledgment, and Draco, Theo, and Blaise slipped out, hurrying away as they heard shouting erupt in the office behind him. Aberforth was railing at Minerva and Severus, and the clipped brogue and corresponding drawl in response made Draco smirk.

“Let's bring the girls the good news, shall we?” said Draco, as Theo and Blaise grinned broadly.

They hurried through the atrium at the Ministry of Magic, once again being given wide berth by those who were milling about. They floo'd back to the Manor, where Draco grabbed a few quills and Theo grabbed a few bottles of champagne, and then they made their way to Draco's old room to floo back to Grimmauld Place.

They stepped out on the other side to find the parlor full. The boons were huddled together, the tension thick as they waited for news. Narcissa and Andromeda were talking quietly in one corner. Ginny, Luna, and Pansy were seated a little apart from the others, and Hermione was curled up in an armchair, looking soft and pink-cheeked, as though she had just emerged from a bath. When the wizards arrived, she stood.

“Well?” she asked nervously. “What did he say? What happened?”

Draco paused for dramatic effect, and he could see Theo rolling his eyes in his peripheral vision. But he didn't look anywhere except for Hermione as he gave her – and all of the others – the only Christmas gift they wanted that year.

“He wasn't happy about it, but we persuaded him. Blaise has a pardon for every one of you. Once you sign, it will be over.”

Hermione seemed to sway a bit with relief, and Draco moved forward to catch her.

“Are you alright, my darling?” he whispered.

Her eyes filled with tears, as she nodded and pressed herself into him.

“It’s really over isn’t it?”

“It is,” he said quietly. “Sign it, and we can go back to the Manor tonight. We’ll have Christmas with our friends, Mother, Teddy, and Aunt Andy tomorrow morning... and then as soon as you're ready, I’m taking you to Diagon Alley and snogging you in the middle of the street.”

The smile she gave him was blinding, and Draco’s heart filled with joy and pride that he could give this to her.

She was his. She would always be his. His to love, his to cherish, his to protect, his to care for.

“You’re mine,” he whispered against her lips.

“I’m yours,” she agreed.

Chapter 46: Lullabies

Chapter Notes

TW: References to premature birth, stillbirth, and miscarriage

The first time Hermione set foot in Diagon Alley, it was two days after Christmas. Once her pardon came through, Hermione found that she was perfectly content to spend Christmas and Boxing Day at the Manor so that they could wait until they would have an audience for a very public kiss.

They had spent Christmas morning at Malfoy Manor, watching Narcissa and Andromeda make careful conversation while Teddy played with several boxes they had wrapped specifically for that purpose.

The boxes had nothing in them except for a small stuffed dragon, which Draco had barely found time to purchase, but none of that seemed to matter. Teddy wasn't quite a year old yet, and he enjoyed crinkling the paper just as much as he liked to hug the dragon.

There were no gifts for anybody else, because they had everything they wanted: their freedom, their pardons, and their future.

Correction: they had *nearly* everything they wanted. There was one last thing to do on Hermione's list before she turned to *Draco's* list and started planning a wedding.

This last thing on Hermione's list was the real reason she wanted to go to Diagon Alley in the first place. Draco could have handled this errand for her, but Hermione wanted to do it herself. She needed to know that she was truly free.

Of course she did not object when Draco insisted upon coming with her.

"We could always just confund the muggles," Draco pointed out as he threaded his fingers through hers and led her down the middle of Diagon Alley at a slow pace.

"We can't do that, we're supposed to be upstanding citizens now. Confunding muggles is for emergencies."

All around them, shopkeepers and bystanders stopped and stared, some with fear and others with gratitude. But all of them seemed unwilling to approach Hermione and Draco or interrupt them on their business there that day, until Rita Skeeter came bursting out of a shop and halted directly in front of them, her eyes wide.

Draco didn't miss a beat and pulled Hermione in before cupping her cheeks in his hands and kissing her so thoroughly she felt a bit lightheaded.

When he finally released her he turned to find Rita staring at them intently.

"So it's true? Columba Black is really the Granger girl?"

"Columba Black is Hermione Granger and Hermione Granger is Columba Black," said Draco. "All of it was real, and it was a plan we put into place for her safety. She is mine."

"So you're engaged to a mud – a *muggleborn*," said Rita with a sharp look.

"Very happily," said Draco. "And one of my best friends, who served in the Death Eaters with me as a spy for the Order, is muggleborn too. Theodore Nott, you know. He and Hermione are actually twins. He will be happy to answer any questions you may have about that."

Rita's face transformed into a look of shock as Draco tugged on Hermione's hand and pulled her past. She suppressed a giggle, and Draco glanced around at the sound. He grinned and pulled her in for another kiss.

"*Ooomph*, Draco we have to be going..." she murmured, but he seemed in no hurry.

"Fuck it, I've wanted to do this for *years* ..."

Hermione sighed into his lips and let him lead her for a few minutes. She hadn't waited as long for this as he had of course, but the *freedom* and the *joy* were almost foreign feelings to her now. She had to pinch herself to believe that it was finally over.

Well, mostly over.

"Draco," she groaned. "Come on. I need to get that muggle money..."

He pulled away and dropped his forehead to hers. "Fine. But as soon as we make the arrangements we go back to bed, alright? I'm utterly exhausted from all the magic and fighting the Dark Lord and holidays with a baby."

She rolled her eyes at him, but nodded agreeably, and he let her pull him up toward the marble steps of Gringotts.

"You really think this will work?" she muttered under her breath. "I've only been in the vaults a single time."

"It will work," he said.

The goblins eyed them warily, but nobody stopped them as they entered the bank and approached one of the counters.

"Name?" said the nasally voice, though Hermione was sure he knew precisely who they were.

Which name should I use?

She had been debating this for the last two days, not that it mattered very much. Draco had offered to give this to her as her Christmas present, but Hermione insisted she wanted to do it herself. She had been the one to start it, and now she wanted to finish it.

She made her decision in a flash.

"Hermione Granger. I'm here to visit the vault left to me by Harry Potter."

The goblin nodded and checked her wand and the key she presented to Harry's old vault.

"This wand is registered in two names," he commented.

Hermione inclined her head. "Yes, my other name is Columba Aquila Black."

The goblin looked at a piece of parchment before nodding once.

"Very well, then. You are entitled to the contents of both, but you said you wished to visit the Granger vault, rather than the Black vault?"

"Yes."

"Then please head to the doors over there. I'm sure you know the way."

He gave her a disapproving look, and Hermione blushed a little bit at the reminder of her break-in. Draco tugged on her hand and led her to a goblin she didn't recognize, who escorted them both into the antechamber with the carts.

"This way," he said in a nasally voice. "Keep your hands and feet in the cart at all times."

And with that, Hermione held her breath as they were off.

"I think I'm going to throw up," said Theo, who was looking exceptionally green as he stared at the large airplane they were about to board at Heathrow.

"Don't," advised Ginny. "Hermione says it's going to take us a full twenty-four hours to get there."

"But I *hate* heights," he commented.

"It's really not the same as being on a broom," said Hermione encouragingly. "You won't feel like you're in the air at all."

"But—"

"I asked Hermione to pack some stomach potions for you, Theo," said Luna, who was reading a muggle magazine with interest. As Hermione watched, Luna turned it upside down for a moment as though it was a copy of the *Quibbler*. "I thought you might be a tad ill."

"I have them in my bag," confirmed Hermione. "I'll distribute them once we're on the plane."

Hermione glanced at Draco, who wasn't saying a word, but was just staring out the window at the plane with wide eyes. She smiled a little.

"They'll feed us, right?" asked Blaise. "And you said we have to take two of these to get there?"

"That's right," said Hermione. "We'll be in the first class cabins up front. It should be quite comfortable."

This, of course, had been the reason she needed to visit Gringotts a few days prior. She withdrew enough of Harry's gold to convert back to pounds so she could purchase six first-class seats on the next available flight to Brisbane.

Hermione had been fully prepared for only Theo and Draco to go with her, but she was surprised and gratified when Luna, Ginny, and Blaise said they wanted to go too. Of course, they had to use muggle transportation because the Ministry of Magic was still not issuing new international portkeys. Neither she nor Theo wanted to wait until the Ministry began authorizing them again, both because of the time delay and because they wanted avoid the Ministry after the trouble Shacklebolt had just given them surrounding the pardons. Hermione privately thought that Aberforth had brainwashed Shacklebolt just a little bit, but she couldn't be certain. She decided it was best to keep her head down and take this trip on an anonymous basis as quickly as possible, so that left them stuck with muggle transportation.

Hermione was determined to make the best of it and turn it into a bit of an adventure for the others.

"Now boarding!" came a call over an intercom, and Hermione nudged the others up. "Follow me. Just show them your ticket, and then we'll find our seats. They should all be grouped together."

The other witches and wizards nodded a bit nervously and let Hermione lead the way – with Draco close behind her of course – until they boarded the large aircraft and eventually found their seats, with three rows of two side by side just as Hermione had promised.

All five of them gaped.

"*This* is how muggles fly?" demanded Ginny.

"Shhh!" hissed Hermione. "Yes, it is! Like I said, it's quite comfortable compared to brooms! Just have a seat and follow their instructions!"

They all sat down, and then Hermione opened the backpack she had collected from her parents' house the day before to distribute small bags of snacks, books, and other forms of entertainment for each of them. She also made a point to hand a stomach potion to Theo. Their luggage had been shrunk and stored in her beaded bag, which was at the bottom of her backpack.

She did not trust any of the others to handle muggle luggage through security, so they were holding nothing but the items Hermione had just distributed as they settled in.

She was surprised to see a few television screens as she passed out the books. Perhaps this was one of the newer aircraft that could play movies in the air. She knew she would see what was on offer, but she hadn't been relying on it and packed as though they would have to entertain themselves for the duration of the trip.

"This should be enough to be going with until they come around with meals," she said. "Just make yourselves at home, and do as they say with the seat belt and all that. It's for your safety. We have two very long flights ahead of us."

It took another forty minutes for the plane to fill and the flight attendants to give the standard safety speech. Soon they were pushing back from the gate and heading to the runway.

"Are you ready?" she asked a very pale Draco, who was looking out the window a bit nervously.

He just swallowed hard and nodded.

"You'll do fine."

"What's it like?" he said quietly.

"It's going to be really loud and really fast as we take off. You like flying on a broom, so I know you'll like flying on this. Once you're in the air, it doesn't feel like anything."

He took a deep breath and nodded. She reached over to grip his hands, as the pilot announced, "Cleared for takeoff!"

The plane began to accelerate, and Hermione heard Draco gasp beside her. She turned to find his eyes wide and a smile blooming on his face as the nose of the plane tilted up into the air, and the wheels left the ground.

"We did it, Draco! We're flying on a plane together!"

His smile was blinding as he turned to her.

"I love you, sweet girl."

The shine of the long-haul flight to Brisbane wore off within a couple of hours, and all six of them were a bit worse for the wear when they finally deplaned. Hermione intentionally scheduled a very long layover in Hong Kong so that their second long-haul flight would be overnight. This time, she quietly handed out some sleeping potions to each one of them so that by the time they landed in Brisbane their body clocks had been reset.

When they finally exited the airport at Brisbane, Hermione turned to Theo.

“Well? Do you know where their flat is located?”

Theo nodded and pulled out a slip of parchment with the address on it and handed it to her.

“It’s near the river.”

Hermione studied it for a moment and nodded. “Alright then, let’s call a cab. You don’t want me to drive, and I’d prefer to avoid apparition unless we have no choice. The Australian Ministry of Magic tracks apparition closely, and nobody knows we’re here.”

They all nodded at this, and Hermione hired two cabs to take them to the Grangers’ address in downtown Brisbane.

When she finally exited, she looked up at the building that was now owned by Theo.

“The building is only half-full now,” said Theo quietly. “I haven’t been renewing leases for anyone as they come up.”

“Do you think they’ve noticed?” asked Hermione curiously.

Theo shrugged. “It’s possible, but I doubt it. There are still a few other tenants, and the last time I was here I placed notice-me-nots on every empty unit. None of the muggles who are here should be aware that the building is slowly emptying.”

Hermione bit her lip, but nodded. “Are we ready to do this, then? Or do you want to wait?”

Theo’s face broke at this question. “I…”

He closed his eyes to compose himself and then tried again. “I’ve been waiting for almost twenty years. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

Hermione felt his eagerness, but also his anxiety spike through their bond, and she began to siphon for him, while Luna slipped her hand into his.

“Alright,” said Hermione. “In that case, Draco and I will go first. You all stay back, and one of us will fetch you when their memories have been restored.”

Hermione’s own nerves started at this very moment, and Theo reached out to pull her in for a hug.

"I know you can do it, Sis," he said quietly. "And if something goes wrong and it doesn't work... I promise I won't blame you for it. You did what you needed to do to protect them."

Hermione swallowed hard, and nodded into his chest as he released her.

"Let's go then," said Draco. "We should get off the street."

They let themselves into the small lobby of the building, and Hermione shuddered a bit as they passed through the wards. Theo, Luna, Blaise, and Ginny all took a seat on some empty sofas and chairs, while Hermione and Draco took the lift to the third floor where her parents had been living for the last eighteen months.

"Are you ready, sweet girl?" asked Draco quietly.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded.

"I know the theory. I just hope I didn't overdo it..."

She trailed off, twisting her shirt a bit nervously. She had never really thought she would survive the war. Even after Voldemort fell she had not given herself time and space to really *think* about this moment. She knew that if she did she might not have the courage to try.

"You can do it," said Draco. "I'm certain. And I'll be right there with you the whole time."

Hermione nodded as the lift arrived at the correct floor, and the door slid open.

"Then let's do this," she said, trying to sound more optimistic than she was feeling.

They approached the unit with "304" on the front door, and Hermione raised her hand to knock.

For a long, excruciating moment, Hermione thought her parents wouldn't be home. But then she heard her mother's voice call, "Just a minute!" as she shuffled to the door on the other side.

"Oh God," said Hermione, her nerves suddenly seizing her.

Draco sensed her teetering, and he stepped in front of her just as the door opened.

"Can I help you?" asked Hermione's mother's voice.

"Good morning," said Draco pleasantly. "I was hoping to speak to Wendell and Monica Wilkins. It's about your lease renewal coming up in a few months."

"Oh! Oh yes, of course. One moment. *Wendell!*"

Hermione was gripping the back of Draco's shirt, trying to pull herself together as she heard a second set of footsteps approach.

"Monica, who is it?" came her father's voice.

“Stupefy! Stupefy!”

She heard two identical *thuds* as her parents hit the floor. Hermione stepped around Draco to find them collapsed in a heap together.

“It’s them,” she said in a choked voice. “Mum and Dad...”

“Let’s get them settled on their bed, and then you can work the spell from there,” suggested Draco.

Hermione nodded, as he waved his wand and levitated them both through the flat into the bedroom that was attached on the opposite end. Hermione looked around curiously and noted that she recognized almost nothing.

Of course I don’t. They left their entire lives in England.

The flat was modern, but sparsely decorated. Hermione was a bit bemused to see that her father must have won the decor war, which was something he had been fighting her mother about for years in their family home. Her father had always favored a more Scandinavian look with clean lines and sharp edges. Her mother, however, liked things a bit more traditional, and that was the style of the home where Hermione had grown up.

The flat looked exactly like something out of her father’s dreams, and she almost tripped as she wondered if he would rather stay here than return home to England with them.

No. No, he will want to come home.

Hermione followed Draco into their bedroom, where he slowly lowered them both to their bed.

“Which one first?” asked Draco with some forced casualness.

Hermione bit her lip and looked between them.

Which parent do I choose?

Hermione had hidden their memories, she had not erased them. But nonetheless, she had locked them away behind thick doors that would require a lot of magical energy to reverse. Creating the barriers for her mother had taken twice as long as her father because her mother had been the default parent. She was the one who picked up Hermione from school each day as a child and arranged her birthday parties and wrote to Hermione at Hogwarts like clockwork every single week.

Her father had been there too, of course, but if there was a patient emergency after hours, he was always the one who took it. When she modified their memories originally, she worked on her father first because she knew he would be easier than her mother. She decided to do the same thing again.

“Dad first,” she said. “It will be draining, but his modification isn’t as extensive as Mum’s. I should still have some energy left to work on her once I finish with him.”

Draco nodded and levitated a chair over to her father's side of the bed. He lowered himself into it and then gestured for her to sit too.

"Come lean against me. Pull everything you need, my darling. I know you can do it."

Hermione nodded and sank down into his lap, adjusting herself so she was comfortable. Then she looked at her father and took a deep breath as she raised her wand.

"*Invenium memorium*," she whispered, and she felt a rush of power as the spell connected.

Hermione was in a dark room, bare and empty, except for four doors. She approached the first door on the left and opened it to find sunlight, tall buildings, and the river that she vaguely recognized as running through the middle of Brisbane. She studied it for a moment before it dissolved, and then it reformed into the flat she had just entered with Draco. A few moments after that she was back in the sunshine again, staring at a large boat that was moored in a harbor with her mother sitting on it and sunning herself.

There were real memories, then – snippets of her father's life from the last eighteen months.

Hermione carefully backed out of the room and shut the door behind her, returning to the dark antechamber of his subconscious. She would not disturb those memories.

The next door she approached stuck a little as she pushed it open. But with a pulse of magic she pushed through it and stared around with some curiosity. These memories were blurred a little bit, as though something about them wasn't quite right. It started with her father, learning to ride a bike. She gasped when he fell and scraped a knee so badly Hermione knew he still carried the scar almost fifty years later.

"Wendell! Are you alright?" cried a woman Hermione recognized as her grandmother, whom she had only ever seen in photos.

Hermione winced at the name and now knew why this room felt a little off.

As she watched, that memory dissolved and turned into a birthday party when her father was gifted a puppy. He had spoken of his dog fondly for her entire life. The poor thing had passed away soon before Hermione was born.

The memory seemed to melt, and then Hermione was at a rugby match, as her father — now a teenager and wearing a team uniform — clapped a hand over his bloody mouth. Another teen she didn't recognize was leaning over him, looking at him with concern.

"That was a bad hit, mate. You're lucky you didn't lose any teeth."

Her father worked his jaw and then spit something out into his palm. It was a bloody front tooth.

"Blimey," said the other boy in amazement. "They walloped you right and proper didn't they? You should have worn your gum shields..."

Then it dissolved again, and this time he was in dental school and gathering his courage to ask out the young woman who sat in the row ahead of him. He had been staring at her all term and had just learned her name the week before after some careful reconnaissance.

“Monica,” he said, as she turned around, and Hermione saw her mother. She blushed prettily.

“Hello... Wendell, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said her father with eagerness. “Erm... I was just wondering... would you like to get a drink with me after class? Perhaps we can study together?”

Her mother turned crimson, but seemed very pleased. “Oh... alright then, that sounds lovely.”

The memory dissolved and then formed again, with her father pushing her mother against the wall.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“Please, Monica... I want you so much...”

Hermione averted her eyes and tried to cover her ears. This was too private.

A few moments later it mercifully ended, and then she was standing at an altar, watching her mother walk down the aisle in a wedding dress. Hermione felt love, joy, and a keen sense of nerves as her father beheld her for the first time.

She watched their entire wedding ceremony and was feeling choked up until their lips touched, and suddenly she was forcibly shoved out of the room, where the door slammed shut.

Back in the dark again, she blinked in confusion, but slowly stood and faced the third door. This one opened easily, but the sense of wrongness was stronger than ever as Hermione watched her parents purchasing the house where she was raised.

“We’ll have a family soon, dear,” said her father. “I’m sure the next one will stick.”

Hermione’s mother brushed her stomach sadly, but just nodded a little and signed on the dotted line.

The memory dissolved, and then the next one emerged, blurrier than ever.

“No! No, I can’t do this again!” cried her mother, as she was in a doctor’s office with her father clutching her hand. “I’m not doing this again, Wendell, I’m not!”

Hermione’s heart broke, as she realized what this was. Her mother had miscarried twice before she had Hermione and Theo. This was the second time, and Hermione had changed this moment ever so slightly when she modified her parents’ memories eighteen months earlier.

Instead of encouraging her mother to try one more time – which was how Hermione and Theo came to be – her father crouched down and cupped her face in his hands.

“Alright, Monica. We can stop. We never have to worry about this ever again.”

The memories from there were familiar, and yet not. Her parents had a dental practice and a house, but it wasn't full of children's books, and there was no dollhouse in the spare bedroom. Their lives were odd and barren.

Her father knew that something seemed to be missing, but he had never been able to identify what it was. Every time he tried to pinpoint it, he simply lost it. All he knew was that their lives had devolved into the same routine day after day, year after year: breakfast, then work, then home for dinner, a favorite show or two, and then bed.

It had become rote.

Hermione reached the end of these memories when her father decided he had had enough. He put together a plan to change their lives and then approached his wife.

“Monica, I have some news. You know how we've always said we wanted to move to Australia and travel that side of the world someday? Well we hit our number, dear. We can afford to do it.”

Her mother gasped in surprise and beamed. “Do you mean it?”

“I mean it. We can leave whenever you want to.”

“Within a month!” she declared. “I've been dreaming about this for years!”

With that, Hermione was forcibly kicked out a second time, and then she found herself in the dark antechamber once more. She turned to the last door and eyed it warily. She knew what she would find here, and this was the moment she would learn if she had wrecked her father's memories for good.

She tried to open the door, but nothing happened. She pushed with her magic, and it barely budged. She took a deep breath and then began to pull from Draco too as she focused all of her energy and magic on opening that door. The moment it cracked, she gasped as she was hit by a flood of memories that began to fill the antechamber where she had been standing.

“David! Are you alright?”

“I can't believe you lost a tooth playing rugby, David! You're sixteen for heaven's sake!”

“Please, Helen... I want you so much...”

“You may kiss the bride...”

“We'll have a family soon, Helen. I'm sure the next one will stick.”

“No! No, I can't do this again! I'm not doing this again, David, I'm not!”

“Please, Helen... we said we would give it three tries. Just three tries, and I will never ask this of you again...”

“Congratulations, Mrs. Granger, you’re having twins!”

“I just know it's going to be a boy and a girl! I can feel it!”

“Oh God, we lost him, David... we lost our little boy...”

“We must focus on our daughter, Helen. She’s perfect.”

“David, I think there’s something odd happening to Hermione. She keeps having these incidents...”

“But Dad, I want to play with other children!”

“Play with your dollhouse dear, and read your books.”

“Good evening, Mr. Granger. I’m Minerva McGonagall. I’m here to tell you about Hermione and deliver her letter in person.”

“I finally have friends, Dad!”

“It’s really nothing, Dad. That was Draco Malfoy. He’s just a horrible bully, and his father is obviously the same way.”

“Go on Hermione, tell your father which one of them you have a crush on!”

“I can’t believe my little girl is all grown up and going to balls!”

“Dad, please let me go stay with the Weasleys! You know I hate not being in my world!”

“We’re losing her, David. We’re losing her to them...”

“I’m so sorry... Obliviate.”

Hermione fell to her knees, sobbing as the flashes of memory hit her all at once. She found herself crawling to the other three doors to push them open too, so that the false memories could merge with the real ones. She didn’t want to make them forget their other timeline. She wanted them to remember both. She would never hide their memories or their lives from them again, and she wanted them to have everything back.

The antechamber of David Granger’s subconscious was bright now, filling like an ocean of memory and magic. Hermione took a deep breath and dove under the waves and then...

She opened her eyes.

“Well?” asked Draco anxiously. “Are you alright? Did you do it?”

“I... I think so...” she said cautiously, as she looked at her father who was starting to stir.

“Should I knock him out again?” asked Draco uncomfortably. “You were in his head for nearly an hour, and you still need to do your mother...”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Yes, we should do that. Mum has more memories, but I think I know what to do this time.”

Draco nodded and raised his wand toward her father. “*Stupefy*,” he said softly, and Hermione’s father stilled once more.

“Alright,” she said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s move to the other side of the bed while I give Theo an update.”

Draco nodded and began to rearrange the furniture while Hermione reached out to Theo through their bond.

Theo, I’m pretty sure Dad is done. I’m doing Mum next.

She felt his anxiety spike, and she began to siphon just a little.

It will be alright.

Thanks, Hermione. I’ll try to be patient.

She broke their connection and settled back into Draco’s lap before pointing her wand at her mother. “*Invenium memorum*,” she whispered for a second time, as the spell connected once more.

Hermione gasped when she found herself inside her mother’s subconscious. Whereas her father’s mind had been plain and dark, her mother’s was cold. It reminded her of the cell at Hogwarts, when she was a prisoner with little hope of escape.

“Oh Mum, what did I do to you?” she whispered.

Her mother didn’t answer of course. She had no awareness like this. But as Hermione faced the four doors in front of her, she knew what she was looking for this time.

The door she needed would be nearly impossible to open. The memories she had hidden from her mother had been extensive, and now Hermione felt more guilt than ever to realize just how many holes she must have left behind. Even if Helen was unaware of it, something about the emptiness that Hermione had created by removing herself from her mother’s life seemed to seep into her very being.

Hermione proceeded methodically, and on the third try she found the door that would not open.

She tugged on Draco’s magic, harder than ever, as she braced her shoulder against it and pushed until it opened just a crack. It took every bit of effort from both of them to force it to budge, and Hermione felt a wave of magical exhaustion hit her as soon as it started to move. Immediately, the memories began to pour out, brighter and more vibrant than her father’s. Hermione gasped as she didn’t just catch snippets of them, but she felt them too.

“Helen, dear, you make the prettiest flower crowns!”

“Girls can have jobs too, Mum! It’s not just men that work!”

“I did it! I got in! I got in!”

“He’s always looking at you. I’ll bet you five pounds he asks you out before the end of term.”

“Everybody is having sex, Mum, it’s not just me! It’s 1969!”

“Helen Jean Turner, will you marry me?”

“A three bedroom home – perfect for your growing family!”

“No... no, David it hurts!”

“Please, Helen... we said we would give it three tries. Just three tries, and I will never ask this of you again...”

“Congratulations, Mrs. Granger, you’re having twins!”

“Lavender’s blue, dilly dilly, lavender’s green! William’s our king, dilly and Hermione’s our queen...”

“Oh my boy... oh my darling boy... Oh God, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I did to make this happen to you, but please forgive me. Please... I’ll always love you, William....”

“Mrs. Granger, you have to try. Hermione still needs you.”

“I can’t believe she’s already walking.”

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine... you make me happy when skies are grey...”

“Happy birthday, my darling boy. I wish you were here.”

“Mrs. Granger, I can assure you that a three-year-old simply cannot move a piece of furniture that large from one side of the room to the other without hurting herself. What you’re describing is impossible.”

“It’s your birthday again, Will. Somewhere, over the rainbow, bluebirds fly...”

“I don’t know how it happened, David, but I am telling you that Emily pushed Hermione over on the playground, and then Emily’s arm just broke! I heard it happen, and the poor girl was screaming. I can’t explain it!”

“How was ballet dear?”

“Mum, can I have a real birthday party this year? The other girls have them, and I want to make friends.”

“You would be ten years old, Will. Did you know that? I like to think you know that... When you wish upon a star... makes no difference who you are... anything your heart desires... will come to you...”

“A witch? Oh thank God. We will finally have answers!”

“David, do you think William would have been a wizard if he hadn’t died? Would Hermione have had him with her at Hogwarts? I’m worried that she doesn’t seem to have friends.”

“Helen, I need you to talk to Hermione about making friends with girls. My heart can’t stand it that she only hangs around with boys!”

“PETRIFIED!? I’M GOING TO KILL ALBUS DUMBLEDORE! WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON IN THAT SCHOOL? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? I CAN’T LOSE ANOTHER CHILD DAVID!”

“Mum, please... you don't need to give me any details about sex! I can look it up in the library!”

“She’s going to the ball with somebody famous, David! She needs to look perfect!”

“Helen, does Hermione seem tense to you?”

“You’ve been gone for seventeen years, and I still miss you my boy.”

“David, do you think she’ll still want us when she’s done at Hogwarts? Or will she get a job, get married, and then disappear into the wizarding world for good? Will I even be able to see my daughter get married? We’ve never been allowed at that school of hers.”

“A dream is a wish your heart makes... when you’re fast asleep... in dreams you will lose your heartaches... whatever you wish for you keep.... Have faith in your dreams and someday... your rainbow will come smiling through... no matter how your heart is grieving... if you keep on believing... the dream that you wish will come true...”

“Obliviate.”

Hermione was drowning in the flood of emotions – the love, the strength, the grief that her mother still carried for Theo in particular. When she had locked these memories away, she had carved them out en masse. She had not taken the time to fully examine them. And now she could feel everything, and Hermione just knew that Theo would be welcome with open arms. He had barely spoken of his fears, but she knew that he wondered if their parents would be angry with him or would not love him because it had been so long. After feeling her mother’s emotions, Hermione knew that Theo had been worried for nothing. Helen still missed him so much that Hermione wept from it.

Just like her father, she crawled to the other doors and opened them too, allowing the memories to spill out and mix and fill her mother’s subconscious.

“I love you, Mum, and I hope you forgive me,” said Hermione out loud before she took a deep breath and dove to the bottom.

She opened her eyes to find Draco staring at her, with something like fear on his face.

“What?” she asked, as she sat up stiffly.

“You were crying... and singing...” he said. “Songs I’ve never heard before.”

“Oh,” said Hermione in surprise. “My mum... she used to sing children’s songs and lullabies to me. I realized she’s been singing them to Theo too for my whole life, at least until I made her forget him.”

Draco’s gaze softened, and he pulled her in for a kiss.

“Do you think you did it?” he asked, as he released her and looked over at Helen, who was stirring.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “And now I need to face them. Please give me a moment while I revive Dad too.”

Draco nodded firmly and nudged her off of his lap. He leaned down for one more kiss.

“Call me if you need me. I’ll go retrieve the others, and then we’ll be just on the other side of the door.”

Hermione nodded nervously as he slipped out and she approached her father to draw her wand.

“Ennervate,” she whispered, and then she stepped back as her father’s eyes fluttered open at nearly the same moment as her mother’s.

They both winced and struggled to sit up a little while Hermione bit her lip and watched them nervously.

“Hermione?” asked her father first, and Helen gasped as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Hermione was sure her memories were merging.

“Hi, Dad... Hi, Mum...” she said nervously. “I... erm... well...”

She trailed off, having no idea how to start.

“What happened?” asked Helen. “I forgot you... but how could I *ever* forget you? And now we’re in Australia?”

Hermione sighed and lowered herself to the chair.

“You’re going to be angry, but please just hear me out.”

Her parents both looked at her cautiously, but they nodded.

“There was a war...” she began, and once she started she couldn’t seem to stop. She told them nearly everything from that year on the run: how Harry had been given a top-secret

mission to kill Voldemort, how it could *only* be him because of some unique dark magic, and how Hermione and Ron had gone with him to help.

“And there was a battle at Hogwarts,” she sniffed. “And... neither one of them made it.”

Her parents’ eyes were huge as they listened to her describe what came next.

“I was captured by a Death Eater, but it was all a plot you see. He fancied me. He had wanted me for years... and as soon as Voldemort killed Harry, he captured me and pretended to kill me so he could get me into hiding.”

“You’ve been in hiding with a Death Eater?” said her father with a mixture of anger and fear.

“For the last eight months, yes,” said Hermione. “But it’s alright, Dad. He loves me. And I...” she trailed off and looked at her parents nervously. “Well, I love him too. I love him so much that we’re actually engaged now.”

Hermione’s mother gasped.

“I know it’s fast,” said Hermione quickly, “but I’ve grown up. This war has aged me. And he... well, he’s *so* good to me. And he worked for our side undercover. He was the one who killed Voldemort at the very end of it all.”

Her parents’ eyes were both wide and she called in a louder voice, “Draco? Are you back?”

Just as Hermione suspected, Draco had returned with the others and was listening at the door. He slipped in, and he immediately moved to Hermione to place a hand on her shoulder. She reached up and gripped it.

“Mum, Dad, this is Draco Malfoy.”

Her mother was gaping, but it was her father’s eyes that flashed with no small amount of anger.

“You’re the boy who bullied my daughter.”

Hermione felt Draco’s hand clench.

“Yes Sir, I did,” he said.

“Dad, please... there were a lot of reasons for that, and we were just kids. Draco has more than apologized. He loves me, and—”

“He kidnapped you.”

“He *saved* me. He saved me from going to one of the others, and he’s been nothing but respectful toward me. And as I said, he turned for our side and worked under cover up until a couple of weeks ago, when he killed Voldemort himself. He nearly died doing it, too, and our Ministry of Magic has given him a full pardon for his actions during the war because of it.”

David's lips pursed a little, but he fell silent as he studied Draco. Hermione was sure that Draco was doing precisely the same thing, and they were sizing each other up.

But then Draco surprised her by speaking.

"I'm sorry, Sir," he said. "I'm sorry for how I treated Hermione while my father was alive. It's not an excuse, but I was raised to believe that people like her and people like you were somehow less. I know that's all bollocks now, but it took time for me to realize my father had been feeding me a crock of shit for my entire childhood. By the time I finally did, the Dark Lord had risen again, and my father committed me to his service. I never wanted it, not ever, and as soon as I could find Hermione and get her to safety I took my chance."

"And what does your father think now?" asked David. "I recall seeing him fight with Arthur Weasley in a bookstore several years ago."

"He's dead," said Draco bluntly. "He died in the same battle that killed Harry Potter and Ron Weasley and many others. My mother, though, is still alive, and she's in favor. She lives at the Manor with us."

"And you proposed to Hermione?" came Helen's tentative voice.

Hermione jumped in before Draco could say anything. "Well... actually, I sort of proposed to him... in a way... it's a long story, Mum, but let's just say that Voldemort wanted him to get engaged to somebody else. I had to intervene, so I disguised myself and claimed Draco instead. It all worked out."

Both of Hermione's parents fell silent, and Hermione was struggling to read their expressions. They were obviously shocked, and she sensed they were a bit angry too. That was to be expected. But she hoped they were starting to understand that she had little choice. Besides, she knew that the revelation that they had forgotten their daughter for eighteen months was nothing compared to what was coming.

"There's something else we need to tell you," said Hermione.

Helen's eyes immediately widened. "*You're pregnant?!?*"

Now David's eyes widened too, and Hermione's jaw dropped. "*What?* No! Of course I'm not pregnant! Why on earth would you think *that's* what we have to tell you?!"

Draco squeezed her shoulder a little, as though encouraging her to take it back and tell them that she *was*....

No doubt he'll take me as soon as we are alone if I did something like that to try to make it true.

She almost batted his hand away.

Not now, honestly.

“Why wouldn’t I think that when you tell us there is *more* to announce? Whatever it is, I can see that it’s making you even more nervous than the fact that I forgot you and that you returned to me engaged!”

Hermione bit her lip. “Fine. I suppose that’s fair. But that’s not what we have to tell you.”

“Then what is it?” asked her father warily.

Hermione glanced up at Draco and gave him a slightly overwhelmed look before turning back to her parents.

“I just... look, when I tell you this, I want you to try not to freak out. And please remember that nobody who is here had anything to do with it, alright? The people who were involved are all dead.”

This, of course, was not true. But Hermione, Draco, and Theo had agreed that Narcissa’s involvement in Theo’s abduction years ago would remain a secret. In fact, they wouldn’t mention the Malfoys at all. It couldn’t be undone, and there was no reason to share that with Hermione’s parents and risk tainting their view of Draco because of it.

Hermione’s parents were looking scared now, but they nodded slowly.

“Theo?” called Hermione. “Can you come in here too, please?”

Hermione stood and turned to find Theo slipping into the room now. His nerves were spilling over into their bond, and Hermione began to siphon for him as she moved toward him. She slipped her arm around his waist, and he slipped his arm over her shoulder. Then she looked at her parents, who were staring at Theo as though they had just seen a ghost.

“No....” whispered Helen. “No, it can’t be... tell me I’m dreaming, I... *Oh my God...*”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Mum, Dad, this is Theodore Nott. You named him William Granger, but he was taken from you in the hospital just after we were born. He’s magical, like me. The woman who raised him was married to a violent man, and the little boy she gave birth to was stillborn. Her husband was traveling when she went into labor, and she panicked when she realized her baby was gone. The Notts were an old, magical family that required an heir, and she feared her husband would kill her when he learned that their baby had not made it. She managed to access the magical pregnancy and birth records at the Ministry of Magic and found a record of your pregnancy, Mum. She took Theo and swapped him with her own child because our ages were close enough to make it believable, and you would still have me once he was gone.”

Her mother was staring at Theo and not blinking, tears pouring down her cheeks. Her father looked totally overwhelmed, but he found his voice first.

“You know each other? You found each other?”

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but to her surprise Theo began to talk first.

“Yes. I noticed Hermione the first day at Hogwarts because we look so much alike. We were sorted into different Houses, and we weren’t friendly at first... but eventually the similarities became so apparent that I finally confronted my mother about it right before she died. She confessed to what she had done, but by then the war was underway, and it wasn’t safe for us to acknowledge each other. Draco’s been my best friend for most of my life, and I joined the Death Eaters with him because of pressure from my father. He’s dead now too, and once he was gone Draco and I were able to get Hermione to safety after the Battle of Hogwarts, along with a couple more friends. We’ve been living together ever since.”

Helen was holding her hand over her mouth as she just continued to cry, but David looked perturbed.

“You’re a Death Eater?”

Theo’s nerves spiked, and Hermione siphoned harder.

“I was, yes,” he acknowledged. “But like Draco, I never wanted it. Our fathers committed us to his service, and we had no choice but to join. He would have killed us if we refused. Both of us turned to work with the Order as soon as we were able, and at the end of the day I don’t regret it, because it gave me enough influence to keep Hermione and Luna safe for the last eight months. Luna’s *my* fiancée.”

“Luna Lovegood,” added Hermione. “I’ve told both of you about her before.”

“Did somebody call me?” came Luna’s musical voice as she drifted into the bedroom. “Should we call in Blaise and Ginny too? They’ll start snogging on the sofa if we leave them alone too long.”

Hermione’s parents looked gobsmacked, but the comment broke some of the tension, and Hermione snorted. Then she began to laugh, and before she knew it she was clutching at Theo, relief finally hitting her that they were here, and her parents’ memories weren’t wrecked beyond repair. It might take time until things were back to normal, but they *had* time now. They had all the time in the world. Theo held her up, as he started to laugh too, and then Draco joined, and soon all three of them were barely upright.

When their laughter finally died down, Hermione stood and swiped at her eyes. She saw amazement on her father’s face, but her mother was smiling a little through her tears.

“You love each other,” she said.

“Very much,” confirmed Theo. “She’s my baby sister.”

“Oh honestly, I am *not* your baby sister!”

“You’re four minutes younger than me. I stole our birth records to prove it.”

“And four minutes does not make me a baby! It’s Draco who’s the baby!”

“No, it’s *Ginny* who’s the baby,” said Draco instantly.

“You called?” came Ginny’s voice, and now she entered the room with Blaise behind her.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Granger,” she added. “We’ve met a few times before. This is Blaise Zabini, my fiancé. He’s best friends with these two, and all three of these prats held us girls hostage for a time until they finally deigned to tell us all of their secrets. They’re really not so bad once you get to know them, though Theo and Hermione drive the rest of us crazy with their bickering.”

It was said so matter-of-factly, that Hermione’s mother’s tears finally ebbed. She took a deep breath and stood as she moved toward Hermione and Theo.

“I know we’ve just met Will – I mean, *Theo*... but may I?”

All of Theo’s humor had vanished, and now he was looking at Helen with ill-disguised longing.

“Yes... I’d like that, Mum.”

Hermione was immediately pulled into a very tight three-way hug with Theo and Helen, and she heard her mum crying again.

“Oh my boy... *my boy!* I have missed you so much!”

Helen shifted her grip, which allowed Hermione to step out of the embrace, and she saw her father now approaching Draco.

“So...” said David, “you’re engaged to my daughter and best friends with my son.”

“Yes Sir,” said Draco a bit stiffly.

David’s face seemed to crumpled at this, and he just sighed and slumped.

“Then please forgive me for being so defensive. I’ve barely accepted the fact that my little girl is old enough to date boys at all, and then I learn that she’s engaged and our son is alive and engaged too. I’m afraid this has been a lot for me to absorb.”

Draco blinked in surprise, but Hermione smiled a little. This was very much like her father. He could be a little sharp when adjusting to something new, but he usually came around and softened quickly. The familiarity of it warmed her heart.

“It’s no problem,” said Draco, clearly baffled by this change of opinion. No doubt he was accustomed to fathers who were cruel and held onto their anger and fear, using it to hurt others.

David gave him a small smile. “In that case, let’s start over and allow me to introduce myself. I’m David Granger.”

He held out a hand, and Hermione looked around to see that everyone was watching now. Luna had linked arms with Ginny, who was leaning against Blaise. Helen had still not let go of Theo, but he didn’t seem to mind at all as they both turned to look at Draco and David. As

for Hermione, she looked back at Draco and caught his eye, giving him a small smile of encouragement.

Draco exhaled and gripped David's hand.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir. I'm Draco Malfoy, and I'm in love with your daughter.”

Chapter 47: Revenge

It was the morning of the Summer Solstice, and Hermione woke up with a groan.

“Draco...” she whined as his hands slipped under her nightgown.

“What?” he demanded.

She opened a bleary eye. He sounded cross.

“You aren’t supposed to be here. It’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

He ignored her for a moment as he bunched her nightgown up and yanked it over her head. His eyes scanned her body greedily, and Hermione sighed as she let him do it. They seemed to linger on her scar from Dolohov just a little bit, but then they moved down to her knickers.

“Vanish them,” he ordered.

Hermione waved her hand lazily, and then she was bare for him, and he bent down to trace his tongue slowly up her inner thigh, before brushing it lightly over her clit and then back down.

She shuddered and arched, as he gently placed one finger lightly inside of her.

“Draco!” she groaned. He was getting her worked up, and it wasn’t at *all* satisfying. “You need to touch me if you’re going to start this!”

He didn’t move his finger at all, but lifted himself up so she could see his eyes, which were very dark and serious.

“You kicked me out of our bed last night. You deserve some frustration.”

Hermione wriggled her hips, but Draco pinned her. It was gentle – he would never be too rough with her, not ever – but still firm enough that she couldn’t move.

She huffed in irritation.

“I told you, that’s because you aren’t supposed to see the bride before the wedding!”

“That’s utter bollocks, and you know it. I haven’t slept apart from you for a full night since you came back to the Manor after leaving me all those months ago. I was barely asleep before I had a nightmare about it, and then I woke up to discover it was one in the morning. I’ve been awake ever since.”

Hermione softened. “It gave you nightmares?”

Draco nodded, his eyes looking a little haunted. “Horrible ones. I haven’t had dreams like that since you were gone.”

“I’m sorry,” she sighed. “You know I didn’t mean anything by it, I just wanted to uphold tradition.”

He seemed to soften now too, and he took in her earnest face, the ribbon in her hair, and her hips which were jerking just a little bit – though Hermione was now trying to cooperate and suppress it. His eyes warmed with approval.

“I know. That’s why I didn’t come to you before now. I stayed in my bed for four hours so you could get your rest, but I couldn’t stand it any longer, my darling. I don’t ever want to sleep apart from you again.”

“Alright,” she sighed. “You don’t have to. I’m sorry, Draco.”

He lowered his mouth to her breasts.

“Don’t be sorry, just be good, little dove. You’ve been working far too hard.”

Hermione smiled a little at this. Of course she had not been working too hard, but she would never be able to convince Draco of that. From the moment they returned from Australia, he decreed an excessive amount of pampering for her as part of her daily routine.

He had also started training her a little bit.

“You’re going to stay perfectly still for me. I don’t want you to come until I give you permission.”

“Alright,” she breathed, as she shut her eyes and made herself relax. It was the only way to survive the teasing he liked to give her while he built it up for her. She could tell he was staring at her. He always did. But he liked her like this: supple, compliant, open, nude.

He liked to be the one in control, and she certainly didn’t mind.

“You’re going to become my wife today. Twice.”

“I know,” she murmured as he finally rubbed against her clit. Hermione instinctively jerked, but then made herself still as her breathing went shallow. She opened her eyes to find him watching her with approval.

“Very good. Again...”

She exhaled as he did it again, and this time her little jerks were even smaller. It was building like this, and she felt that knot winding tight.

“You can expect a couple of surprises today, my darling. I want this day to be perfect for you.”

“Me too,” she said, as he lowered his head to pull a nipple in her mouth lazily. Hermione stifled a groan.

“Look at how well you’re doing. You’re soaking for me, aren’t you? But you’re doing everything I say.”

“Yes Sir,” she responded.

She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her, his pupils suddenly black.

“*What did you just say?*”

She gave him an innocent smile, though she wanted to smirk at his reaction. Truthfully, this was something *she* had planned for their wedding day too.

“I said ‘*Yes Sir.*’”

“*Fuck...*” he breathed, as he shook his head a little in disbelief. “I never thought you would actually.... That you might...”

“Might what, *Master?*”

Draco’s jaw dropped, and he wrenched that tantalizing finger out her cunt and gripped both wrists above her head to hold her in place.

“*What did you just call me?*”

“You’re the Master of Death, aren’t you? Maybe I want you to master *me* now and then too.”

“Vanish my clothes,” he ordered, and Hermione closed her eyes and flicked a finger so that he was now nude as well.

He wasted no time at all as he slotted into her, and Hermione arched and cried out with relief to feel herself full of him.

She had gotten what she wanted from him. She enjoyed their little training sessions, but sometimes she became impatient and just wanted to come. Draco never *could* resist her when she was extra sweet for him.

Like right now.

He was snapping his hips into her, eyes slightly wild as he stared down at her face.

“Say it again... beg me for it...”

“*Please Master,*” she breathed. “*Please let me come.*”

“*Fuck,* you’re the sweetest goddamned thing,” he said, as he dropped his head to her shoulder and latched onto it. He sucked hard and she gasped. She felt herself growing closer as he suddenly wrenched himself off of her and gripped her firmly by her hips.

Without any further ado, he flipped her over on her stomach and then pulled her up to her knees. He pushed himself into her like this and she sank back down to her chest.

“I’m your master?” he gasped as he began to ram her hard.

“Yes!” she cried out.

“Master of everything, is that right?”

“Yes Sir!”

“Fuck me...” he muttered to himself as he pressed in harder and then ran a gentle finger down the cleft of her arse, and the feeling was so surprising she spasmed and started to come.

“Draco! I’m gonna...” she gasped, as he did it again.

“Tell me. Someday can I master this too?”

“Yes Sir!”

“Fuck...” he groaned, and then she felt him start to come. On and on it went, until she was full of him. He cast his favorite spell to hold it inside of her – it was the wandless magic he performed most often these days – and then he pulled out, while she stayed on her knees with her chest pressed down into the mattress.

She couldn’t see him, but she could feel him. He was gently rubbing a hand over her arse, and then she felt that gentle finger drift down the center once more, making her shudder.

Hermione groaned, but stayed just as she was. He hadn’t told her to relax yet, and she learned he liked to be the one to do that too.

“Would you like that, someday?” he prompted.

“Yes Sir,” she whispered, but she couldn’t help the tremor in her voice.

“Relax, my darling, and look at me.”

Hermione exhaled as she finally lowered herself fully to the bed and turned to face him. He was looking at her with that slightly crazed expression that she knew meant that he was imagining things. She was stoking his obsession with her, though she could scarcely imagine how it could become any greater than it already was.

“You know I like it when you give me your fear.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“And I will never do anything that hurts you.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“So you’ll trust me with it? Maybe you’ll let me start preparing you tonight? It can be very slow. Something new for us to work up to.”

She just nodded, and he leaned down to kiss her deeply, entwining his tongue with hers.

“My perfect girl,” he murmured. “How did I ever get so lucky?”

Hermione gave him a small smile and nestled in. She felt him exhale, as he started to relax too.

“I want to keep my cum in you all day,” he murmured, and she could hear his voice growing sleepy. “I want you to get married with it inside of you. Not that it will do anything for us right now. You’re not fertile at the moment.”

Hermione tried to do the maths in her head, but she soon gave it up and didn’t bother to reach for a potion. She had been deep in wedding planning for the past few months and had mostly stopped tracking her cycles on her own. These days she let Draco be the one to spill the beans about which weeks she was fertile and only worried about potions then. He talked about it often enough that he could never seem to keep it to himself, and he monitored her cycles far more closely than she did.

So far there had been no accidents, and the closer they got to the wedding the less she worried about it because she was practically a mother already. Draco had formally adopted Teddy, after discussing the matter at length with Andromeda, Remus, and Tonks. Though already a Black in a technical sense, both Andromeda and Tonks had been disowned and disinherited. That meant several people would have to die for him to have any claim on the Black fortune. It might have worked in a pinch had Draco and Hermione both perished in the final battle, but since they were alive and planned to have their own family one day, Draco decided to take active measures to enhance Teddy’s position so that he would not be disinherited too.

Draco used the same adoption spell to move Teddy away from Tonks’ line and place him under Draco’s own. He even changed Teddy’s last name while he did it so that his side of the Black family would have a named Black once more. Draco made sure to complete the ritual before he and Hermione were married so that Teddy would be acknowledged as Draco’s son, but not hers.

Then in a move that Hermione knew would surprise most of the pureblood world if they had been aware of it, Draco had gone to the goblins and preemptively signed away his rights to any claim on the Black fortune that came from Hermione’s side of the family. Even marriage would not make Draco entitled to it, and it meant that *Teddy* would no longer be entitled to it either since Teddy was now part of Draco’s direct line.

“I gave that fortune to you, my darling. It was always meant to be yours and only yours until you want to part with it. If I sign my rights away before we marry, then our lines will still be separate until we have our own children someday. Teddy has rights to his own fortune that have been secured through my line only, and there is no need for him to have a competing claim on yours. Sirius’s fortune and Grimmauld Place should pass down through your line and not mine.”

Draco was absolutely correct about this, and Hermione had been impressed by his foresight and planning once he explained it to her. Conveniently, Snape had managed to kill Rodolphus Lestrage just before Narcissa and Andromeda killed Bellatrix Black Lestrage during the final battle. Bellatrix – being Bellatrix – had ensured that she would inherit from her husband if he predeceased her. And of course she had never intended for her fortune to be claimed by anybody but Draco or his children, provided he continued to support the Dark Lord.

She certainly did not have time to disinherit Draco once she discovered the truth about his loyalties.

That meant that Draco ended up first in line for Bellatrix's share of the Black fortune, along with the entire Lestrage estate as well. As a Malfoy he certainly didn't need it, so his solution was to adopt Teddy first and then claim everything on Teddy's behalf, to be held in trust until Teddy was of age and old enough to manage it himself.

It seemed fitting that Teddy would be the one to continue that side of the Black family into the next generation, especially since he was biologically a half-breed. Hermione knew that Bellatrix absolutely *hated* what Draco had done to ensure that Teddy was Draco's direct heir to the Blacks.

Because of course Draco had called Bellatrix with the Resurrection Stone just so he and Hermione could gloat about it.

Bellatrix had raved and screamed and threatened to curse them from the grave for ensuring that her and her husband's legacy went to a half-werewolf. Draco had just watched her curiously, with his head cocked.

"What do you think, sweet girl, should I send her into the Beyond too? The Dark Lord could surely use a companion."

"I don't know, Draco, the Black family magic might think that you were the one who killed her if you do that. It's all a bit uncertain, isn't it? I'm not sure how the family magic would view it since she's already dead."

"Good point. We had better not do that until we are done having children. She's certainly not worth risking impotence."

Teddy was now Theodore Remus Lupin Black, and he had his own fortune waiting for him and an entire village of people to help raise him until that time came.

As for Andromeda, she had sold her small cottage and moved into Malfoy Manor with them, sharing the wing with Narcissa. Theo and Luna had moved into Nott Castle and were deep in the throes of a full renovation to make it less barren and more inviting. Blaise and Ginny now lived at one of his many properties, and Blaise had also given a home to Molly and Arthur as a sort of apology for burning down the Burrow.

The Burrow, however, had not been rebuilt.

Grimmauld Place was empty now, ever since the Walshes moved back to Whitby, but Mary Walsh spent so much time at the Manor that she often slept in Luna's old room in their wing. It was connected to Theo's old room of course, which was now Teddy's nursery. Mary was turning into some blend of an older sister, aunt, and nanny for Teddy during Hogwarts breaks.

Teddy loved Mary just as much as she loved him.

To the shock of nearly everyone except for Andromeda and Hermione, Draco proved that he made an *exceptional* father. While Hermione had spent most of the spring doing a correspondence course at Hogwarts that was arranged through Minerva McGonagall, Draco had done nothing at all except parent the little boy. Hermione stepped in when she could, but Draco had shown that he was more than capable of taking care of a baby entirely on his own – and with the help of Andromeda, Narcissa, the elves, Mary, Hermione, and their friends, he had an enormous amount of built-in support when he needed it. In fact, he was so good at it, that he had already announced he wanted to be a stay at home parent so Hermione could have a career – or just spend her days being pampered if that was what she preferred to do.

"I love taking care of you and our family, sweet girl. It's my favorite thing to do."

He said it was his calling, and she knew he was very eager to give Teddy another playmate that was close in age. As it was, the only other child in Teddy's life at the moment was Rose Parkinson, though she was still a young baby and not quite old enough to play yet.

Pansy's mother had been pregnant during that disastrous garden party where Hermione had eavesdropped and still had not given birth before the final battle. So when Pansy appeared at Malfoy Manor a few months later with a tiny baby girl in her arms, everyone was very surprised.

"She's not a boy, and my parents are disappointed. They barely acknowledge her, and she's being raised by the elves while my father complains about having to fund dowries for five girls. I want her to have a better childhood than I did and not be forced into a tie with a man who might hurt her. I'm working on bringing my parents around to her, but it's taking time, and I think some distance might help while my parents get used to the idea that the estate is probably going to end up with a distant relative. So can we stay for a little while?"

Draco took one look at baby Rose and promptly melted. He and Hermione invited Pansy and Rose to stay for as long as they wished, and they had temporarily moved into the same wing as Andromeda and Narcissa. That had been a few months ago, and they still had not left. It had been a good thing all around – Pansy had a little freedom from her parents, though as the oldest daughter she could not cut them out completely. Baby Rose was soon receiving just as much attention and love as Teddy. And the move accelerated the slow thawing of Hermione's and Pansy's relationship, and they were now becoming friends.

Hermione wasn't quite ready to add another baby to their brood, but she thought she would be soon. Draco was a father already, and Hermione was practically a mother too.

Hermione looked at Draco and turned to find him breathing deeply next to her, finally able to fall asleep now that he was in bed with her.

She closed her eyes and snuggled in to sleep a bit more too.

Sod tradition.

“Hermione, you’re beautiful,” said Helen, as she stared at her daughter in the mirror of the small bride’s room at the church where Hermione had been raised.

Hermione just gave her mother a smile back.

They were getting married twice today – first in the muggle world and then in the wizarding one once night fell. The Summer Solstice had, rather unfortunately, fallen on a Monday that year, but there were still a surprising number of muggle guests who said they would be attending.

Most of them were neighbors or distant relatives or old friends of her parents. The only wizards in attendance for this were Narcissa, Andromeda, Teddy, Mary, and her closest friends. They would be coming to both ceremonies of course, as would Hermione’s parents. But Hermione had not trusted many other wizards to be present at the muggle ceremony, so she kept her own guest list limited.

She didn’t mind it, though. Every person she truly, *deeply* cared about was here.

Helen Granger had pleaded with Hermione to get married on a Saturday, but she refused to do it.

“The wizarding wedding vows will be strongest on a night like the Summer Solstice. I don’t want to have two different anniversaries.”

So here she was, getting ready to walk down the aisle of the pretty stone church at one in the afternoon on a Monday. Sunset wouldn’t take place until nearly ten o’clock that night, so they had time before they needed to get back to Malfoy Manor.

“You’re father’s waiting,” said Helen, who was dabbing her eyes a little.

Hermione smiled and turned to head toward the door, where David was lingering. His breath caught when he saw her.

“My God,” he whispered. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“It’s the right thing for me, Dad,” she said. “He’s my whole world.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he said. “I’ve become rather fond of him myself.”

Hermione smiled a little and picked up her bouquet. It was composed of flowers from the Manor gardens in a variety of colors that Posy had hand-tied for her.

There was yellow for prosperity. Blue for peace. Orange for passion. Purple for happiness. Greenery for fecundity and birth. Red for power. White for innocent love. And Posy had even found the slightest hint of black for love after death.

It was a small nod to wizarding tradition that Hermione insisted upon using for her muggle wedding, and it fit rather well she thought. The church where they were getting married had several stunning stained glass windows that were in a rainbow of colors too. A bride could choose virtually any color she wished, and it would coordinate as well as any other.

Why stop at one? Let's use them all.

Luna and Ginny had smaller bouquets that matched Hermione's, and they wore blue bridesmaid dresses that fell in a straight sheath to the floor. The sapphire shade of their dresses matched the ring Draco had given to her for their tying.

Hermione did a quick check of her person to make sure she had followed the *other* traditions she wanted to observe for this part of their big day.

Something old: her Columba pendant, which she still wore at all times. The Aquila knives were carefully holstered to her thigh.

Something new: some diamond earrings Draco had gifted to her that morning that were muggle in origin. When she told him about this tradition, his face lit with excitement, and he assured her he would take care of it for her. The earrings were simple, but stunning in a teardrop shape and matched her dress perfectly.

Something borrowed: her mother's wedding veil, which was made out of antique lace and had been one of those things Hermione had coveted as a young girl. Her mother used to let her play with it, *carefully*, and Hermione always knew she wanted to wear it to her own wedding someday.

Something blue: her ring of course.

She was ready and took a deep breath as she gripped her father's arm. Soon the music was beginning, and Ginny and Luna processed up to the front to join Draco, Theo, and Blaise, who were waiting for them.

"Ready?" asked her father, as the music changed.

Hermione nodded, and the doors opened for her. Her gaze was pulled to Draco, who was in a morning coat with a vest in blue that matched the bridesmaids and other groomsmen. His boutonniere, however, was just two colors: the white from her bouquet and that slightest hint of black.

He *was* the Master of Death, after all.

His eyes were huge as he took in Hermione's muggle wedding dress, which was off her shoulders and tight through the bodice, before it flared out to end in a full skirt with a small train. She could tell from the look on his face that he had never seen anything like it before, but he *adored* it.

"Hermione," he breathed, when she got to the front with her father.

She gave him a small smile, and he gripped her hand as the pastor began to recite the words.

Draco didn't tear his eyes away from her, and Hermione felt herself blush. Draco Malfoy, of course, had no identity in the muggle world, so to make this happen he had to create an entirely new one for himself. He forged papers and bank records and even a driving license so that their marriage would be legally registered in muggle Britain. These weren't his traditions, and she knew that he recognized very few of the passages being spoken. But this was the old church wedding Hermione had always wanted as a little girl, and she could tell that he was moved by it.

"I, Hermione Jean Granger, do take you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, to be my wedded husband..."

Soon they were exchanging rings, and Hermione slipped one onto his finger, while he placed a muggle ring on hers. When it came time to kiss her, he did it softly, and then they were husband and wife, *at least in the muggle world*.

"We're married, my darling," he whispered, and he beamed at her.

Hermione found herself beaming back, utterly struck by that small comment. Their magical wedding was still to come, but Draco Malfoy – a man who had been raised to think that people like her were less and who had to falsify documents to even be here today – thought he was married to her. Their muggle wedding was just as valid in his mind as the wizarding one, and Hermione felt her breath catch.

"It's real, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," he said firmly. "And we'll do it again in a few hours. But first, let's celebrate with your muggle friends."

Hermione allowed herself to be led back down the aisle by him, and soon they moved to a reception at a nearby hall that had been made stunning by Helen's industriousness. The reception was really for her parents. The only thing she had cared about was the ceremony in the little church where she had grown up, but she would not deny her mother the chance to host their muggle friends at her only daughter's wedding.

Hermione had seen in her mother's mind that it was a dream she thought she had lost when Hermione entered the wizarding world. After the memories Hermione had hidden, she felt she owed her mother this.

It was lovely and just how Helen Granger had envisioned.

After eating, dancing, mingling, and even letting Draco reach under her dress to retrieve the garter – he had *certainly* copped a feel during that part – Hermione and Draco “drove away,” which was really just a quick spin around the block before apparating back to Malfoy Manor.

It was six o’clock now, and their magical wedding feast would be starting in an hour.

“Theo’s bringing your parents,” said Draco. “They’ll be here soon. Posy has everything you need for this part, and once our bond is complete, I’ve arranged a very special wedding gift for you before I finally explore that lovely little arse.”

Hermione blushed, but smiled and nodded demurely. “Alright.”

Draco grinned down at her and gave her a deep kiss.

“Then run along and get dressed, my darling wife. I’ll meet you in the gardens.”

Hermione watched him slip into his old bedroom, but not before he cast a look back at her that told her he had been thinking about her arse all day.

She would be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous about it. She wasn’t entirely sure what kind of ‘exploration’ and ‘preparation’ he had in mind. But she trusted Draco, and she had her ring to calm her while she waited for that time. She knew he would be gentle. He wouldn’t let it hurt. And if that was what he wanted from her tonight, who was she to deny him?

He had given her everything he had to give, just like he promised.

Within seconds of Draco walking out, Posy appeared with a *POP!*

“Mistress is beautiful!” she said with watery eyes. “And now my Mistress is marrying Master Draco! House Black will be united tonight!”

Hermione smiled down at the little elf. “You’re right, Posy. Are you ready to help me with it? You know that Draco and I made a deal: my mother and I would arrange the muggle wedding, and he and Narcissa were in charge of the wizarding one. The whole thing will be a bit of a surprise for me, except for the spells used during the ceremony.”

Posy bobbed a curtsy. “I is ready, Mistress, and I is thinking that Mistress will like this very much!” she said. “Your gown is in the closet.”

Hermione took a deep breath as she opened it to see what Draco had selected for her. She knew it would be white, because that was the color she had tied in. The wedding colors had to match for the bond to become permanent – and Draco would not accept anything but full permanence. But otherwise, she didn’t know what to expect.

She gasped when the door opened to reveal one of the most stunning and elaborate gowns she had ever seen, placed on a faceless mannequin that Posy must have erected while she and Draco were getting married in the muggle world earlier that day.

It was made of white silk, and like her tying dress, it had a square neckline that was low cut, but this time there were sheer sleeves that would cover her arms. In lieu of a train, it had a cape attached to it that extended across her shoulders and all the way to the ground, beyond the edge of the skirt. While the fabric of the dress was white, the lining of the cape and the embroidery on the gown was crimson – red for power, just like Draco had worn for their tie.

She approached it slowly, her mouth hanging open as she studied the embroidery on it. The hem of the skirt was designed with flowers from the Manor gardens and a few blooms from her parents' home. The sycamore tree from Grimmauld place was embroidered up one side and the Whomping Willow from Hogwarts up the other. There were even a couple of gnomes peeking out from behind the Whomping Willow that reminded her of the Burrow and made her heart squeeze.

The small flowers framed her neckline too. Then she began to circle it, and as she moved to the back and saw the full scope of the cape she gasped a second time.

The cape was a work of art on its own. In the upper left corner was the Malfoy crest. The upper right corner contained the Black crest. The lower left corner featured the Nott crest and the lower right was one that Hermione distantly recognized as being the crest of House Potter. Along the bottom hem of the cape there were animals. On the left side near the Nott crest was a horse and a hound. On the right side near the Potter crest was a stag and a Jack Russel terrier. They were for Ginny and Luna, along with Harry and Ron of course, and in between them was a rendering of Crookshanks, who were curled into a ball. Just below the Malfoy crest was an embroidered eagle that was holding a familiar wand. Below the Black crest was a dove, clutching a familiar ring. And in the middle of all of it was a phoenix that looked awfully like Fawkes, uniting them all, superimposed over a rendering of fabric that Hermione knew must have represented the Invisibility Cloak.

It was one of the most incredible things Hermione had ever seen.

"This is too much," she breathed, as she stared at it, but Posy shook her head firmly.

"Master Draco is having one for himself too, Mistress. 'Tis proper for a wedding such as yours."

With that, Posy snapped her fingers and the cape detached and floated out to be laid on top of the bed.

"You is not wearing that part until the cloaking, Mistress."

Hermione nodded and turned around so Posy could help unfasten her muggle dress. After stepping out of it, Posy gave Hermione another surprise.

"You is not to wear undergarments, Mistress."

"Pardon?" asked Hermione.

"Master's orders. He is saying he is wanting access to you tonight."

Hermione forced herself not to blush as she stripped naked. Posy and Poppy had seen her and Draco in a compromising position many times by this point.

“I’m not sure how he thinks he will touch me through that dress,” she said, nodding toward it as Posy carefully levitated it over her head.

“Posy is not knowing, Mistress. But Posy is thinking that if Master Draco is wanting you, then Master Draco is finding a way.”

Hermione shuddered as the dress finally lowered over her, and once it was secured she ran a hand across it, marveling once more at the intricate design.

“And we can’t forget the jewels, Mistress. They is just as important.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, as Posy brought over several boxes, and then her jaw dropped when they were opened.

She was still wearing the earrings he had gifted to her for their muggle wedding, but Posy presented a set of ruby earrings for this.

“They is from House Potter,” said Posy. “We is getting them from your Hermione vault.”

Hermione swallowed hard as she nodded and carefully removed the ones Draco had gifted her and placed the Potter rubies instead.

“And we is finding this necklace from your Columba vault. ‘Tis a lovely match.”

With this, a spectacular necklace that must have once belonged to Sirius was produced, and Posy helped Hermione place it around her neck, removing her Columba pendant for the first time. It felt cold and heavy, and Hermione stared at herself in the mirror in disbelief.

“We is also having two bracelets, Mistress,” added Posy, opening two more boxes now.

“This is from Master Theo and House Nott.”

Posy clasped a diamond bangle around one wrist.

“And this is made by your parents, Mistress. They is giving you one from House Granger, as the first of your name.”

Hermione gasped in surprise as a beautiful, delicate bracelet that was studded in rubies and diamonds was produced. It was different than the one Theo had given to her, but just as lovely. Her eyes welled with tears, and Posy reached up quickly to dab them.

“You must not cry! We is needing you to be perfect, Mistress!”

Finally, Posy produced a large box and opened it with a flourish.

“Tis the wedding tiara from House Malfoy, Mistress. Every Malfoy bride has worn it for a thousand years.”

Hermione's heart was pounding as she tentatively reached out and touched it. Draco had not told her about this, but perhaps she should not be surprised. She knew that witches often wore tiaras from their future husbands' families when they got married – Fleur had certainly worn the Weasley tiara at her wedding to Bill – but this piece was larger, more elaborate, and utterly *stunning*.

Hermione could scarcely believe it.

“Alright,” she said in a hoarse voice as Posy carefully levitated it to Hermione's head. It nestled into her curls, and when she turned to look in the mirror she barely recognized herself. She looked like a princess that he was dressing up just as he wished.

She glanced around her room and was once again reminded of her old dollhouse.

Then again, these days the entire *Manor* was her dollhouse. Draco had been redecorating the Manor room by room so that the colors were more to her taste. He said he liked to see her surrounded by pale blue and pink and other soft neutrals.

“This will be your home forever, my darling. I must make it perfect for you.”

And now with the gown and tiara, Draco was claiming her as his. She knew it would have perturbed her a year ago, but now it felt perfect. She wanted to be his. She wanted to let him be the one to arrange her wardrobe and living space and skincare regime because it made him content.

“I'll wear it proudly,” she said.

Posy beamed at her, and then Hermione was being hurried out.

“You must not miss the feast, Mistress!”

Hermione descended slowly through her wing and then down the stairs. The blood wards had been removed a couple of months ago once Draco was satisfied that every person from whom Hermione had stolen magic was either dead or imprisoned.

She could move freely now.

“Hermione!” called Theo's voice, and she saw him waiting with her parents at the base of the main staircase. Draco had dropped the anti-muggle wards for this, and her parents were staring around her home for the first time in utter amazement.

Then they caught sight of her and their jaws dropped.

“My God,” said her mother, as she approached and took it all in. “You're beautiful. And I know you told me that Draco is practically wizarding royalty, but I did not appreciate what that meant until this very moment.”

I'm practically wizarding royalty too, she wanted to say. She exchanged a glance with Theo, whose eyes were twinkling, and she realized she must have spoken out loud through their bond.

Their parents had only been informed that Theo owned a castle a few weeks ago. They had been taking a lot of time to get to know each other since Australia, but most of their time had been spent in the muggle world. Theo had only brought them to his estate once he was certain it was clear of dark magic from Voldemort's time there.

"I don't suppose I have to worry about Draco being able to take care of my little girl," said David, as he eyed her tiara.

Hermione huffed a laugh. "No, Dad. You will never have to worry about that."

"Let's go meet the others," said Theo, who extended his arm to her. "They are waiting for us at the head table."

Hermione gripped his arm, and he escorted her through the back of the Manor and out into the early evening sun, as their parents followed behind.

"You're stunning," he whispered. "Draco is going to die when he sees you."

"I hope not!" declared Hermione, though secretly she was very pleased.

When they turned the corner to the gardens, she found an arrangement set up very much like the tying ceremony, though this time there were no Death Eaters present. One section of the gardens had been arranged with multiple tables, and flowers in red and white were spilling over a large spread of food.

As they walked in, multiple people audibly gasped to see her, and Draco's blonde head whipped around at the commotion. His jaw dropped, and he appeared momentarily stunned while he took her in, and she did the same to him.

Whereas she was white with red embroidery, he was wearing the reverse: red embroidered with white. His was less elaborate than hers, but she still saw the same flowers from the Manor gardens stitched along the bottom hem of his tunic. He strode forward to meet her, his eyes riveted as though he was trying to memorize this.

"Hermione," he breathed, and he pulled her in for a deep kiss. She was breathless by the time they broke away, and she looked at his grey eyes, which were still wide and unblinking.

"Well? Let's eat and then get married again."

The time for their second wedding had come.

Just like their tying, the ceremony would take place after night fell, in the section of the gardens where the earth magic was strongest. Just before ten at night the feast wrapped up, and everyone moved to the rows of chairs, while Hermione hung back near the tree where she had transformed into Columba before intervening with Voldemort.

Draco was at the front, with Theo and Blaise wearing red robes to match. Ginny and Luna were on the other side in white for Hermione. And when Hermione stepped out into the aisle, this time the torches lit for *her*, and there were murmurings as her jewels caught the light.

Draco's expression was so dark and covetous that she felt like some sort of sacrifice, but she didn't care. She had chosen this, intentionally, and she didn't have a single regret or second thought.

She walked slowly toward the front, catching the eyes of those she knew.

There were all of the surviving Weasleys, Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape, and Filius Flitwick. Andromeda was there with Teddy and Mary, along with the boons who were becoming her friends. Pansy Parkinson was bouncing Rose on her knee. She was seated a bit apart from the rest of her family and closer to the other pureblood girls, though the Greengrass family was notably absent. And as Hermione walked forward she silently turned the ring that Draco had pressed into her hand just minutes earlier three times before slipping it on her thumb for safe-keeping.

The moment the third turn was complete, Harry and Ron appeared for her, to be there in person.

She was bound to the Master of Death, but she was not the master herself. And that meant that she could call her closest friends for this, but she was the only one who could see them. They were watching her, smiling and *proud*.

She took a deep breath so she wouldn't cry.

"My darling girl," murmured Draco, as he stepped forward to grasp her hand.

Hermione straightened her shoulders and faced him. They were already married, it was true, but this would be a bonding. It was something deeper and more intimate than anything they had done before. Their magic was already shared, but with this they would entwine their souls too. It was permanent and irrevocable. They would not merge, but would adhere – always dwelling with the other. They would be able to feel the other when they were physically apart during life. And they would die within seconds of each other because they would have to cross the veil together. And once they were gone, they would join their friends on the other side and be with each other for eternity.

Draco would not have had it any other way, and Hermione found she wanted it nearly as much as he did.

Draco pulled her to the small table with a knife that had a hilt that glittered in the torch light.

“It’s the Black marriage knife,” he whispered. “It’s only used for bonds like this.”

Theo, Luna, Blaise, and Ginny began to chant beside them as Draco reached for it and opened his palm. He started to aim the blade toward Hermione too, but he faltered – he could never make himself cut her like that.

She smiled as she pulled the knife from his hand and did it herself. He turned pale as he saw the red bloom across her palm, but she placed the knife back on the table and then gripped his hand firmly against hers.

“Do it,” she whispered. Draco swallowed, but began to chant, claiming Columba Aquila Black as his wife to be the newest member of House Malfoy and the final joining of two lines of House Black.

Because yes, she had to marry him as Columba Black since that was the way they had tied.

This, of course, was the biggest reason she wanted the muggle wedding in the first place. She was Columba Black, but she was also Hermione Granger. Draco – in a rare fit of guilt – had actually offered to break his tie with Columba and then immediately tie with her as Hermione instead so he could marry her that way too, but Hermione declined. Their shared power was special and a byproduct of the fact that they were technically related to one another and she had been a virgin when the tie took place. If they broke their tie, they would never be able to get that magic back again, and she was unwilling to give it up. So instead, she came up with a compromise and proposed two weddings: Draco Malfoy would marry Hermione Granger in the muggle world and Columba Black in the wizarding one.

As Draco’s words were spoken, the chanting grew stronger as the guests joined in, and Hermione felt her vision swim as her soul wrapped itself around Draco’s for the first time.

It was dark and slippery, much like his magic had been, and there was something distinctly ancient and a little unsettling about it. If she looked at it too closely, it was almost as though she could peer through the veil and see through it to the other side. In her periphery, her dead friends who had joined her grew brighter as her connection to them drew closer.

Draco let out a low groan, and Hermione forced her eyes open to see that his were squeezed shut. They were both hunched over, as their souls touched and then entwined and then adhered. They were still distinct – Hermione could feel hers against his – but they were stuck together now, melding just a little bit as their cracks filled with each other.

Then Draco opened his eyes and stared right at her, and Hermione gasped.

She could feel it for the first time: that dark desire, the obsession, the singular focus on her as the only thing he had ever truly wanted. It made her hot, needy, *wet*.

“*Oh my fucking Merlin,*” Draco whispered as he sensed her desire.

His hand jerked, as though about to cup her sex through her voluminous dress, when he caught himself and remembered they were in front of an audience.

They both straightened up, still faint from the thing they had just done, as Theo rushed forward and healed both of their hands.

“Are you alright?” he said under his breath.

Only now did Hermione look around the guests to see they were watching the bonding with amazement and a little bit of fear. This was a special type of bond – one that was only possible because of the way they tied in the first place – and it was not something that any of the guests had seen before.

“Yes,” whispered Hermione. “Yes, I’m... well I’m *excellent*, actually. It was just very intense.”

Theo looked a bit pale, but he nodded and stepped back as Draco gripped her hand again and led her to the other side of the small table to make the final announcement, in accordance with his family’s traditions.

“House Malfoy has joined with House Black,” he said out loud. “Our lines will be fruitful, and our magic will be strong.”

Theo and Ginny then moved forward, carrying Hermione’s cape and one for Draco too. Unsurprisingly, his was nearly the inverse of hers, with red fabric embroidered in white. His cape contained the Malfoy and Black crests in the upper corners. Columba and Aquila were there too, each holding a Deathly Hallow, along with Fawkes in the middle superimposed over the third. But along the bottom, where hers featured animals, his featured magical creatures: Veela, thestrals, dragons, centaurs, and even two house elves that looked very much like Poppy and Posy.

Their capes were secured, and then Draco gripped her hand and raised it for a kiss.

“Rise and greet my wife: Hermione Jean Granger Malfoy, also known as Columba Aquila Black Malfoy.”

As one the audience rose and the torches flared as they were introduced to the wizarding world as a married couple for the first time.

Draco turned to her and gave her a deep kiss that was so reminiscent of their tying it made Hermione’s heart twinge. He must have felt it too, because he jerked just a little as his hand squeezed her waist.

He released her with a dark look.

“I will stay at the reception for one hour, and then I will give you your wedding gifts, and then I’m taking you,” he whispered into her ear. “I want to be fucking you before the Solstice is over.”

Hermione felt her knees go a little weak, but she just nodded quickly as he pulled away and then escorted her back down the aisle. The light from her dead friends grew more distant, and Hermione wished them a silent farewell as she made her way to the end.

She took a deep breath and turned to her husband, her heart full as she looked at him in the low light.

He was hers, and they had done it.

“We need to make our escape,” muttered Draco, as they moved away from a group of guests.

“The party is going to last all night,” said Hermione.

“So? I don’t intend to stay. Mother can handle them for us. Your wedding gifts will require us to leave the gardens, and then I need to get inside of you. I can feel how much you want it, and it’s making me painfully hard.”

Hermione flushed with heat. She *did* want it. He wanted it too. She could feel it a little bit from his side through their new bond, and she wondered what on earth they had done to themselves.

“Is it always going to be like this?” she asked, as she let him grip her hand and lead her away, back toward the Manor. The crowd parted for them, as the guests sent knowing looks their way. Nobody tried to stop them.

“Do you mean am I always going to be ravenous for you? Yes. I think that’s a safe assumption.”

“We’ll never make it out of bed,” she groaned.

“That is not a problem. We’re rich, darling. We can just eat, sleep, fuck, and play with Teddy and our children. I don’t see a reason to do anything else, *ever*.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Draco did not look like he was joking as he pulled her toward the house.

“Now...” he said. “It’s time for your first wedding gift.”

“You’ve given me *many* wedding gifts,” she countered, as she gestured toward her dress and tiara and wedding ring from their muggle ceremony.

Draco’s eyes softened. “All of those things you are entitled to as my wife. This next thing though... let’s call it a one-time experience. I’ve been saving it for a special night.”

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at him, as he pulled her behind a row of hedges, out of the view of any guests, and then to her utter shock he pulled out her beaded bag from a pocket in his tunic and retrieved his broom from it.

“We need to apparate. Let’s fly to the fields at the edge of the wards.”

Very intrigued now, Hermione just nodded and transformed into Aquila. She took off into the sky as Draco mounted the broom and flew next to her. It was only a few minutes, but it was much faster than walking, especially in her heavy dress.

When she reached the familiar field she lowered herself to the ground to transform back into herself and Draco landed gracefully next to her.

“The next step,” he said, “is a spot of apparition.”

He put the broom back into her bag and now retrieved the Invisibility Cloak. Hermione looked at him in surprise.

“Do we need to apparate under it?” she asked.

Draco nodded. “You told me once you used to do that with Potter.”

“We did,” she said. “We got very good at it.”

“In that case, I need you to apparate us to Hogsmeade, on the north end of High Street. We need to stay under the Cloak.”

Utterly perplexed now, Hermione just nodded as Draco threw it over them both.

“Hug me,” she said. “That will give us the best chance of not being seen.”

Draco immediately complied and ran a hand over one breast as he pulled her close.

“You’re distracting me,” she chided, but he said nothing. She felt him grin into her hair, as she carefully made a very tight turn and squeezed through that familiar tube. They emerged on the other side with a *CRACK!*

Hermione looked around under the Cloak and saw that the streets of Hogsmeade were bustling, despite the lateness of the hour. Of course they were: it was the Solstice, and plenty of witches and wizards were celebrating.

“This way,” whispered Draco, as he gripped her hand and tugged on it. He pulled her a short distance down a side street, until he came to a halt at a familiar building.

“I’ll probably need the Resurrection Stone for this since it will need to be very subtle, and I have to do this one myself. But I thought you might like to watch.”

Hermione’s heart started to pound with anticipation as she slipped his ring with the Resurrection Stone off of her finger and handed it back to him. Draco placed it on his right ring finger and pulled out the Elder Wand from his tunic at the same time.

“Wait for it,” he muttered, and they positioned themselves near the door, waiting for it to open for a visible patron.

It took only a couple of minutes before somebody from the inside pushed it open to leave, and Hermione and Draco darted through.

“There he is,” whispered Draco, gesturing to the old man behind the bar, serving some rowdy guests with a scowl on his face.

“We’re really going to do this now?” she murmured in slight disbelief.

“No better time,” said Draco back to her. “We will have plenty of eyewitnesses to a natural death, and you and I are supposed to be at the Manor fucking each other’s brains out at this very moment. Which – let’s be clear – will be happening soon.”

Hermione chuckled, and Draco did too as he moved behind her, and they crept together toward the very center of the Hogshead, still hidden under the Cloak.

“Watch it,” he whispered in her ear. “I’m going to kill him for you, my darling. Please consider this to be my first husbandly act in your name.”

Hermione was spellbound as she felt Draco grip the wand, part the Invisibility Cloak ever so slightly, and concentrate. He pointed the wand at the old man and started to tug on her magic. That soul that she both knew so well and was still entirely unfamiliar to her seemed to darken, and Hermione had to suppress a moan.

“Fuck me, this is turning you on isn’t it?” he whispered. “I can feel it through our marriage bond.”

“I think everything about you turns me on,” she breathed. “Our bond...”

“I know, sweet girl. But keep those eyes open. I want you to see his life fade. I know how much you despise him. I know you want this just as much as I do. Watch for it.”

She felt Draco’s magic thicken as he called on Death, this time with less drama and fanfare than the time he had killed Voldemort. They were in the middle of a crowded bar, so he couldn’t just cast an *Avada*, not now that he had been pardoned. But while Death occasionally chose to be dramatic, it could also be very subtle when necessary.

It could find you at any time.

Hermione’s eyes were peeled, and she couldn’t turn away as she felt it happen.

Death reached out for Aberforth Dumbledore’s heart and plucked it.

Aberforth gasped as he clutched at his chest and doubled over. The patrons closest to him shouted and tried to help, but she felt Draco call on Death to *squeeze*.

His eyes rolled up, and his hand fell from his chest as he lurched forward and crashed head-first into the bar.

“Somebody call a healer!” cried a patron, as another ran to the dingy fireplace to floo St. Mungo’s.

But it was too late. Hermione sensed the faintest presence cross near Draco's soul.

"I've collected him for you, little dove. He's gone now. Come along for your next surprise."

Hermione let him lead her away, adrenaline rushing through her at what she had just witnessed.

It had been so careful, so precise. Aberforth Dumbledore had simply suffered a major heart attack, and he had died before help could be found. Nobody would ever suspect that it had been caused by external forces.

There was no violent murder, just *direction*. Draco simply tapped on Death's shoulder and said, *take that one right there*.

It was both terrifying and *thrilling* how easily and silently Draco could kill now.

They only had to wait a few seconds before the door was opening again, and they could slip out into the night, still under the Cloak. Draco gripped her hand and led her to High Street again, before turning on the spot and appearing as close to Malfoy Manor as they could manage.

"Before I give you my next gift, I need to know... is Kingsley Shacklebolt still off my list? Because I would love nothing more than to take him out too after the trouble he gave me with your pardon."

Hermione frowned as she considered this.

"For now... I think we leave him alone," she said slowly. "He's the Minister of Magic, and removing him will create another power vacuum. As much as I don't like him, he's no blood purist. The wizarding world needs him right now until it's fully recovered from Voldemort, and it's going to be a long time until blood prejudices have been eradicated from the Ministry and its laws. Shacklebolt is working on it, but it may take him years until it's fully purged. I fear that if you kill him then a true blood purist would step into his place, and we will never make that sort of progress in government."

"I don't like it," insisted Draco.

Hermione gave him a small smile and placed her hand on his chest. He gripped it and held it over his heart.

"I know you don't. But there are some advantages to keeping him in power while you and I settle into our new life together. He's terrified of you, and he's wary of me. Having a powerful man like that under our thumbs is not a bad thing, Draco. I don't think he will actively interfere with our lives, but if he starts to become too difficult to control with idle threats..."

"Then I can take him out?"

Hermione inclined her head. "Yes. For now, he's off the list, but we will keep an eye on him. His leash will be short."

Draco nodded once. "In that case, your next gift should be in my old bedroom. Let's fly."

Hermione nodded, eager to be alone with him, as she transformed into Aquila and waited for him to mount his broom. As soon as he kicked off, she spread her wings and followed him the short distance through the night sky to the large patio where she had first learned to fly. In the distance she could see lights from the party still in full swing.

She transformed back into herself, and Draco dismounted. He gripped her hand and pulled her toward him, before cupping her face with a very serious look.

"This next thing may shock you, my darling. If you want me to handle it, I will happily do so. But I did want to give you a chance to do it first. Take a moment and compose yourself once you see what is inside. Remember that you are safe, and nothing will harm you here."

Hermione's anxiety spiked for a moment, before her ring washed it away. Draco, however, seemed to sense it.

"May I?" he whispered, as he raised her hand and examined her ring. "Can you give me your fear tonight?"

Hermione nodded slowly as he kissed the back of her hand and then pulled her sapphire ring off, though he left her wedding band behind. He brushed a thumb across it possessively.

"If I could ask only one thing of you, for the rest of our lives together, it would be that you never take this ring off. I want you to sleep with it, bathe with it, bear our children with it, grow old with it, and someday die with it. Please promise me you will always wear it."

"I will," whispered Hermione, who was nearly moved to tears by his words.

"Good," he said. "Now then, prepare yourself for this next surprise. We can proceed however you wish once you see it."

Hermione's nerves were jangling, but she focused on Draco's strong grip as he quietly unlatched the door to his bedroom and tugged on her hand to follow him inside.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, the lamps flared to life, and Hermione gasped at what she saw there.

Against one wall, where the table for their potions lab usually stood, was a *thing* that was chained to the wall.

It took her a full three seconds to realize it was a man.

Hermione instinctively pressed herself into Draco, repulsed by what she was seeing. Both of his hands and feet were gone. Even his legs had been removed to right below the knee. His eyes were missing. His ears were removed. He made a guttural sound that she didn't recognize as speech, but which told her he had no tongue.

"Dolohov," said Draco cordially. "How good of you to join us tonight."

Hermione gasped, as her pulse began to race. Truthfully, she had forgotten all about him. After Voldemort fell and her parents were found, she had never asked Draco about him again. The rare times she thought of him she assumed Draco had simply killed him, but evidently not.

He was here, mutilated, and she knew that her husband was responsible for most of it, though she was certain Theo had taken a few turns as well.

“You’ve met my bride, of course,” Draco continued. “Hermione Granger. We were just married, you see. As I was wracking my brain for a gift I could give to her to mark this occasion, it occurred to me that I could give her *you*.”

As he spoke, Hermione could feel something bleed through their new bond. Draco was angry, *violent*, but also very excited. He had obviously been waiting for this moment for months, while he took many pounds of flesh from the cowering man in front of them.

It was dark and heady, and now Hermione was swaying a little as it seemed to move down her body.

It was so *intimate*.

She let out a tiny groan, and Draco’s eyes immediately snapped to her. She glanced up at him to find his pupils blown dark, and she read the wonder on his face as he realized what was happening to her as she sensed his own feelings about this through their new bond.

“Oh my darling wife,” he whispered, his entire attention now on her as he moved behind her and traced the neckline of her dress. He placed a tender kiss on her neck, and she shuddered as her head fell back onto his shoulder, the feelings and heat making her insides melt.

“You’re so beautiful like this... bedecked in jewels from four ancient Houses, along with one of your own name. You’re perfect, aren’t you? I want you to wear these all night for me, little wife... and now let’s see if you’ve been obedient and followed my instructions today,” he murmured, as he waved his hand and the small barrier he had placed inside of her that morning vanished. His spend from more than twelve hours earlier started to run down her legs, making her shiver.

“Fuck,” he whispered, as his hands ghosted over her breasts. “I can’t touch you properly in this gown, but...”

His hand moved to her back and quickly found the ribbon that was holding her dress together. He loosened it and then guided it off of her shoulders just enough so his hands could slip inside the neckline.

“Normally I wouldn’t do this in front of another man,” he commented. “But this one has no eyes, so he can’t see what he’s missing.”

Hermione melted into his chest at his touch.

“Are we really going to...?” she breathed, but she trailed off as his hands clamped firmly on her breasts, and she felt his cock nudge her through the fabric of her dress.

“We’ll wait until we’re alone for most of it,” he said. “But I do need to brace you for this, don’t I? And you’re trembling, sweet girl. It’s making the diamonds around your neck sparkle.”

“It’s because of you,” she insisted. “It’s everything you left inside of me. And you’re excited about...”

“About killing him? Yes,” said Draco simply.

At these words, Dolohov made a frantic sound, but his cries of fear and pain seemed to make Draco harder. Even through the many yards of lush fabric she was wearing, she felt herself being overwhelmed by him – his energy, his heat, his excitement, which was bleeding through their bond – and now her fear of the man in front of her was being replaced by an urgent need to be filled with her husband.

She reflexively arched back toward him.

“Patience...” whispered Draco, as his hands continued to tease her nipples. “This is our wedding night. We have hours yet...”

Hermione groaned, but his arm was gripping her hard, holding her against his chest.

“Tell me...” he said, as he trailed soft kisses on her neck. “Which one of us is going to kill him? I would love to do it, sweet wife, but you get first dibs.”

Hermione let out a small mewl as he found a sensitive spot, her attention split between his lips and the question he had just asked.

Was there any risk to her doing this? No, there wasn’t. The Order already thought Dolohov was dead, and Draco would not let her feel the aftereffects from the spell.

Did she *want* to do it? Did she want to kill the man who had almost killed her twice?

Yes. Yes, she wanted to end him and know that *she* was the reason he was dead. He was the only man she still feared, and she wanted to take it back from him.

“I want to do it,” she breathed. “It will be my last one.”

“Then take my wand and send his soul to me,” said Draco, as he plucked the Elder Wand from his tunic and pressed it into her hand.

As soon as she gripped it, his hands returned to her body, and she felt warmth spread down her arm. The wand wasn’t *hers*, but its master was, and she sensed it would answer to her as well as it could answer to anybody who wasn’t Draco Malfoy.

Draco continued to touch her, slowly easing the gown off of her shoulders so her breasts sprang free for him. She shivered and sank back into his chest, and he pushed the fabric

down, exposing her slowly, carefully, as he coaxed her toward that moment. He was being exceedingly gentle with her, which was in sharp contrast to the violence he was anticipating. She found her eyes fluttering closed at the urgency she felt from him: his craving for Dolohov's death, blending with his need for her at precisely the same time.

"Send him to me, Hermione. End his pathetic life. You can do it, sweet girl."

Hermione forced her eyes open to discover Dolohov struggling fruitlessly against the chains that were binding him to the wall. She raised a shaky hand as she pointed Draco's wand at his heart. She started to look for Death, but then discovered he was already there – he was behind her, kissing her, slowly removing her clothing and touching every part of her naked body that he revealed.

Death was Draco, and she was married to him. He claimed innumerable souls across the veil, but hers was the only one that was his in this life.

Draco must have sensed the moment she opened her mouth to cast, because as soon as she did he lowered his own mouth to her neck and started to suck a mark onto it as his hands gripped her breasts to brace her for the force of the spell. The words spilled across her lips almost unconsciously, and her body convulsed to feel the power that emerged from this wand, while Death's master caressed her so lovingly from behind.

The magic ripped through her and then poured out of the wand. It rushed toward the cowering man in the corner, and Hermione felt his life extinguish as the familiar green light caught the Malfoy tiara and refracted through the room.

It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and left her breathless. Behind her, Death was smiling as those words she had just spoken seemed to echo all around them.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Chapter 48: Cordelia

Samhain had always been Cordelia's favorite day of the year. For one thing, it was her birthday, and it would have held a special place in her heart for that fact alone. But more importantly, it was the one night of the year when the dead who walked the halls of Malfoy Manor could become solid. The veil was so thin and they were so close to the living plane, that she could feel them when they reached out to hug her.

The fact that she and the others could commune with the dead and interact with them had always been a Black family secret. It was something that had been kept from her when she was very young, and she only learned about it once she was old enough to hold her tongue. Only her parents, her magical grandmothers, and her siblings were aware of it, and the others insisted that it could never go further than that small circle of people for everyone's safety.

Even her Uncle Theo didn't know about it.

Cordelia would never forget meeting her Uncle Harry for the first time on her seventh birthday. He scooped her up into a big hug, and the love she was accustomed to feeling for her Uncle Theo and Uncle Blaise instantly grew to include Uncle Harry too. Then the others stepped forward to hug her as well, and Cordelia's heart grew so full of happiness that she literally lit the room up with golden sparks thanks to some accidental magic. Ever since that day, at least half of her family members called her 'sunshine.'

From then on, every Samhain, her parents would host a large birthday celebration for the extended family in the morning and a private celebration with just the Blacks and *them* at night. Some years there would be a tie or wedding to attend as well, but once she and her family arrived home, her father would gather them all in the Ritual Room and turn that special ring he always wore three times. Their other guests would appear, and her Uncle Harry and Uncle Ron and Grandad Sirius would race to see who could hug their little sunshine first.

Samhain was *her* day, even though she was a twin. Her brother had been born on the thirtieth of October, and she had been born a few minutes later when the clock ticked over to the thirty-first. They shared everything else, but never their birthday parties, and Cordelia secretly loved the fact that *she* was the only one of her siblings who was born on a magical day.

Cordelia always knew that Samhain would be the day she would tie, just like her parents and Uncle Blaise and Auntie Gin. And when she did it she would ask her father if she could wear the ring herself so that all of her deceased family members could be there too. Her mother had once told her a story about her own wedding day and how Uncle Harry and Uncle Ron had appeared, invisible to everyone but her. Cordelia thought it was the most enchanting thing, and she dreamed of having that for herself very soon.

With just under a year to go until the *next* Samhain, it struck Cordelia that now was the perfect time for her plan to be put into motion. If she played her cards just right, the next Samhain could be her best one yet. True, it wasn't fashionable to tie very young these days, but her parents had done it, and they were as happy as could be. In fact, they had been married for more than twenty years and still shagged like rabbits all over Malfoy Manor. They weren't great at casting silencing charms or waiting until they were in their own quarters before getting naked with each other. Her father, in particular, was always too eager to bother with privacy.

Her Uncle Ron had once bemoaned the fact that staying close to her mother meant that he was forced to see her father's naked arse far more often than he wished.

As for Cordelia, she had lost count just how many times she had walked in on her parents in a compromising position, and if she hadn't been such a romantic herself it would have been mortifying. As it was, she found it rather endearing and aspired to have a love just like theirs one day.

Cordelia was a great believer in love, and when she loved she loved *hard*.

Yes, her parents had tied when they were her age, and they were happier than ever. Her brothers might have done the fashionable thing and decided to wait until they were in their early twenties to tie and their mid-twenties to marry, but Cordelia had no intention of following in their footsteps. She wanted a love that was just like her parents, and she saw no reason to wait for it any longer.

Hence, the plan.

The plan had been percolating for the better part of two years but had recently hit a snag. She had tried to come up with a solution that was less violent, she really had, but eventually she was forced to conclude that her original idea to fix her little problem was the most sensible approach. It was a small bother that she had to rely on another person for this part of it, but at least he was predictable. And he loved her more than anything or anyone, except for her mother.

Her father had never been able to tell Cordelia no, especially not when she asked him for something in person. The only inconvenience – but it was a very minor one – was the fact that she was at Hogwarts tonight and her father was at Malfoy Manor. That meant she would have to leave the castle's grounds first.

Cordelia was privileged of course, she always had been. And unlike her older brothers, *her* godparents were at Hogwarts and had always been very good about looking the other way whenever she needed to slip away from the castle. Between Uncle Harry's old Map, her father's old Cloak, and the flexibility afforded to her by her godparents, it was child's play to sneak out.

She knew she wouldn't get detention for it. In fact, she was so comfortable wandering the castle after hours that she rarely bothered with the Invisibility Cloak anymore, though she always kept it draped over her arm for emergencies. She certainly didn't bother throwing it over herself when she saw her godfather approaching on the Marauder's Map.

“Good evening, Miss Potter,” came Severus’s drawling voice.

Cordelia twinkled at him. “Good evening, Godfather.”

“Do I want to know why you are out after hours? And without Mr. Black accompanying you?”

Cordelia gave him a teasing smile and made sure her cheek dimpled while she did it. There weren’t many people who could make Severus Snape bend, but she was one of them. In fact, he was naturally so cold toward most people that she had once asked her mother why she and her father had selected Severus for this role in the first place. Her mother’s response had been slightly perplexing at the time.

“Let’s just say that Severus once wronged me. Asking him to be the godparent of a Potter seemed like an excellent form of revenge. I had to get my own back somehow or I would never have forgiven him for it.”

Cordelia had done her research of course and eventually concluded it had something to do with the war. Her parents, however, had always been very careful not to speak ill of her godparents in front of her. Whatever had happened between her mother and Severus, Cordelia had eventually shrugged it off. Her parents had obviously moved on, so Cordelia could too. Besides, Cordelia had a soft spot for Severus Snape, and he seemed to have one for her as well.

“My brother is studying, Godfather, you must know that. You know how serious Castor is about his marks.”

“Just like his mother,” muttered Severus to himself. Then he eyed her one more time. “Very well. I assume you have a good reason to be out?”

“I need to speak to my father about something private,” she said. “I won’t be long, I promise.”

Severus sighed and assumed a pensive look. “I’ll have to tell Minerva of course, but you’re eighteen now, and as long as it won’t be *all* night...”

“It won’t be,” said Cordelia quickly. “It’s just important that I see him in person, that’s all.”

“In that case, I don’t see how she could object.”

Cordelia gave Severus her most charming smile. “Thank you, Godfather. Please tell Godmother I said hello once you see her. I am looking forward to my monthly tea with her tomorrow. And of course I look forward to the weekly Dark Arts lesson with *you*. I promise I’ve been studying *almost* as much as Castor.”

Severus gave her his thin smile and nodded in approval. Though he officially taught *Defense Against the Dark Arts* to the Hogwarts student body, Severus had always given private lessons in the Dark Arts to Cordelia and her brothers. It was all part of having a well-rounded education, because as her mother liked to say, darkness was entirely relative.

“Was it Dark when I stole the magic from Death Eaters so they couldn’t kill me or other members of the Order? Possibly. But was it justifiable? Absolutely. For a long time I believed in good versus evil, but the war put things into perspective for me. And unlike Albus Dumbledore, I don’t believe in withholding access to certain magic just because it’s been labeled as ‘Dark.’ That sort of thinking did me no favors.”

Severus just waved her off fondly. “Well if you’re prepared for my lessons too, then I suppose I can’t object. I’ll let Minerva know where you’ve gone. Now run along, Miss Potter. And give Draco my best.”

Cordelia flashed him one more grin and then turned and headed down the corridor to the statue of the one-eyed witch, and she pulled out her wand and whispered, *“Dissendium.”*

Immediately it moved to reveal the secret passage behind it, and Cordelia slipped in, now perfectly confident that she would run into nobody else who might stop her. She crept through the secret passage all the way to Honeydukes and only used the Invisibility Cloak at the very end while she was sneaking out through the shop. She was soon emerging onto High Street, which had only a few stragglers meandering late at night.

She turned on the spot and a moment later she landed at the perimeter of the wards to Malfoy Manor. She focused for a moment before transforming into her small black cat form and then trotted briskly toward the edge of the wards. She was invisible in the dark like this, and her night vision was exceptional as a cat.

Cordelia’s oldest brother Teddy was a Metamorphmagus, of course, but she and her two biological brothers had inherited their mother’s gift for Transfiguration. It was strongest in her twin, Castor, who was the only one of the three who had managed an avian form by turning into a crow at fifteen years old. Her other brother, Leo, was a fox.

None of them were registered, of course. Her father liked to say that the Blacks and Potters only registered animagi forms when their hands were forced.

Cordelia’s ears pricked as she heard a familiar noise and identified it as her father’s footsteps. She quickly made her way through the gardens and waited under a hedge until her father crossed the path in front of her. He had clearly just left his special shed.

Her father’s shed was under a *fidelius* and invisible to everybody but him, but all of the children knew its general location. It was the only place on the entire Malfoy property that none of the children had ever visited, but he had once given her a hint about what was inside.

“It’s the place where I store the objects that are most special to me. Most of it is dedicated to your mother, but of course I keep a few baby blankets and items like that in there too. It’s a collection of things I’ve been gathering for most of my life.”

Cordelia thought that a private space dedicated to her father’s love for her mother was terribly romantic. She herself had quite a penchant for collecting things too, and she made sure to guard her own collection carefully.

She adored the fact that this was a trait she shared with her father.

As Draco Malfoy stepped past her, Cordelia prepared to transform back into herself. She knew precisely how to get what she wanted from him, and as the only one of his children who had inherited her mother's rich curls, Cordelia had made sure they were loosely tied back with a scrap of lace before she left the castle that night. It was a little different from her mother's ribbons, but no less lovely. Her father liked to say that the Granger curls always deserved to be adorned with pretty things.

She had positioned herself in front of one of the garden lamps so that her curls would be backlit and blowing softly in the night breeze as soon as she was human again.

She intentionally crunched the gravel as she transformed, and he turned at the sound. His face broke into a broad smile when he saw her.

"Hey little love, why aren't you at school?"

He extended his arms to her, and Cordelia moved forward to fall into his embrace. It was true she was eighteen now, but he had called her this for her entire life. She suspected he would still be doing it when she was a hundred.

"Daddy, I need to speak with you about something. I've been turning it over and over in my head, and I can't do it by myself anymore. I had an absolutely *wretched* day, and I need your help."

His expression darkened at this, and he gestured toward the Manor's interior, which was casting its own light onto the perimeter of the gardens.

"Come along and tell me everything. Have you shared it with Castor already?"

"Yes of course, but there's nothing he can do to help me with this! He agreed that I needed to find you."

Her father's frown deepened at this, but he nodded seriously as he extended an arm and escorted her through the doors of the Manor and then into his study on the first floor, which contained two familiar figures.

"Oh, I didn't realize Teddy and Leo would be here tonight!" she said, hoping her innocent tone was convincing.

One look at her father told her that it was, because he just chuckled indulgently.

"It's true they're grown men, but they still live here, you know that. Teddy may be tied to Rose now, but they're not moving into his estate until they are married next summer. And Leo will be here indefinitely, even after he ties with Victoire at the Spring Equinox."

Cordelia nodded in acknowledgment of this. Her oldest brother, Teddy Black, was her father's heir to his line of Blacks and had been raised alongside Rose Parkinson, who was not quite a year younger than him. Cordelia had always felt sorry for Rose because up until very recently her parents largely ignored her, and Auntie Pansy was Rose's *de facto* guardian. Then again, it had all worked out, and Cordelia was pleased that Rose was finally getting her

own form of quiet revenge by making the best match out of all of her sisters. Auntie Pansy had never married, but her younger sisters all had – and Rose had taken the biggest prize of all by tying with Teddy. Rose and Auntie Pansy had intentionally kept Teddy's claim on the Lestranger fortune a secret until it was announced at their tying. Cordelia would never forget the look of utter shock on Violet Parkinson's face when she heard the news.

Leo, of course, was just two years younger than Teddy, almost to the day. As her second brother, he had been given the Malfoy surname and was the heir to the Malfoy estate. Leo looked very much like her father with his pale blonde hair and flinty gray eyes. Soon he would be tying with Victoire Weasley, who was born on the anniversary of the Dark Lord's fall and was just a few months older than he was. She was a Veela of course – she was blonde and beautiful just like her mother Fleur – and Cordelia was certain they would have gorgeous, blonde baby Malfoys as soon as her father could talk them into giving him grandchildren. Victoire had always struck Cordelia as being a bit prissy, but she knew that Leo loved her, and just like her other brothers and male cousins, he had socialized to the Veela magic from a very early age. He wasn't tying with her because of any kind of enchantment.

Castor had been named their *mother's* heir to her line of Blacks and had been given the Black surname as well. He had already claimed Grimmauld Place for himself after he came of age, though Cordelia knew that her Granny Cissy and Granny Andy had recently moved to Grimmauld Place in anticipation of Leo's tying. Leo would soon be moving away from her parents' wing at Malfoy Manor where all the children's bedrooms were located and into the wing where Narcissa and Andromeda used to live so he could have more privacy with his future wife. Cordelia was sure that her father and brothers would eventually build a house for her two magical grannies when it was finally time for Castor to move into Grimmauld Place, but for at least the next few years the sisters would be located in the ancestral Black home. Castor certainly didn't mind it, claiming that he had far more important things to be worrying about for the next several years besides romance.

Whereas Cordelia was all smiles and had an almost bubbly disposition, Castor was serious, studious, and he had a brooding nature. His dark hair and blue eyes made him look very much like a Black. And while he had never expressed any romantic interest in *anyone*, Cordelia had recently noticed his eyes trailing after a muggleborn witch in their year.

With her three older brothers each claiming a share of the Black and Malfoy fortunes, Cordelia got what was left because she was the youngest of them all by four bloody minutes – and that was why she had been named a Potter and given her Uncle Harry's legacy. Though it was technically a little smaller than her brothers', it was all hers and would never be shared with *anyone*, not even a husband. It was very unusual, she knew, but her parents had insisted upon it and wanted to be certain she was secure in her own right.

Her father called it a "Black family tradition."

There were times when Cordelia Granger Potter loathed being the youngest and one of just three girls among her many cousins (if one could even count Rose Parkinson and Victoire Weasley as cousins now that they were marrying her brothers). Her Uncle Theo and Auntie Luna had two boys, as did Uncle Blaise and Auntie Gin. Cordelia was the youngest of them

all, and with seven older brothers and cousins, not to mention a father, godfather, and two uncles who were former Death Eaters, Cordelia had always been treated differently from the others.

Then again, there were times when it was useful.

“Hey sunshine!” cried Teddy, who rose to greet her. Leo’s blonde head turned from the bar cart, and his grey eyes crinkled into a smile when he saw her.

“Look at you, lighting up the room,” agreed Leo.

“Hi Teddy, hi Leo,” said Cordelia demurely. Her older brothers smiled down at her fondly as she approached them for a kiss on the cheek.

“What brings you here?” asked Leo. “Where’s Cas?”

“He’s busy revising, you know him,” she said, as she bit her lower lip and then reached down and began to twist the hem of her jumper.

She had seen her mother do this dozens of times whenever she wanted something from her father, and it never failed to work.

Sure enough, her father’s eyes sharpened as he sensed her anxiety, and then he looked at her with concern.

“What’s wrong, little love? You said you had a wretched day?”

Now Teddy and Leo’s faces became serious, as they turned their full attention to her.

Cordelia looked down and pretended to swipe at her eyes as she sniffed.

“I’m afraid to tell you,” she murmured.

At this, her father wrapped her up into a hug again.

“Listen to me. There isn’t a single thing you could say that would ever disappoint me, you understand that? Nor your brothers. Whatever it is, you can tell us. We will always have your back, and we will *always* help you.”

She sniffed and nodded into his chest, as he released her and guided her to the sofa in his study.

Teddy and Leo moved near them, with Leo sinking onto the sofa on the other side of her and Teddy leaning against the fireplace with his arms crossed to listen.

“Now tell us everything,” said her father in a very gentle, yet stern voice.

Cordelia sniffed again. “It’s just... I thought this year would be different! I thought Caleb would finally give me a chance. But he’s terrified of what his father will think about it, and it’s holding him back from me. We are friendly now, and his father absolutely *hates* it.

Apparently they fought about it during the celebrations for Samhain, and I think his father put his foot down. Caleb has built some walls around me ever since, and today I heard that he asked Bonnie Marlowe to Hogsmeade this weekend. I know he doesn't like her at all — but she's the one his father has chosen for him."

Cordelia looked down at her knees, willing, *hoping* her father would take the bait. Cordelia wished she could do this herself, but her father always seemed to know whenever one of his children encountered Death too closely, and she couldn't risk it.

There was the time Teddy had overheard Johnny Scruggs calling Professor Walsh a mudblood. He said that she deserved to be treated as a boon, just like she had been during the war. Johnny said it was the only thing a mudblood like her could ever be good for.

Instead of reporting it, Teddy waited until they were brewing Draught of the Living Death before he took a leaf out of Uncle Harry's book and threw a firecracker into Johnny's cauldron when Professor Walsh's back was turned. The cauldron exploded and drenched Scruggs with so much potion that he was at serious risk of overdose and *actual* death. Curiously, her father had arrived at the castle within ten minutes of the explosion and helped Professor Walsh brew the antidote – though *how* he had known to come at all had never been terribly clear.

After that incident, her father pulled Teddy aside and explained that if he ever needed to harm another student, he was to come to Draco first. Still, despite the near miss, Professor Walsh awarded Teddy fifty house points for defending her honor, which meant that Hufflepuff House won the House cup for the first time in nearly thirty years.

Teddy always *had* been Mary Walsh's favorite, though Rose was a close second.

Then there was the time that Leo had cast a dark hex on Brian Montague because he teased Cordelia about her hair. Montague had been a fifth year, like Leo, but he was in Cordelia's House. She was eleven at the time and had only been at Hogwarts for a few weeks when it happened. The taunt had made her cry, and she barricaded herself into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom to sob. Castor, of course, had felt her pain through their twin bond, and he immediately collected Leo so they could find Cordelia and discover why she was so upset. After hearing the story, Leo had been so enraged that found the older boy on the perimeter of the castle's grounds and cursed him until he nearly died.

Somehow – and *again*, none of her siblings were quite sure how – their father had immediately shown up, almost as if summoned there, and he had saved the boy's life before wiping his memory of the incident. He then gave Leo a very stern warning that all matters of attempted murder were to go through him first, and while Leo might be the first Malfoy to be sorted into Gryffindor in a thousand years, that was no excuse to let his hot head and natural recklessness get the better of him.

Leo wanted to be an auror, after all, and he could not afford to have a criminal record.

Finally, there was the time Bertie Willis had tried to kiss Cordelia under the mistletoe in fourth year. It had surprised her so much that she didn't have time to draw her knife on him, and then he cast a petrification spell on her so that she couldn't. Cordelia had shouted for

Castor through their twin bond, and he arrived within seconds, scaring the living daylight out of Bertie with his *own* knife before releasing Cordelia from the spell. She had been unharmed, but was very shaken up, and when Bertie reported the knives to Professor McGonagall, *he* was the one who got detention after Professor McGonagall reviewed Cordelia's memory of the incident.

Castor had then gotten further revenge on the Quidditch pitch the following weekend by whacking a bludger at Bertie so hard he fell from his broom.

This time her father had been in the stands watching Castor's game, and he had intervened once again, by somehow pulling Bertie back from the brink of death when he landed on the ground in a crumpled heap. And once it was over, he reminded them both that all forms of revenge, injury, or attempted murder were to be cleared through him in advance. Castor's version of revenge was certainly better planned than Leo's had been – no doubt being a Ravenclaw had something to do with it – but Draco gave him a stern reminder that an incident like that could still result in a stain on his record. If Castor wanted to join the Department of Mysteries after he was out of Hogwarts, then he could not be complicit in 'accidents' that resulted in another person's death.

Cordelia – being the only Slytherin among all of her siblings – had certainly noticed that none of her brothers had gotten away with it. Furthermore, both boys who tormented her had quietly disappeared, and she heard from Teddy that Johnny Scruggs had vanished too. The rumor among the student body was that all three of them had transferred to new schools, but she had never been sure if she believed it. Something told her that her father was involved in whatever happened to them, and it was enough to convince her that she would need his help if she wanted Caleb's father out of the way.

"Do you know how Caleb feels about his father?" asked Draco thoughtfully.

Cordelia looked up at him, and she could see him giving her a knowing look. Whereas Leo was particularly adept with Dark Magic and knives like their father and Castor's powers were similar to their mother's with advanced wandless magic, Cordelia's talents had manifested themselves in a completely different way.

She was a natural legilimens and could read the surface thoughts of nearly anyone she encountered.

The only people whose minds Cordelia didn't bother to read were those of her own family members and her godparents. They were all trained in occlumency and could tell when she was doing it. Her other professors and peers, however, were open books.

"Yes," she said. "Caleb resents his father. He's been absent for most of Caleb's life, and you know he's obsessed with power. He's always been very strict with Caleb to maintain his public image, and he's constantly telling Caleb that he's a disappointment, even though he *isn't* disappointing at all! He didn't even congratulate Caleb on making Head Boy!"

Draco tutted at this and frowned in disapproval.

“Well I won’t deny that Caleb’s father is starting to outlive his usefulness. Your mother had her reasons for leaving him alone twenty years ago, but I suspect he’s the reason her charity ball for the elves was rather poorly attended last summer. He’s also been resistant to Teddy’s werewolf reform bill, and I had to... remind him of a few things... when he tried to interfere with Leo’s application to the Auror Academy. No doubt he’ll try to block Castor’s application to the Unspeakables as well. He’s always backed off when I’ve had a word with him, but it sounds like he’s trying to hold firm on this.”

Cordelia nodded seriously and made her eyes wide as she gripped her father’s hand.

“Please, Daddy. I need your help with this. You *know* how much I love him.”

Draco’s face softened as he stared at his youngest child. Like her biological brothers, her name was celestial – Cordelia was one of Uranus’s moons. But unlike them, both of whom had been given Roman names in accordance with the Malfoy family tradition, Cordelia’s name was from Shakespeare, like her mother.

Cordelia was the youngest child of King Lear and his favorite. She was supposed to be innocent, kind, and virtuous. For the most part, she thought the characteristics of the Shakespearean Cordelia fit her rather well, and if there were occasions when she had to bend things just a little bit, that was okay too. As long as she acted like her namesake in front of her father, then Draco Malfoy would give her anything she wanted.

Even this.

“You’re like me, aren’t you? You love ardently.”

“Yes, Daddy. I love him the same way you love Mummy. You know I’ve never wanted anybody else, and I am certain that I can bring him around. Sometimes he looks at me, and I can tell he wants me too – but his father is an enormous complication and won’t bend on this. Caleb tries to be a dutiful son, and he’s honorable. It’s tearing him to pieces to want someone his father has forbidden.”

She looked at her two brothers now, who were also staring at her knowingly. She gave them a watery smile, and they softened right on cue.

All of the men in Cordelia’s life were wrapped around her little finger, except for one. And that one was the most important of all. But Cordelia was confident that with this final hurdle out of the way, she could finally have him too, and then she would want for nothing.

Her father cupped her under her chin and looked at her seriously.

“You did so well telling me about this. Unlike your brothers, you had the sense to come to me first, and I’m so proud of you for doing that. Caleb’s father should be at the anniversary party to celebrate the fall of the Dark Lord as usual, and I’m certain we can arrange things appropriately if you can stand to wait that long.”

“It’s a long time, Daddy...” said Cordelia, as her face fell. “Another six weeks...”

“I know, little love, and you’ve been *so* patient. But it’s important that we do this the right way, and you’ll still have all of next term with him. I’m sure that with his father out of the picture he’ll be able to see things with you more clearly.”

Cordelia slumped a little, but nodded.

“Will you tell me how...?” she started, but her father and both of her brothers were already shaking their heads.

“No. Leave it up to me and your brothers. It’s our job to make sure you have all the things you need, including this. You shouldn’t worry your head about it. I can assure you, we will handle it.”

Cordelia bit her lip and gave him her best wide-eyed look. “Can you make Cas come to the anniversary party then? Just so he can tell me when it’s done, I mean. I want to make sure I’m there when Caleb hears the news.”

“Cas will volunteer to go himself when he hears it’s for you, sunshine,” said Leo with fondness. “You know he’ll want to help.”

Cordelia awarded him with a dimpled smile, and Teddy started chuckling by the fireplace as he looked at the others.

“Before we do this, should we vet him a bit more first? Seeing as how she wants him to be part of the family one day...”

Now Cordelia gave Teddy a disapproving look, while her father and Leo laughed too.

“Hush Teddy, don’t tease me. We’ve done all the vetting required. You know he’s perfect.”

“Would his father be swayed by settlements though?” asked Teddy, turning serious now. “Not that I’m opposed to a more permanent solution if that’s necessary, but I do think it’s only fair to consider other options first. All three of us, plus Cas and Uncle Theo, can settle a portion on her if we need to.”

Teddy is such a Hufflepuff sometimes.

Cordelia forced her face to remain demure.

“No, Teddy. I got close enough to his father at the Ministry’s Solstice Ball last summer to check his mind for it. He can’t be bought with settlements, not from our family. He *hates* me.”

Cordelia made her face fall as she said this last part, and all three men immediately jumped in to soothe her.

“Don’t fret, little love, you’re perfect.”

“It’s okay, sunshine, he’s an arsehole.”

“Don’t even think of it. He’s not worth a moment of your sadness.”

Once Cordelia had settled back into a smile again, all three men were able to relax. Then Leo turned to Teddy and her father.

“I think she’s right that it’s best to just fix the root of the problem. She will have a clear path to the wizard she wants that way, and once his father is gone he will have an estate that rivals any of ours. She deserves to be wed to a man as powerful as her father and brothers.”

“And the public will love him with his father out of the way,” mused Teddy. “He’s nearly perfect on paper, and once he’s orphaned he will be a sympathetic figure too. We can help him rise politically if that’s his wish.”

Cordelia breathed a sigh of relief that Teddy no longer objected.

“Then we’re in agreement,” said Draco. “Leo, please don’t arrest me for it.”

Leo started to chuckle. “I would have to have some evidence to arrest you, Father, as you very well know.”

Draco smirked, and then turned back to Cordelia, his gaze softening once more.

“It’s time for you to head back to Hogwarts. One of us will reach out to Castor to make sure he’s there and can give you the news the moment it happens. In the meantime, just be yourself. I am certain he has noticed you.”

Cordelia gave her father a special smile all for him, and she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you, Daddy. I love you so much,” she whispered before pulling away and kissing both of her brothers too.

Cordelia closed her eyes and turned back into her little black cat, and all three wizards chuckled a bit as she hopped up onto a window ledge, which Teddy opened so she could make her escape back out into the gardens. She retraced her steps back to the apparition point and then disappeared under the Cloak to apparate to Hogsmeade before she descended into the Honeyduke’s passage once more.

Cas, I’m back, she called through her bond as she emerged from the statue of the one-eyed witch.

I’m in the Room of Requirement.

I’ll be there in a minute.

Cordelia broke the connection and quickly made her way to the familiar blank span of wall. Cordelia knew the Room of Requirement had been partially destroyed during the war, but eventually the elves repaired it, and over time it was mostly forgotten again. She and Castor had always enjoyed spending time there, since it was neutral ground between their House common rooms, and it was far more private than the library.

She paced in front of the wall three times, and then the door materialized. She pulled it open to find a replica of their suite at Malfoy Manor.

Her parents' wing had six bedrooms, a study, and the old training room that she and her brothers used for target practice. Her parents kept their suite all to themselves, with the connecting bedroom serving as her mother's private potions lab. When Leo was born, he had been given the room that connected to Teddy's. Cordelia and Castor received the remaining pair of bedrooms once they were born, and all guests were moved to the grannies' wing.

Cordelia had always loved how cozy her parents' wing felt at the Manor. Whenever they were home together the children ate with her parents in their parlor for breakfast and tea. They could eat, sleep, train, and study together without ever having to leave their bubble.

Every time she and Castor used the Room of Requirement, it transformed into their suite at Malfoy Manor, though it was always missing the wall between their rooms so they could talk to each other.

Castor was sitting on the bed on his side, and he looked up when the door opened.

"What did Father say?"

"He's going to do it. Teddy and Leo were there, just as you thought, and they were in agreement."

Castor smiled with relief. "Good. They will give Father some cover for it. Did they tell you how he'll be doing it?"

Cordelia frowned as she flumped onto her own bed.

"Of course not."

Castor wrinkled his nose a little. "Well you know my theories about it."

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know you think Father is the Master of Death. I'm still not so sure, though."

"It makes sense, Cor. He has all three Hallows. That has to be how he defeated Voldemort, and it would explain how he always just *knows* whenever one of us takes a plan too far..."

"We've never seen the Wand though," she pointed out.

"No, but he probably keeps it in his shed with the rest of his collection... and we *know* he had it at one point, don't we? Father was seen carrying it now and then before we were born. You know how much research I've done on it."

"Well perhaps someday he'll let you in on that family secret. He's already told Teddy and Leo, and their superior looks are just *maddening*. I know Father waited until they were out of Hogwarts to tell them, but I don't think he will ever tell *me*. It doesn't matter how old I am – Father, Teddy, and Leo all think I'm too delicate to know anything about it."

Castor snorted. “Nothing about you is delicate, Cor. Trust me, they know that.”

She sniffed. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. None of them are stupid. They just don’t want to burden you with it. They’re all protective. You know Teddy and Leo get that from Father.”

“You’re not that different,” she pointed out.

Castor inclined his head in acknowledgement of this. “Can you blame me for worrying about you? You’re my baby sister.”

“Merlin, I am *not* your baby sister!”

“Your birthday’s a day later than mine,” he said with a grin, as Cordelia groaned again.

“It was only four minutes!”

“But four very *important* minutes,” said Castor with a superior air.

They had been fighting about this for their entire lives. Cordelia knew that the only person in her entire extended family who took her side on this issue was her mother.

“Well if I’m your baby sister, then I need to call in a favor from my big brother,” she said, casting him a slight glare.

Castor’s smile immediately slid from his face, and he looked at her with suspicion. “What is it?”

“I need you to go to the anniversary party of the Dark Lord’s fall. That’s when they’re going to do it, and I need you to tell me as soon as it happens.”

Castor let out a groan.

“Cor...”

“*Please*, Cas, I need your help...”

She made her eyes wide, and to her delight she felt him crumble through their bond almost immediately.

“Fine, but if I need help during Flitwick’s exam the next day, I expect you to read his mind for me.”

Cordelia snorted and rolled her eyes. “I always do that anyway.”

“Still...”

Cordelia gave him a sincere nod. “You have my word.”

“Then I’ll go to the party for you. You can tell Father and the others they don’t have to formally summon me. I’m certain you asked...”

Cordelia shot him a grin. Castor just gave her a slightly irritated look, but it was overlaid with that familiar fondness.

“I would *only* do this for you, Cor, I hope you know that.”

“Hush, you would do it for our mother too, don’t deny it.”

Castor blushed a little, but dipped his head in acknowledgment. Though Cordelia was the child who looked the most like Hermione, Castor was the one who behaved the most like her. Castor and Hermione both preferred a quiet night of study at home to any kind of social event, though they could both put their books away and turn on their charm when called to do it.

“In fact,” added Cordelia, “I think I’ll reach out to Mum and ask her to invite Maisie Goldfield as a special guest to the anniversary ball.”

Castor blinked in surprise. “Pardon?”

“You heard me – Maisie Goldfield. She’s in Hufflepuff, remember? Muggleborn? I was speaking to her at lunch the other day, and she told me that she was very interested in Mum’s charity work with magical creatures. I think I’ll write to Mum and suggest that she invite Maisie along. You know she’ll be happy to do that.”

Castor’s face now turned a deep red, and Cordelia stifled a grin.

“When she shows up at the ball, you’ll have to be nice to her, Cas. You know our family can be a *lot*, and everybody but me is going to be there. I know you’re doing a lot for me by going in the first place, but would you mind helping Maisie acclimate to the family? I’m sure Mum will take a shine to her, and once that happens you know she’ll be throwing job offers at the poor girl. Nobody tells Mum no, and Maisie is very sweet. I’m afraid it might overwhelm her just a little bit.”

Castor swallowed hard, but nodded, now looking slightly terrified.

“Thank you,” said Cordelia, hiding her smile once more. “And for what it’s worth, I approve of Maisie. She’s always been perfectly lovely toward me, and she’s one of the very few girls who have never had even a passing fancy for Caleb. She will make a perfect sister.”

Castor’s eyes widened. “I don’t–”

“Of course you do. I can feel your emotions every time you look at her, remember?”

Castor’s face fell, and now Cordelia chuckled.

“Falling in love is not so bad, Cas.”

“It’s just a crush,” he insisted.

“Mmmm,” said Cordelia skeptically.

She didn’t believe him, of course. The Blacks didn’t really *do* crushes. Then again, she supposed that being in denial about it was a family trait too, at least among the men. Cordelia, of course, had identified her feelings for Caleb right away, but she was a girl and far more sensible about that sort of thing than boys were. Both Teddy and Leo had danced around their partners for a few years before accepting that their feelings for their witches were not brotherly, and it appeared that Castor was about to behave in precisely the same way.

That was alright. Cordelia would give him a few weeks to adjust. No doubt she could make Maisie spectacular for the ball, and that would move things along a bit.

“I mean it, Cor, it’s hardly anything. Don’t say a word to the others. They will be unbearable if they know.”

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. “I won’t.”

He gave her a piercing look. “You promise?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “You know you’re my favorite sibling. I would never betray you like that to the others.”

Castor rolled his eyes at her, but he was smiling now to hear Cordelia admit that he was her favorite – but of *course* he was her favorite. He was her twin.

“Alright, fine. I’ll go to this ball of yours and let you know when Caleb’s old man croaks so you can make your move. And I’ll try to find my courage and talk to Maisie while I’m there. I’m going to need you to help me come up with some dress robes for it, though. I have no clue what to wear.”

“Maisie likes blue,” Cordelia said at once. “I’ve already checked her mind for all the things she prefers, and I know just how to dress you for it. You won’t have to worry about a thing, I can arrange it all with Poppy. Maisie also thinks your eyes are gorgeous, so we will match the shade to them. Then all you’ll have to do is smile and bat your eyes at her, and she’ll be falling for you before you know it.”

Castor turned pink again, but nodded a little, and Cordelia rose before crossing the room to give him a peck on the cheek.

“Good. Now we have a plan for each of us that night. I think we should each aim for a good snog before the night is over, and that will set us up well going into the next term. Caleb might be a little challenging with his father dead, but I’ll do my best to make it happen and so should you. Of course I’ll give you a full report.”

Castor grimaced. “Please don’t.”

Cordelia laughed as she turned to head out of the Room of Requirement. She gave Castor one last wave before shutting the door and moving down the hall to approach a staircase that

would take her to the portrait in front of the Heads' dormitory. Once she arrived she whispered the password and then let herself into the small, shared common room.

She slipped up the stairs to the landing that contained the two bedrooms at the top, one for Cordelia and the other for the love of her life. Instead of turning into her room, she pressed an ear against his door and waited for several long minutes until she concluded that he was asleep.

She muttered the password to his room – she had taken it straight from his mind on their first day, of course – and then eased the door open and slipped in like a shadow.

Normally she covered herself in the Cloak for this, but tonight she did not. She was so close to her goal now, she almost wanted him to wake up and see her.

But as usual, he didn't wake. He slept more soundly than she did, and even when she lowered herself onto the bed next to him he didn't stir.

She stared at the familiar features in the moonlight.

His skin was dark, his face achingly handsome, and he huffed out little puffs of air in his sleep. He was truly beautiful, with perfectly straight white teeth, a commanding presence, and a sense of honor that his own father certainly did not share.

Cordelia knew all about the very one-sided family feud between the Shackebolts and the Malfoys. Kingsley Shacklebolt thought of it every single time he laid eyes on her, and Cordelia had watched the memory of her father wheedling a pardon out of Shacklebolt in his head several times.

It never failed to make Cordelia very angry. Kingsley Shacklebolt had wronged her mother. He despised her father. And he had tried to keep Cordelia from achieving her greatest dream.

Caleb Shacklebolt, however, was a better man than that. She had been fascinated with him since the very first day she saw him on the train at Hogwarts, and it had grown into something deep and enduring. For their first six years together, Cordelia had watched him from afar and learned everything about him, but Caleb had always kept his distance. He wasn't cruel, but there had always been a wall she could never seem to scale, until her godparents offered her Head Girl and then took her suggestion to make Caleb Head Boy.

Her father always *did* say that forced proximity was the shortest path to romance.

Once becoming Heads together, Caleb could no longer avoid her. Over the previous months they had become friends and even confidantes. There were times he opened up to her and told her all about the pressures of being the Minister of Magic's only child. He told her that he desperately missed his mother, who had married Shacklebolt just after the war and then died right before Caleb started at Hogwarts. His father had rarely been there for him because he was so wrapped up in his career.

She heard the resentment in Caleb's voice whenever he spoke of it, and she hated Shacklebolt even more for inflicting that kind of damage on such a beautiful person. Still, Kingsley

Shacklebolt had done a very good job of warning Caleb against her, and she knew that Caleb liked her against his better judgment. His mind rolled with guilt every time he thought about moving past friendship and doing the things to her that filled his fantasies.

“It’s okay, my darling,” she whispered to him, “I’ll make sure your father’s dead soon, and you’ll be able to love me without any guilt.”

Cordelia reached out a hand and with the lightest touch traced his hairline and the strong jaw before brushing his lips. Merlin, what she would do to have those lips on her. She knew that he also thought about it during his weaker moments, and Cordelia made sure that he had many. She often let him catch her in their common room without a bra so he could see her nipples tighten under his gaze. She usually wore her hair down around him because she knew that he preferred it that way, and she bit her lower lip whenever she pretended to think about something. She was always dropping things around him just to have the excuse to bend over to flash him a glimpse of her knickers. And once, she had even pretended to forget to lock the door to their shared bath and let him run into her while wearing a towel and dripping wet.

Caleb had remarkable self-control, it was true, but she knew he noticed everything she did, and she was wearing him down. And while he fought his growing feelings for her during the day, he could never stop them at night.

She was training his mind to accept her, to accept *them*.

Cordelia retrieved a small vial of her favorite scent from her pocket that she always wore around him – it was a special blend of lilac and honeysuckle from the Manor gardens that Posy and Poppy prepared for her. Every night Cordelia slipped into his room and wafted the scent under his nose while he slept. She knew he loved it, and he associated it exclusively with her. She had learned weeks ago that a single whiff of her perfume made his dreams shift to focus on her.

She closed her eyes and slipped into his dream with him, and sure enough she saw herself. She was studying at the small table in their common room, and in his dream he was hidden in the corner, and she didn’t notice him watching her.

Cordelia smiled to herself as she nudged his dream along and began to direct it just a little bit. The Cordelia in the dream began to touch herself under her Hogwarts skirt, and she felt Caleb’s brain light with excitement and eagerness as he watched. Soon she was disrobing and splayed out on the chair, naked for him to look at while she came with a cry and his name on her lips.

When she pulled out of his mind, she saw that he was erect under his sheets, and he was thrusting his hips ever so slightly in his sleep.

“Soon you can have all of that and more,” she whispered as she gently guided his hand toward it. He grunted a little to feel himself, and Cordelia sighed with contentment.

He was just perfect, pleasuring himself to thoughts and dreams of her.

She slipped into his head once more, and sure enough, his dream had morphed all on its own. Cordelia was now underneath him while his lips trailed hot down her naked body, with his cock slipping inside of her. She shuddered to herself as she watched. She had saved every single thing for him – her first kiss, her virginity, all of it would be his as soon as he was willing to take it from her.

She was *so* close she could practically taste it now.

Satisfied with the direction of his dreams, Cordelia left his mind and rose carefully before glancing down at his nightstand, where a half-eaten chocolate frog was just waiting for her. She chuckled affectionately and picked it up.

She would add it to her collection as soon as she got back to her room. She kept a trunk under her bed that was dedicated to him. She had newspaper clippings of every article that had been written about him since his birth. She had an old Gryffindor quidditch jersey that still smelled like him thanks to the preservation charm she had cast upon it, along with a Gryffindor scarf he thought he had lost.

She even had records of his finances and the estate that Caleb would be inheriting very soon. Leo had stolen those papers directly from Shacklebolt's office once she made it clear to the others that Caleb was her choice. Her father and brothers needed to know what Caleb could offer her — and then Cordelia had stolen the papers from *them* once they declared themselves to be satisfied.

She had old books and notes and even a few sketches Caleb had drawn of the Hogwarts grounds. He had a true talent for visual art that his father had never encouraged, and he always threw those things away at the end of every term so his father wouldn't find them.

Cordelia had collected them all.

She sniffed the chocolate frog — she knew they were his favorite sweet — and sighed a little to know that her love's lips had been there not that long ago. Then she slipped it into her pocket for safekeeping and leaned down once more to brush a soft kiss on his forehead.

“Be good for me, my darling, and keep dreaming lovely things. You are mine, and soon there will be nobody who can stop our happiness together. Your only flaw is your father, but Daddy promised to fix it. I know we can trust him to do it for us. It might make you a little sad at first, but I know you'll feel relief as well. And I'll be there to help you through it, I promise. You'll be able to give me all of your pain and guilt, and I'll turn it into joy.”

She sighed with contentment as she cast one, final look at him in the moonlight.

“I love you, Caleb. I'm going to love you forever.”

And as she moved to the door to slip out, she glanced back through the window and saw her favorite constellation, standing guard over her love while he slept. She knew everything would go according to her plan, because he would make sure of it. He had never let her down.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

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