

Contradictions

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Contradictions

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Summary

When Hermione Granger is presented with a problem, she turns to research. Information, hypotheses, and experiments... These are all things she knows and loves, so it should come as no surprise that when she finds herself with a problem in the bedroom, she knows exactly how to find a solution.

And it just so happens that the solution is in the arms of a strong and confident stranger, with hands and lips that know just how to drive her body wild. The only problem? They belong to Draco Malfoy, the one person she should never trust.

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Chapter 1

No. No. This *couldn't* be right. Hermione checked the slip of paper in her hand, eyes glancing between the scrawled address and the numbers on the front of the old stone building before her.

This was the place? Apprehension built in her stomach, eclipsing the curiosity that had been driving her for days.

It looked more like a dilapidated manor, maybe once majestic before the vines caused the stones to crumble and blacken with dirt, than the place that was supposed to "fulfill her innermost desires." Or, at least, that's what the pamphlet said when she first heard of The Scarlet Order. She almost snorted to herself at the name. *The Scarlet Order*. It sounded so pretentious and fake, but after the hours of research she had poured into it... That's exactly what they were going for. They technically had several different names just to throw off the general public, and that was what sold it for her.

The anonymity. The security. The trust that she could try this, just once, and never look back when her suspicions were confirmed.

The woman from The Scarlet Order boasted that they were the most discreet service of their kind. That no one would ever know what she was looking for, and that every precaution was taken to protect the identities of their clients. So much so that as soon as she filled out her profile and sent them her first payment, the sleek black owl had shown up with a red stone pendant within an hour.

Follow the directions to the address below, and wear this to your first appointment. It contains magic that has been created for you, and you only, to access our properties. If anyone else places the pendant around their neck, the spell will be rendered useless, and your account will be cancelled.

She held the bottom of that note crumpled in her hand now, and the necklace was heavy around her throat. It seemed impervious to the glamour spell she'd cast on her face earlier in the evening, changing her features into someone that she didn't recognize. It was the face of a witch she'd seen on a magazine cover in a shop near her flat. It was a classically beautiful glamour, with straight black hair instead of brown curls, sparkling green eyes, a slim nose, and perfectly proportioned lips. It would be *definitely* appealing to whomever she was set up to meet tonight, and something that wouldn't give away her true identity. The magic was advanced, but after a few practice attempts, she had gotten the hang of it well enough. A polyjuice potion would have been overkill, and the spell gave her more freedom in choosing what she wanted, or needed, to look like.

The worst part about her aspirations to become the Minister of Magic meant that everything she did, every step she made, could be used against her. And this? This was something that could ruin her career before it even got off the ground.

It wasn't until she took a hesitant step forward that the image before her eyes shimmered slightly, shifting until the vines disappeared and the stones looked good as new. The magic radiating from the building in front of her was so strong it was palpable. It filled the air around her, crackling like static until it tickled the hairs of her arms. The necklace grew warm, flashing against her skin with heavy pulses of heat, until everything settled around her once more. It was as though she had stepped through a barrier, granted access with the charmed necklace.

Whoa. Hermione knew strong magic, but this... This was something else. Casting another look up at the building in front of her, she caught a skewed reflection of her new face in one of the front windows. It taunted her, mocking the silly idea her mind had run wild with over the last few weeks. *Is this really something you're going to waste your time on?* the face asked. *This dress up game?*

Familiar frustration boiled up in her stomach. It had been almost eighteen months since her relationship ended with Ron, and she wasn't any closer to finding a solution for her little *problem* than she had been the day of their tearful breakup. The day he begged and pleaded that it wasn't a big deal. That they could *work around it*, he said, as if it was a simple disagreement over a piece of furniture.

Not that she was completely and utterly dissatisfied with their sex life, or that for the last half of their relationship, her mind would wander any time they were in bed together. *Had she filed that memo at work before leaving for the weekend? Did the rubbish bin need to be emptied? What about the weekly shopping?* Like clockwork, she would inevitably start thinking about their grocery list in the midst of sex, despite her attempts to stay focused.

It wasn't Ron's fault, either, which just made it worse. There didn't seem to be anything he could do to help, no matter what they tried. They were just... incompatible. The same as all her other partners, and she was sick of it. *Something* had to change. She knew she wasn't broken, either, because she *could* feel aroused, and she did. She had a healthy sex drive, but the only time she could stay focused was by herself. Which, by logical conclusion, meant she was missing some key piece with her partners.

Almost immediately after the breakup with Ron, she'd dived into her research. Different techniques, toys, charms, anything and everything to see what worked and what didn't. At first, her hypothesis was just to prove that she could still get aroused and enjoy her body. It didn't take long to confirm. Then, after a few months of her preliminary research to prove she was headed in the right direction, she'd tried dating. Different types of men from different walks of life. There hadn't been many of them, just a few, but it was enough... Out of the five she went on dates with, three made it to the bedroom.

And she couldn't stay aroused with any of them.

They were nice, really. But they weren't any the wiser when she forced herself to play up her part, moaning loudly and clenching her legs when she thought it was the "right" time. Then, after, they'd collapse next to her, spent and happy, grinning like they just won the quidditch world cup.

"*Seemed good for you, yeah?*"

Good, indeed. But only for her research. At the end of her experiment with dating, several things were confirmed.

One, she had a completely healthy and active sex drive. She was capable of getting and staying aroused, and could orgasm by hand or toy, both muggle and magical.

Two, she was interested in sex. The problems only started once things got going, and that's when her mind would wander.

Three, if her mind wandered, there was no chance of orgasm.

Which led her to a new research question. What *would* it take for her to stay focused in bed, with a man? During her experiments at home, by herself, she didn't waste any time. She was efficient in the way she touched herself, knowing exactly what she needed and how. Was it that she felt the need to direct the men she was with? Or was it that she constantly felt like they were completely disinterested in her pleasure, and focused only on their own?

Hermione's research expanded. She found muggle literature talking about the same things. She found therapists that specialized in all things sex and sexual relationships. She found articles from magazines in the specialty shops, protected by spells to be unseen by children, tucked back in the tight corners between Knockturn and Diagon Alley, where most shoppers didn't venture.

They each pointed to one thing: dominance and submission.

It was laughable, really. *Her?* Hermione Jean Granger, into BDSM? Absolutely not. She'd been beaten, tortured, threatened with death, and then some. She lost friends and loved ones in the war. She knew pain, and it wasn't pleasurable. In some spots, she still bore the evidence of it. The scars had faded, but they wouldn't ever go away entirely... So she knew that she held zero desire to be bound up by some stranger, or to dive into the more murky areas of the scene she'd read about.

But the longer it went, the more it seemed like the only option left to try. Her experiments all failed, one by one, her hypothesis becoming more and more depressing with every passing week that she couldn't find a solution. Which is what led her there, to that moment, standing outside The Scarlet Order ready to try the last thing on her list. The one she swore she wasn't interested in, but Hermione Granger simply did not *give up*. She wouldn't be able to rest until she knew that she exhausted every single possibility, even if it meant trying dominance and submission.

If this failed, it meant she was just destined for mediocre sex for the rest of her life. *No*, she self-corrected. *When* this failed. As certain as she was that it would be a waste of time, the dedication to seeing her research through meant that she had to finish what she started, just so she could say with confidence that she was right. She *must*.

"Miss Jean?"

A polite voice interrupted her spiral of thoughts, and her attention snapped to the doorway of the manor. A slight man in a formal suit held the door open, white gloves gleaming against the black paint. It only took her a split second to recognize that he used the preferred name she listed on her application, rather than her real one.

"Ah, yes, sorry," she apologized quickly, moving toward the door. With a quick glance at her watch, she realized she'd wasted almost ten minutes out on the sidewalk, stuck in her own head. The sun was beginning to set, and any longer outside would mean missing her appointment. And they already made it clear that they did *not* issue refunds.

"Please come in." He took a step back, moving out of the way so she could enter the formal hallway. Once the door was closed behind her, he spoke again. "Tonight we have you scheduled with one of our more experienced clients, based on your profile and intake survey."

Ahh, the intake survey. She almost smiled at the memory. It was another thing that sold her on The Scarlet Order—their commitment to research and data to back up their business model. Each client filled out a profile survey every three to six months, indicating their likes, dislikes, interests, and more. At the end, there was a three-page list of sexual escapades that she was expected to rate with her interest levels. Unsurprisingly, many of them were hard zeros.

"Would you like to make any changes before I show you upstairs?" His knowing look made her cheeks flush hot. *Was her inexperience that obvious?*

Out of the hundred or so items on the list, she had researched every single one. She found muggle made videos and wizarding photos that looped through various scenes, and she made sure to give every option a thorough review before her answer. A few were tame and expected, even if she wasn't into things like roleplay or dress up. Some made her stomach turn, like the knife play or the fire wands. Others had just been confusing... But there were a few that made her heart race and her abdomen grow tight.

"No, thank you." Hermione forced herself to swallow past the growing tightness in her throat. Although she hadn't been too anxious during the journey over, now that she was inside, her stomach was beginning to fill with butterflies. It was the same sort of anxiety she used to feel in school before a big exam. A fluttery stomach, tightness in her chest, and a pulse that beat a steady tempo in the tips of her extremities.

"Right this way, then."

With a decisive nod, he began to climb the stairs. Her legs were stiff, but she forced herself to follow without question, up and around the sweeping steps to the second floor. With the classic wood paneling and plush carpet lining the stairs, the manor really did feel like an old, stately home. Tasteful art hung on the walls in gilded frames, but the majority of the paintings were of landscapes or still life, with the flowers and trees rustling in an invisible breeze. *Was this someone's home? Or was it just designed this way to feel as casual as possible? Is that why the man in front of her was dressed as a butler? There were so many other places and services that claimed to cater to the BDSM crowd, but the majority seemed to be set up like bars and private clubs. The Scarlet Order marketed themselves as a private matchmaking service instead, complete with arranged appointments as "dates." Dates which occurred on their private properties, like this one, hidden on the streets of London.*

When they reached the second floor landing, she continued her observations. Six doors in the same dark-stained wood. Another staircase led to a third floor, but it was roped off. Noticing her curiosity, the man cleared his throat and stepped toward the closest door.

"You've been booked in room four this evening. Each room has a private bath that you may use at your discretion, before, during, or after your appointment. If you need any assistance at all during your stay, there are private summoning charms built into the room intercoms near the door. Whichever staff member is closest will assist you immediately, but no one else in the house will be alerted."

Wow, she could feel her eyebrows creeping up in surprise. They really do value privacy.

"Do you have any questions?" he prompted, but she could only manage a shake of her head. The fast-paced tempo of her heart was only increasing, and her palms grew sweaty. Instead of wiping them on her skirt, she clasped them in front of her hips. *Just breathe, Hermione thought to herself. You've done worse, so this should be easy.* Her attempts at calming herself down did nothing to affect the slight tingling in her fingers. No one would want a partner with clammy palms, match-made or not.

"No." With her confirmation, the man opened the door and stepped aside.

"Your partner for this evening has left his instructions on the table. He should be arriving soon."

Before she could sputter out a shocked response, he was gone, descending the staircase in quick, silent steps.

Instructions. Whoever this guy was... He left her *instructions*. The tightness in her chest clamped down tighter, and she sucked in a choked breath. Oh Merlin, this was a bad idea. Now, standing in the hallway alone, she regretted everything that led up to this moment.

He should be arriving soon, the second half of the sentence floated through her mind, prompting her into action. She had two options: go inside and read those instructions, or leave. She didn't have more time to stand around thinking about what brought her to this moment.

Before she could succumb to the cold fear that was creeping through her veins, she dashed into the room, shutting the door behind her with a decisive *click*. No time to second guess, no time to run away screaming. *This* was courage, right? Facing down the unknown? Something that could hurt you, but you had to trust that everything would be okay?

It had been a long time.

Closing her eyes, Hermione counted to ten. Each odd number fell on an inhale, each even number, an exhale. *One, two, three...* By the time she reached ten, her heart had settled by a few paces. When she opened her eyes, she made sure to focus on keeping her breathing steady as she took in the room.

Like the rest of the manor, the floors were dark stained wood, but a thick carpet with abstract strokes of red and grey sat in the middle of the room. On top of it was a matching set of leather furniture, one long couch and two arm chairs, with a plain wooden table in the middle. To the left sat a large chest, and bookshelves lined the walls. There was a window with the shades drawn, and another door to the right, most likely the bathroom that the man downstairs had mentioned. With every breath, Hermione's heart settled more. This wasn't some dungeon of sin, or a warehouse full of painful implements.... It was just a room. A plain room, filled with books and comfortable furniture. This room could be in any house.

Huh.

Before she could get distracted with the books surrounding her, she looked to her side. Just inside the door was a small black table, with a few pieces of parchment sitting atop. The first two were lists, and upon closer inspection, she realized that one of them was hers. Even though the names had been removed, she recognized her scores. Which meant... *Oh*. The second list was *his*, whoever he must be. As soon as her eyes began to scan through the numbers, her panic began to climb. *Is there anything he isn't into?* Each item was marked with some level of interest, and the longer she read, the more anxious she became. A full score for bondage. The same for spanking, paddling, but not whipping. Even though she should be relieved, it couldn't compare to what the rest of his list held. Voyeurism, exhibitionism, sensory play... he was into all of it.

Shoving the list out of the way, she looked at the other pieces of parchment. If she read any further on his list, she would end up giving up on the experiment entirely and running away. *They matched us for a reason*, she reminded herself. *Unless...* The idea that it could have been a mistake filtered past her weak attempt at reassurance. Would they have accidentally matched her with someone who was too advanced for her? Someone who would end up hurting her?

The next set appeared to be copies of test results, both marked with a clean bill of health. One must be hers, then. Hermione remembered consenting to one during her initial meeting, and when she

accepted the birth control potion as a condition of her membership with The Scarlet Order. While there were plenty of potions and spells to prevent or treat things like sickness, diseases, and pregnancy, precautions still had to be taken. Clean, discreet, with no strings attached. This is what she wanted... right?

Yes, she reminded herself, shuffling to the last piece of parchment in the stack. This one was unlike the rest, and contained a neat script, written in flourishing ink that gleamed a dark green when she picked it up to read it closer.

In the top drawer of this table is a blindfold. Please put it on and find a seat anywhere in the room you deem comfortable, and I will join you shortly.

She read through his words three times before they fully sank in. *That's it? That's the only instruction?* Deep down, she was expecting the worst. To be told to strip naked and tie herself to the radiator, perhaps. But a blindfold? It almost seemed too easy. Pursing her lips, she pulled open the drawer. As expected, there was a single item inside. A black silk blindfold, with long ties on either side. Running it through her fingers, the fabric felt soft and luxurious, and she couldn't help but raise it to her lips to feel the cool material slip across her skin. It did nothing to settle her nerves, but it at least gave her something to anchor herself to. Something that was *hers* in this strange, foreign place.

Okay, she let out one last nervous breath. *I can do this.* Dropping her wand and purse on the side table, she took a few tentative steps toward the seating area. *Find a seat anywhere in the room you deem comfortable,* the note said. There were pros and cons to each choice, but she couldn't let herself get caught up in something that didn't matter. She couldn't anticipate what he would like, and it didn't really make a difference if her back was to the door if she was wearing a blindfold, did it?

Forcing herself not to overthink it, she took a seat at the edge of the couch. With shaking hands, she lifted the fabric to her face, deciding at the last minute to tie it loose enough that a sliver of light peeked through the bottom edge.

There, good enough, Hermione let out an unsteady breath. She could still somewhat—

A whisper of noise from the door alerted her that she was no longer alone, followed closely by footsteps entering the room. Holding her breath, she waited for the click of the lock, but only silence remained for several long moments. Finally, it slipped into place with a slight *snick*.

“Well,” a deep voice said softly behind her, but she didn’t dare move. “If that isn’t a pleasant surprise, I don’t know what would be.”

A pleasant surprise? Curiosity and apprehension mixed in her stomach, potent and somewhat nauseating.

“I’m sorry?” The question came out weak and reedy.

His answer was an amused noise, followed by the shuffle of parchment and a few careful footsteps. His gait was steady, and from the corner of her narrowed sight she spied sleek dragonscale shoes, shined to perfection. “Not many newcomers seem to follow instructions so readily.”

“Oh.” Relief washed through her, warming her cold extremities.

His foot shifted, then paused. “Oh, indeed... I think I might have spoken too soon. Aren’t you a clever little witch?”

Before she could ask what he meant, the silk tightened against her eyes, blocking the rest of her view. Embarrassment grew within her chest, blooming up and across the back of her neck. *How had he noticed?* The question overshadowed her realization that he didn’t even say the spell out loud... Which meant he was an advanced wizard as well. *Hmm.* That was interesting. She had only known a handful of witches and wizards in her life who had been able to accomplish nonverbal magic so easily, and it was something she still struggled with from time to time.

“And a glamour spell too? Someone came prepared.”

Something about his tone grated against her already frazzled nerves. Somehow, this stranger was able to catch on to her so easily. *Too easily*, and it made her feel more unsettled than she was ready for.

“I was under the impression that glamour spells were well within the acceptable rules for clients here.” Her words came out harsher than she intended, but she didn’t cow herself. Instead she straightened her shoulders and pushed her chin up higher, despite the inky darkness that filled her vision. *Besides*, she thought with an angry clip, *how could he even tell?* It was supposed to be practically undetectable. Apparently, her skills weren’t as good as she thought, and that nettled her even further.

“Indeed they are, but,” his voice dropped an octave, deepening to a smooth, sultry tone as he leaned down to speak closer to her ear, “fair warning, my dear. Other wizards might not take too kindly to such an adversarial tone from a submissive.”

Hermione barely muffled the squeak of surprise when she felt his weight sink down onto the couch next to her. Luckily for her, he seemed entertained by her jumpiness, because his only response was another low chuckle. Merlin’s beard, she really was screwing this up, wasn’t she? First she was getting snippy, and now she was jumping at any movement he made? How would she be able to give him a fair shot if she kept going off like one of the Weasley’s joke fireworks?

“I’ll forgive it just this once, since you’re new. But I am curious...” his voice trailed off, and she caught herself leaning toward the sound. When he didn’t elaborate, she cleared her throat.

“Curious?” Thankfully, her voice sounded more like herself. Steady and confident, even if she didn’t feel it on the inside.

“What a witch like you is doing in a place like this, using an advanced glamour spell to hide her identity.” The slight rustle of parchment sounded from beside her, as if he was leafing through her list the same way she had done with his. “Please relax, we have a few things to discuss before we can think about getting started.”

“What do you mean *a witch like me*?” The sharp question flew to her lips before she could think to stop herself. Some of the things she read had mentioned that some dominants didn’t like their submissives to speak unless they were given express, explicit permission. *Oh, Merlin, please tell me he isn’t one of those types...*

Instead of answering, he waited. Silence grew around them, and she instantly knew that she overstepped her bounds. “I apologize, that was rude of me. This is my first time, so I’m a little nervous.”

Her apology felt forced on her tongue, but deep down she understood that it was the right thing to do.

“Exactly.” She could almost *hear* the way his lips were curling up. He had an attractive voice, and now that she was growing used to the lack of sight, it seemed like her other senses were heightening. The heat of his body was radiating into her skin, meaning he was close, maybe close enough to touch if she moved in the right way. The subtle notes of his cologne tickled her nostrils, smelling deep and luxurious and *expensive*.

“You’re the first witch they’ve matched me with in a long while, despite your inexperience. For some reason, they took a look at you and thought that this would work, regardless of the massive disparity in our interests. When the agency sent me your profile details yesterday, I wasn’t sure it could be correct.”

Hermione’s heart fell. So this *was* a mistake. “If you didn’t agree with the match, then why ask me to wear this blindfold? Why even come at all?”

Her question was quiet between them, showing more of her regret than she had intended. Why was *he* given the opportunity to see her profile, but she hadn’t been given any information on him in return? There were too many questions burning inside her head, and no time to address them all.

“Because,” she heard another shuffle of the parchment, and felt his weight shift forward, then back, like he set them down on the table in front of the couch, “I can’t deny that your answers intrigued me. And just like you wanted your little spell to protect your identity, the blindfold helps me to maintain my privacy *and* do my job better.”

Better, how? Before she could voice her next question, she felt a feather light touch run down her upper arm. It felt like the tip of his finger, and he drew lazy circles, chasing goosebumps as they erupted against her skin. She fought to keep from shivering, but when the pad of his finger dipped into her elbow and traced a slow line to the inside of her wrist, she shuddered out a breath. His voice dropped as his fingers skirted across her skin. “Like this.”

She was either touch starved, or the blindfold really was working to his advantage. “Now,” he said, pausing his movements, and her arm jerked involuntarily, seeking more of his touch. Heat flooded through her chest and torso, her skin burning hot under her dress. It was surely evident since the fabric was low cut enough to showcase her collarbones, but stopped well above her cleavage. If he noticed, he didn’t say anything. “I think it’s obvious that you’ve got questions of your own, but so do I. So how about a little game of question and reward?”

Oh, he was good. Sly, but good.

“Okay,” she agreed with a heavy swallow. This was something she could handle.

He made a pleased hum, then resumed his light traces on her arm. “Good girl. Since you agreed so easily, I’ll let you have the first question.”

She wasn’t sure if the pleasure that washed over her was from his compliment, or that she’d made the right move after so many missteps.

“You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

He was silent for a long moment, but his finger never stopped moving. The patterns he traced felt like he was weaving a complicated spell, looping around and back over and over again.

Finally, after he gathered his thoughts, he answered in a serious voice. “I would never do anything you hadn’t explicitly agreed to before coming here. I’m well acquainted with pain, but I don’t dole it out to those who don’t ask for it.” Before she could let out a sigh of relief, he continued, “But you must understand something—pain does not always equal *hurt*. When I’m given the right kind of trust, it’s possible to use certain techniques to enhance pleasure. What you *think* might hurt will actually feel good.”

Her instinct was to stiffen, but his hand drifted back up her arm and skated over the fabric of her sleeve until he was touching the base of her neck. Heat flashed through her body, and she couldn’t help but melt a little farther into the couch. If this was her reward, she’d take it.

“Your intake form said you were looking to try something new. Why?”

Struggling to keep her breathing steady, Hermione counted a few breaths before answering. She hadn’t been totally honest in her application interview. While she knew that she was on a mission to solve her sexual problems, it seemed too personal of an issue to tell a stranger. So instead she claimed that she was bored and looking to expand her experiences somewhere private and safe.

“Boredom, I guess.”

The lie tasted sour on her tongue, but when his fingers stopped their delicate tracing on her collarbone, dread sank like a heavy weight in her abdomen.

At first, he didn’t speak, but she felt him shifting away. The sudden absence of his body heat felt like a punishment, and she flexed her fingers in her lap to keep from tearing off the blindfold to see where he’d gone. “While I found your penchant for snark endearing, I do not tolerate lying.”

“I’m sorry—” she tried to start, but he cut her off.

“Nor am I interested in any more of your apologies. They only count if you mean them, darling.”

Caught. So he did know that she wasn’t sorry for snapping at him earlier. Dipping her head, she shifted her weight forward. Without the use of her sight, she felt practically naked. He could see her, but she was isolated and under the spotlight.

“I—” She had to swallow past the familiar, tight feeling in her throat. “I have trouble focusing in bed.”

“How?” The word was harsh and direct, but the authority in his tone wasn’t judging. Instead it sent hot shivers down the back of her neck, and she took a steady breath.

“By myself I’m fine, but when I’m with someone, I get distracted too easily. I’ve tried everything else, but... Something’s missing.”

The only noise he made in response was a sharp intake of breath, then a muttered curse.

“Why lie about something so mundane?”

“It’s not *mundane*—” she snapped, recognizing her mistake one second too late. Slapping her hand over her mouth, she tried to disguise the horror diffusing her features. “I’m sorry—I should go.”

This isn't going to work."

Before she could fully stand, a strong hand wrapped around her wrist and tugged her back down. His palm was wide, but his fingers were long enough that they managed to span her entire wrist and down into her own hand, covering the skin with a confident hold that had her body freezing in place.

"I know what you need, but you're not going to like it." After a brief pause, he amended his promise. "Not at first, at least."

"What do you mean?" Everything she read said that the experience would be *freeing*. But the amount of nerves and tremors that were coursing through her body at that moment felt anything but freeing.

"I mean," he started, tugging her a little closer, testing to see if she would settle in beside his body. It wasn't until she did that he continued, but she couldn't help but notice the solid build underneath his clothes. His scent was even stronger now that she was aligned against him, and it was *intoxicating*. "That the most important thing in this room, between us, or anyone doing this, has to be trust. You have to trust me to know what you need and to know how to give it to you."

His body against hers felt lithe and strong, not bulky with muscle or soft like some of the men she'd been with, and it was almost distracting enough for her to forget what he'd said.

"You don't even know me. How would you know what I need?"

"Because men like me are directly in tune with the types of needs of witches like you. Clever little witches who try to sneak glances and ask too many questions because they're afraid to give up control. I specialize in seizing that control, so that *you* can let go."

When her cheeks heated with an embarrassed blush, he chuckled. "I'm going to guess that the wizards you've been with have let you take the reins, eh?" When she didn't answer, he made a *tsk* noise with his tongue. "You keep getting distracted because those prats are too busy chasing their own pleasure to keep you satisfied."

"I enjoy it just fine—" His fingers pressed into her lips before she could come up with a fabricated excuse about how it wasn't "that bad." But they both knew it was. She wouldn't be there if that wasn't the case, would she?

"And that's why you've gotten to this point, isn't it? You keep making excuses for them, rather than letting yourself give in with someone who wants to take care of you."

"I—" Was it? Was that it? Her research *had* shown her that her libido wasn't the problem, after all. "I don't know. It could be."

"Well then, I'm glad we agree." His arm tightened around her body like an Immobulus hold. "And in that case, we've got two orders of business to attend to. Do you agree to give it a shot? Or would you like to leave and go back to your boring dates?"

Merlin, he was cocky, wasn't he? Twenty minutes together and he was already convinced that he knew exactly what she would like? Unlikely. However, deep down, there *was* something oddly appealing about his confidence. It wasn't a false bravado, but rather, something that emanated from

deep down inside of him. It was a *part* of him, she could tell, and it was as appealing as it was unsettling.

Taking a deep breath, she steeled her fluttering nerves. “If I say yes, what happens?”

His answer was another laugh, and she felt his fingers trace back up her neck until his hand locked her jaw into position. It was a silent command. *He* was in control. *He* called the shots, and she would follow his lead.

A hot thrill flashed through her system, heady and exciting.

“That’s for me to know, and you to find out. Your curiosity will be sated soon enough, little witch.”

A moment passed before she found the strength to nod. Giving up control didn’t come easy to her, and it never had. Which, by her own admission of research, made sense.

“Okay. Yes.”

His hold on her jaw shifted until his fingers cradled her face, his thumb tracing lightly over the outline of her lips. She had almost forgotten about her glamour until his husky whisper.

“What I wouldn’t do to see your real features under all this magic. But it might be for the best, given how we’re about to get started. I do apologize in advance, darling. It will be over quickly.”

“Wait—” Stiffening, she tried to push against his chest but he held her in place so she couldn’t pull away. “What? No—”

“Stop.” His command was firm, and she forced her body to still. “Not only were you very cross with me, but you lied. I told you I don’t take kindly to lying, and if I allow it, it sets a... distasteful precedent for our relationship, don’t you think?”

Unfortunately, he was correct. She had been adversarial, and she couldn’t even be honest when he asked her a simple question. How was she supposed to finalize her research if she wasn’t being truthful with the experiment? *Bollocks*. She couldn’t speak past the sudden dryness in her mouth, so she gave him a shaky nod instead.

“Since your survey said no bondage, I’ll allow you to keep your hands clasped above your head. But if you move them in any way, I will stop immediately. Understood?”

A sweet wave of relief washed over her. “Yes. Thank you.”

She could almost hear the grin in his voice. “You’re catching on so quickly.” His weight beside her shifted, then strong hands were guiding her body across his lap. “Now lay face down, and keep your hands above your head. There’s a noise dampening charm on the room, so you may make as much noise as you please, but I’d like for you to keep count.”

Keep count? What did—*oh no*. As soon as she was situated, stomach across his lap, she felt the telltale sweep of his hand against the backs of her bare thighs. She’d seen it in the photos and videos, when women would be swatted until their backsides were bright red and they were keening for more.

A heavy flush settled against her skin, and he hadn’t even started yet. She couldn’t tell if it was apprehension or excitement, but the nervousness was strong enough to make her hands tremble.

"I would ask if you've ever been spanked before, but I think I might know the answer already." His fingers swept higher, dipping under the hem of her skirt until the tips of his fingers brushed against the sensitive skin below her arse.

"No," she admitted, unwilling to lie again. His ministrations on her legs were so delicate and subtle that it felt like every nerve ending below her waist was flaring to life. Awakening her body in smooth, easy strokes, she felt every bit of his skin against hers and as much as it surprised her, heat began to build in her core. Her body was at war, somehow excited and anxious at the same time, mixing together into a palpable sensation that had her feeling like she'd taken several Redi-Wake draughts like she used to when staying up all night for her exams.

"Thank you for being honest. If you do well, I promise I'll make it up to you after. How does five sound? Do you think you can handle that?"

She could only manage another shaky nod once she felt him expose her backside to the cool air. Her hands were tucked into the edge of the cushion above her head, and she knotted her fingers together for good measure. Five wasn't too bad, was it? Five quick swats, and it would be time for the good stuff.

It wasn't like I didn't earn the punishment, she thought to herself with a grimace. Way to go, Hermione. Screw up your BDSM experience before you can even get—

His hand came down heavy on her backside, his palm hitting the sensitive skin right between her arse and thigh. The same spot that he had just been attending to with light brushes of his fingers.

"Oh!" The sound squeaked out of her chest before she could stop herself, and her body immediately stiffened. It stung, but it wasn't too bad.

"Count, please," he reminded her gently, sweeping his palm over the slight burn that his hand left behind.

Her voice was choked. "One."

Another rained down, this time on the opposite side. "Two." When she held her breath, he soothed the burn again.

The third and fourth hits were higher, settling on the soft, fleshy parts of her cheeks beside the seam of her knickers. He didn't touch them to move the fabric out of the way, but he made sure she felt the sting of his hand with each swat. Had she known she would be ending up with her arse in the air before they'd even kissed, she might have picked a sexier pair instead of the plain black bikini style she favored from the muggle shops. "Three. Four."

By now, her entire rear was on fire. The blood in her system was pooling in her pelvis and around her hips, rushing to the areas that were surely blushing as red as her chest and face were right now. It was an uncomfortable sensation, but he paused, running both of his hands in sweeping motions, pressing into her skin until the coolness of his touch soothed the pain away.

"You're doing so good, darling. Can you take one more?"

Hermione forced herself to nod, digging her head further into the cushion so he couldn't see her face. The strange sensation of the spanking was confusing the rest of her body. It didn't feel *good*,

per se, but the rush of blood after each hit was sending more waves of heat to her core, almost like it didn't know better.

"Yes." When she finally managed a breathy response, his hands stilled. Shifting her with one knee underneath her pelvis, he tilted her backside even higher in the air, and used one hand to spread her thighs open a few inches.

"Good girl. Now breathe..." He waited until he saw her chest expand on an inhale to strike, but this time he didn't go for the soft, fleshy parts of her butt or thighs. He went right for her core. He didn't hold back, putting more force behind the final swat since the sting of it was muted by the fabric stretched across her lower lips. But the impact was there all the same, and a rough moan let loose from her chest before she could think to stop it. It was right over her clit, which was sensitive from the increased blood flow already, and the shock sent her eyes rolling back. A wave of arousal rushed through her system, hot and heady in the mix of the pain he just dealt.

"Five." The last number was barely more than a shaky exhale, as his hands resumed their sweeping motions.

"I'm very proud of you. Was that so bad?" He squeezed her thighs lightly, sending light shocks of sensation through her core. Everything felt swollen and sensitive, and when she shifted on his lap, she froze.

She was *wet*.

"I guess not," he chuckled, still not stopping. "Tell me again what it was I told you earlier."

It didn't take a genius to know what he was talking about, but somehow, she knew if she didn't answer, he would stop touching her. All she knew was in that moment, that was the *last* thing she wanted. She would take more swats if it meant more of that exquisite heat that was building between her legs.

"Pain..." she started, panting heavily. "Doesn't always have to hurt."

"And did it hurt?" His fingers toyed with the edge of her knickers, but he didn't dip underneath, not even when she wiggled closer. It felt shameless, but the pressure building in her core was undeniable. She *never* got this turned on, not even by herself.

Another shaky breath, and some of the fog cleared from her mind. "Only a little. But... Now it feels good."

And it did, truly. More than she ever could have thought possible. If he weren't there, holding her legs in place, she would have already pressed her fingers to the spot right above her clit to relieve some of the building ache.

"Then I think you're ready for your reward, don't you?"

This time, he didn't wait for her response. Instead, he used one hand to keep her in position and delved the other under the seam of her underwear, pushing the fabric aside until she was exposed. *Oh, Merlin...* She was wet enough that the cool air around her felt like an icy kiss against her cunt. Heat built against her cheeks, but she was too worked up to be fully embarrassed. Besides, this is what she was there for, right? This is what he knew would happen, even though she had been adamant it wouldn't? She might be inexperienced in the world of kink, but she wasn't demure.

“Well, well, well.” He didn’t laugh, but the amusement in his voice was evident. It was more than that, though… It was strained, and serious, and she could tell that he was taking in the sight of her glistening folds, presented on his lap like a feast. “I think you might have learned something about yourself tonight, don’t you think?”

She couldn’t take it any more. Shifting her hips, she angled herself up even more, trying to work some kind of friction between her thighs, but in doing so, it made one thing clear. Underneath her, pressing against the front of her thighs, was a thick erection.

Oh.

So this is what he liked, then. The knowledge that he was just as turned on as she was made her feel even more empowered, and she squeezed her thighs together. When she did, his hand tightened around her thigh.

“You little minx. I see what you’re doing.” He gave her a quick, light swat on her left cheek that made her cry out. It wasn’t nearly as hard as the others, but it was a warning. “Do you like feeling my eyes on you? Do you like knowing that the sight of this—” he lightly traced her opening, but didn’t dip his finger in, “—has me desperate for a taste?”

“Yes.” The admission was barely more than a whisper, but the way his grip tightened on her said more than any response he could have said aloud.

When he delicately touched her center, she almost missed his muttered words. He traced the same tantalizing patterns, up and down, back around and over again, repeating until she was mindless and writhing on his lap.

“I guess they do know a thing or two about matches…”

She had a feeling they were more for himself than they were for her, but it sent satisfaction coursing through her veins. Careful not to move her hands from their spot, she arched her back, desperate for something. Some kind of touch, or friction, or relief. The building ache was turning painful, and she didn’t know how much longer she could tolerate it without taking care of things herself.

“Please, I need more.”

“Do you?” His voice was sharp. “Is this where you usually take over and tell your dates how you like to be touched? Or is this where *I* decide what you need?”

“You,” she agreed quickly, nodding her assent. “You, please. I’ll do whatever you want.”

At this point, she would do anything he asked if that meant getting those long fingers inside of her. She didn’t care if they didn’t have sex—she just needed more, and more from *him* only. Whatever he wanted, because he was right—in this moment, in this room, she trusted him to know exactly what she needed most. How easily he had proved it, with just a few swats of his hand.

Later, she would be embarrassed. She would lay in her bed and burn red with the shame that she pushed her hips higher to chase his touch, that she tilted her center toward his fingers in a desperate attempt to fill the painful emptiness between her legs.

“What if I wanted to do this again?” He gave her another light smack, and she felt the way her flesh rippled with the impact. The sting quickly morphed into more heat, more wetness, and she let out a keening moan.

“Oh, Merlin...”

“You should be saying *my* name. I’m the one making you feel this way,” he reminded her, smacking the other side with equal, but light force. These weren’t punishing blows—they were just light enough to keep the heat building underneath her skin, but stiff enough to send a light sting rippling across her backside. A heavy hand followed, laving the sting with his palm against her hot skin. It felt like she was burning *everywhere*, and when his fingers dipped back between her thighs, she thought she might scream.

“Tell me what I should do,” she begged, writhing underneath his hold. She would say his name, if she knew it. She would chant it loud enough that people on the street would be able to hear her, even through the noise dampening spell. “Please, just tell me.”

Finally, he gave in, slipping a finger into her folds. It met no resistance, sinking in past the knuckle, and she almost fell apart at the sensation. Grinding the words through his teeth, he shifted his hips underneath her. “So hot and responsive. It’s like you were made for me.”

“Oh, oh—” Pushing her hips back, she met his slow thrusts with heavy breaths. It didn’t take long for him to add a second finger, stretching her tighter as he worked her. The tips of his fingers easily found the sensitive spot at the front of her pelvis, and she bucked when he began to rub tight circles right where the bundle of nerves sat. She didn’t have the mind to tell him that she wasn’t usually this responsive, or this animated in bed. She’d *never* fucked herself against a guy’s hand, never been so desperate for release that she felt like she would sob if he stopped. Whether it was the spanking, or his confidence, or the expert ease that he managed her body, she didn’t know. But she would scream like a banshee before she ever let him stop.

After a particularly loud moan, his thumb slipped forward, easily finding her clit. He didn’t immediately go for it, but instead rubbed around it, teasing her further. It was *so* close, but not close enough. She knew she couldn’t get off without it, and she let out a frustrated groan when he slipped up and around the nub over and over again.

She had to do something, but if she moved her hands at all, he would stop. He promised her that much, and she believed him. If she asked him directly, he would accuse her of trying to take control. That would go over about as well as a lead balloon.

Come on, she tried to change the pace but he stilled, immediately catching on.

“You’re thinking, aren’t you?”

“Umm—” She barely had time to find the right answer before he withdrew his hand and gripped her waist, pulling her body upright in one strong move. The sudden motion set her head spinning, and her hands latched on to his body of their own accord, acting in self preservation by grabbing at his shoulders. She felt thin fabric underneath her fingers, incredibly smooth, but not silky. Definitely expensive, whatever it was.

“Tell me.” He pulled her hips down over his lap with a strong grip, and she had no choice but to straddle him. When she was settled, one hand stayed on her waist and the other traveled up to her the nape of her neck to grip her hair. “What were you thinking about?”

Hermione's breaths were coming in shallow pants, and the feeling of his chest pressed against her torso was almost too much to take. She wanted to touch him, to run her hands over the planes of his body and learn him, the way he was doing to her. Was he lean and muscular under his expensive tailoring? Did he have chest hair? What would he feel like if she raked her nails across his chest?

"Answer me," he prompted, leaning forward to drag his lips up her neck. He nibbled lightly at the spot below her jaw, and she felt the way his lips curved into a sly smile when she gasped at the sensation.

"I needed..." She panted, struggling not to grind down on the erection that was pressing between her legs. If she did, she'd be sure to stain his pants. "More. I can't come without you touching my clit directly."

The confession felt stiff and forced, but it was true. But instead of pulling away, he rewarded her with a soft nip to her earlobe. "And you thought I wasn't getting there?"

"I've never—" Another heavy pant, this time because the hand that had been anchoring her hip down was now traveling lower, back toward the place she wanted him the most. "I've never been this turned on."

The truth was flowing easier now, and maybe it was better that he had blindfolded her after all. It made it easier to not focus on the outside world, to not scrutinize his reactions or try to catalogue what she should be doing or saying differently. He'd taken the responsibility of it all right out of her hands, and forced herself to only think about her own pleasure.

This is what I've been missing?

His smile grew against her throat, and he began kissing and suckling a path down her neck. He wasn't gentle, and there would definitely be marks in the morning, but she didn't care. She'd buy an entire case of concealing tinctures on her way home tonight, but she wanted the evidence to herself. "Isn't that the point?"

When his fingers reached her core, her body shuddered against his. "Yes," she moaned, sighing in relief when he pushed back inside to resume his ministrations. He didn't waste time working back up to it, instead going right back to where he left off, but this time he didn't tease her clit. His thumb found it, pressing down and sweeping the sensitive bud back and forth in tandem with his middle and ring fingers.

A wave of pleasure hit her, so strong she felt her insides clamp down on his hand. "Yes," she chanted as she worked her hips, feeling the way her dress was bunched up around her hips. He was still fully clothed, but it made the mental image painted in her head even more indecent. They could be anyone, anywhere, fooling around together in secret. Keeping their clothes on because they have to make a quick getaway, or because they can't afford to be caught. A torrid affair between two star crossed lovers, so desperate for each other that they couldn't waste time disrobing.

As if he could read her mind, his fingers released her hair and traveled down her neck and around to her chest, settling right underneath the swell of her breast. With a hook of his fingers, he rubbed the sensitive spot inside her hips in tandem with her clit, driving slow circles that made her thighs shake. Her entire body went tense, and he growled in her ear.

"You have no idea how much I want to rip this prim little dress off your body with my teeth, just to see what you have on underneath. You look so proper and good, but you're absolutely filthy, aren't

you? You love what I'm doing to you, and you can't get enough."

"I do." She nodded, trying to keep her hips steady, but the pressure was building. Her legs were beginning to strain, and the telltale coil of pleasure was growing tighter and tighter with each passing stroke. "Please, don't stop..."

He kept on, sucking and biting at her ears, her neck, her jaw. "Do you know how much you're driving me crazy? I can smell your arousal and it's making my mouth water. Next time we meet, I plan on stripping you naked and laying you out on the table like a feast."

Was she? His erection was still pressing against her inner thigh, but he hadn't given her permission to touch him yet, and something told her that she couldn't just do whatever she wanted.

"Can I—" The question was interrupted by a sudden wave of pleasure, shuddering through her body when he thrust his fingers with renewed force. "Can I touch you?"

"Not yet." The answer was firm, but he didn't stop his motions. "Only if you're a good little witch and come all over my hand. Can you do that?"

Her thighs clenched of their own accord, and she nodded. The trembling in her pelvis was growing stronger, and her movements were turning jerky. He found a steady rhythm that kept her senses overwhelmed, like little figure-eights right on her clit, and it was driving her *mad*. Working in tandem with his fingers, every few thrusts he would reach in further to rub at her g-spot, and she could feel the sweat beginning to bead on her chest. She couldn't hold out much longer, but she remembered one thing from her research, right in the knick of time.

"Can I please come?" The throaty voice barely sounded like her, but she was ready to beg if she had to. Her core was growing tighter by the second, spasming in warning, and she wasn't sure if she could hold out. The picture he had painted, of her laying across a table while he worked his way down her body with his mouth, was almost too much to imagine. If he was this talented with his fingers, his mouth was bound to be even better.

He bit down on the column of her neck, thrusting up with his pelvis to grind his cock into her. "Come, good girl. Come for me and show me how much you love it."

The feeling of it pressing into her bare flesh, right underneath his hand, was enough to send her over the edge. "Oh, oh, oh—" Her whole body seized, and she fell forward into him, writhing and bucking as the pleasure spread into her limbs like a tidal wave, white hot and sparking against her nerve endings. She let go, basking in the feel of it, more than anything she had ever experienced before. More intense, more blinding, until it felt like she was consumed by it entirely. It pulsed, on and on, as she ground down on his hand. Through the roar of blood in her ears, she could hear herself babbling incoherently, sobbing her relief as he chased every ripple of pleasure her body had to give.

When it was over, her body went limp, still numb from the pleasure and the full experience. They were both breathing heavily, but after a moment, she felt his body stiffen underneath hers.

"... Granger?" The word was choked, and cold realization filled her veins, sobering her immediately.

Shit, the intensity of her orgasm must have been enough to dissipate any residual energy from the glamour spell, which meant... *Oh, no*—dread and horror filled her stomach immediately, and there

was only one person in the world who said her name the way the man underneath her just did.

Draco Malfoy.

Oh, Merlin, no—please, please no—the light of the room was blinding when she ripped off the black silk from her eyes, but as soon as they were open, they came to meet an icy grey pair, just a whisper of space away.

The same icy grey that had taunted her for years. Called her names, bullied her friends, watched as his aunt tortured her in his own home. The same man who was too much of a coward to stand up for what was right during the war, who had contributed to some of the worst pain she'd ever experienced in her life, had just brought her to the strongest orgasm she couldn't have dreamed of.

"I think I'm going to be sick—" She scrambled off his lap as fast as she could, stumbling toward the door. Bile was inching up her throat, hot and sour, and she needed to leave *now*.

"Granger, please—" He stood to follow, but she tripped on the rug, legs still weak. Her hand shot out as she caught herself in a poor attempt to keep him at bay, to keep him from coming any closer. "Please sit down. We need to talk—"

"No!" Once her feet were steady, she held a finger out towards him. "There is *nothing* we need to talk about, Malfoy. You disgusting little cockroach—you're still getting off on being a bully, but now you do it in the bedroom?"

She spat the words at him, her hands shaking at her sides. Tears burned at the back of her eyes, but she wouldn't give in. Her entire body felt hot and flushed, and her stomach rolled when she took in the sight of his body. The same one she was just desperate to feel up, that she didn't realize was one of her worst enemies. It had been years since they'd seen each other last, and since then, he'd held the same lean strength he had in school. But now his shoulders were a little wider, his jaw a little more prominent. But how—she had to choke back a sob, holding the back of her hand to her mouth to keep from retching—*how had she not realized?*

"That's not it at all." His voice turned to cold steel. "You don't understand. Please sit down, you're not in any condition to Apparate until you calm down."

With a choked laugh, she snatched up her things. "I understand just fine, *Malfoy*. Now that the war's over, you've got to find a way to inflict pain on people, and what better way to do it than by degrading women."

"That's not what this is about." He took a step closer, putting his hands up. "I told you that wasn't it, and I meant it. Now please—"

His next plea was cut off as she Apparated home, landing in the middle of her living room, the disgusted tears already tracking down her cheeks.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long wait for this chapter! This story ended up giving me more fits than I ever expected. My original plot ideas ended up taking on a life of their own and transformed into a completely different story outline, which left me scrambling to figure out what this story needed and where it should go. I'm still working through it, but I hope this at least makes up for the wait. Hopefully chapter three comes quicker and easier now that I've got through the worst of it.

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

For hours, Hermione sobbed on her bed, curled into a tight ball. Loud, angry heaves that wracked her frame until her whole body was sore and throbbing. The logical part of her brain knew it was an extreme response, though she had somehow spared herself the embarrassment of getting sick once she stumbled into her bedroom. Instead, her reaction had turned purely emotional. Waves of shame and guilt washed over her body, pushing her back and forth until she was filled with more self-loathing than she had ever thought possible.

I just came on Malfoy's hand.

The thought made her shoulders wrack with a shudder. It wasn't the first, and even though the tears had dried, her body still trembled. Her head was pounding and goosebumps raced across her skin with every reminder of what had just happened. That she liked it. *Before*, she clarified with a sniffle. She liked it *before* she found out it was him.

Once her well of tears had run dry, she forced her stiff limbs to move to the shower. Under the hot spray, she scrubbed every inch of her skin until it burned red and she could no longer feel the imprint of his fingers staining her soul.

Anytime Hermione took a sleeping draught, she awoke with a start. It wasn't a natural sleep, and not like the muggle medications that left her feeling heavy and groggy for hours. She would jolt awake in bed as soon as the potion wore off, ready and alert as if she'd never drifted off in the first place. Luckily, between the crying, the shower, and the hours of dreamless sleep, she finally felt more level headed. More like herself.

It wasn't until she sat up that she felt it. A stiffness in her hips and thighs, a delicious soreness that had settled deep into her bones while she slept.

Oh. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she realized, immediately remembering the feel of a hand against her bare skin, slapping and stinging and soothing. Her stomach flipped, sending a fluttering up into her chest. Resting her hand on her heart, she waited for the panic to overtake her the same way it did the night before. For her eyes to begin stinging again, the wetness welling against her eyelids with heated shame.

But nothing ever came. The butterflies dissipated, and everything stayed calm. *Was she all cried out, then? Dried out, for now? Empty until her emotional tank refilled and she had enough to justify breaking down again?* Emotions were silly, risky, stupid things, and she'd always been too prone to tears when she felt overwhelmed. It was only a matter of time until it happened again, which meant she had to make the most of her time while she still had her wits.

Letting out a deep breath, Hermione risked a look at the bedside clock. 9 AM. Later than she usually slept, but not too late that she couldn't have a productive morning. Which is exactly what she needed—her head still felt heavy and stuffy from her bout of crying, but no amount of laying around would change what happened. Nothing could. As much as she hated it, hated the thought of *him*, the deed was done. The last thing she needed was to spend more time ruminating on it, and as she'd well learned, sometimes the only way forward was by force.

Ignoring the ache between her legs, she threw the sheets from her body and climbed out of bed, grabbing a knitted jumper on the way to the kitchen. While she moved through the practiced motions of prepping her morning tea, the gears in her mind started to turn. She needed to work. It was the only, and the best, way to keep busy. The deep well of shame over the night before could only be held at bay for a little while, she knew that much to be true. Soon enough it would creep back up and take her over. It had to.

What to do? She could head into her office at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and get a head start on the paperwork for the latest round of pureblood law repeals. No one else would be in the office on a Sunday, which meant there would be plenty of time and quiet to get things sorted and ready for the initial Auror hearing the next day.

That would do. She imagined the pile of memos and various copies of prior law repeals they would need in order to be prepared. Perfect, unsexy flying memos without the stench of her mistakes. Dusty, stale documents that didn't have any link to her own personal research and theories on sex and pleasure and *preferences*. It was boring, tedious work, and it was exactly what she needed.

Once her tea was ready, she headed to her desk to restock her bag to take to the office. The second bedroom in her flat functioned as a makeshift office, stuffed full of bookshelves and filing cabinets so she could keep track of her various research projects both in and out of work. Even though the Ministry kept standard quills and parchment in stock, she always kept her own. It was a silly habit, and one that Harry poked fun at her for wasting time and money on, but it was her preference. After the war had settled down and things had gone back to normal, it felt nice to be able to focus on the little things again. *Besides, the ink on the NeverDry quills were always bleeding, and it was such a waste of time to spend extra minutes erasing the messy blots —*

Tap. Tap tap.

Looking over at the interruption, a tawny owl dropped the weekend edition of the Daily Prophet off at the window before flying away. Stuffing the last of her supplies into her bag, she moved to grab it with disinterest, barely taking a second glance as she went back to her work preparations. It was probably the same drivel that Rita Skeeter thrived on, filling the pages with society gossip and unconfirmed rumors every weekend. She only kept her subscription to make sure none of her projects at the Ministry made any bad press, but the weekend editions barely had any decent coverage. Before she could toss it into the rubbish bin with the rest of them, a bold headline caught her attention.

MYSTERIOUS MALFOY HEIR SPOTTED ABOUT TOWN

At the crease of the fold, the black and white photo made her stomach drop. A now-familiar head of platinum blond hair, and a hand pushing a few haphazard strands from his forehead. She couldn't even see his eyes, but she knew if she unfolded the paper, they would be there. Intense and grey, staring down whatever was in front of him the same way he had done to her when she pulled off her blindfold.

Her trembling hands moved before her brain could stop them, shaking the paper out to see the article in full. Eyes dutifully avoiding the photo, she focused on the text instead.

Draco Malfoy, mysterious heir to the Malfoy fortune, has been seen about London for the first time in over a year! Our sources spotted him outside a pub alone just after 9 PM before heading inside, where he had several drinks with a mystery brunette. Mr. Malfoy was then seen visiting a nearby bookshop, his companion mysteriously gone, but left without making any purchases. Post-war he was linked to Serafine Bruuner, heiress to the Austrian apothecary chain, but the couple has not been spotted together in many months.

An anonymous source close to Mr. Malfoy has also told us that he has been working closely with the Ministry of Magic since his probationary sentencing by the Wizengamot, and has even made a burgeoning friendship with the boy-wonder himself, Harry Potter. There's no telling what the dashing young wizard is up to these days, but with a friend like Potter, it could be anything. Could this be the start of his entrance back into high wizarding society? A witch can only hope! If this is indeed the beginning of his return as a reformed wizard, we will be waiting with bated breath to see what comes next.

READ MORE ON PAGE SIX.

Hermione read the article four times, unable to process the information in front of her. Each time, her eyes caught on something different.

While she was at home alone, wracked with guilt and shame, he was out cavorting with a date around London? How long did he wait after she Disapparated home before turning his sights on someone else? When she blinked, she remembered his face with painful clarity. His grey eyes were wide and filled with alarm, his arm outstretched toward her like he was approaching a wild animal. Begging, *pleading*, with her to calm down. In their entire time at Hogwarts, she had never seen him look like that. Not even when he watched her writhe, screaming and crying on his drawing room floor. *All so she would keep his secret?* The thought sent a wave of nausea rushing through her stomach.

Of course. There was no way a former Death Eater would want it known that their post-war hobby was dabbling in sexual deviancies at secret clubs around London. It was either that, or he was ashamed that it was her. Most likely both, if she were being honest with herself.

With a shake of her head and a deep breath, she focused on the next bit that had startled her.

An anonymous source close to Mr. Malfoy has also told us that he has been working closely with the Ministry of Magic since his probationary sentencing by the Wizengamot, and has even made a burgeoning friendship with the boy-wonder himself, Harry Potter.

With Rita Skeeter, it was impossible to tell what was true and what was embellished nonsense. Surely she would know if Draco Malfoy had been working with the Ministry since his sentencing? *She'd* been working there for years now. And *friends* with Harry? It was ridiculous. She saw him every week. He would have told her if Malfoy had been traipsing around.

It couldn't be true. There was no way. As her eyes drifted back up to the moving photo, she steeled herself at the sight of him. As he had when he was younger, he wore the same black-on-black wardrobe she was familiar with. Black trousers, tailored to his long legs, and fitted black waistcoat over his button up shirt. The collar of it was still open, and her breath quickened at the memories of her burying her face into his neck while she came, undulating against his hand like a wanton sexpot.

Minus the waistcoat, it was the same thing he'd been wearing with her just two hours before the Prophet claimed the photo was taken.

Gods, he really is handsome. Logically speaking, she couldn't deny it. While she'd noticed that he had filled out, the photo revealed a better look at him than she had allowed for herself in person. He was *tall*, so much taller than she remembered, but looked more fit than she could remember from when they were younger as well. Instead of that scared, scrawny boy with the pointy face he was... Distinguished. His cheekbones and jawline were still sharp, but now he looked more like a high fashion model than a ferret.

Ugh. Men like Malfoy didn't deserve to be *that* attractive.

Her gaze stopped on the motion of his hand once again. Long fingers sifting through his hair, pushing it back and out of his face. Over and over again, the photo looped. He slowly blinked his lashes in a lazy expression while he ducked into the entrance of the bar, like he was already unimpressed with the entire establishment. Breath quickening, she couldn't help but watch it, remembering the ease that he used those same fingers on her.

Heat crept up her chest, blooming across her skin until her neck burned hot, but she was transfixed. No, she forced herself to shake her head, clearing the strange thoughts from her mind. It was hormones and residual lust making her think of Malfoy in any way that wasn't pure horror.

He was disgusting and manipulative and not to be trusted. Even if her body had appreciated his skill, there was no way on earth that it gave him any ounce of redemption. If anything, it only served as a surprising result of her research. She was indeed interested in BDSM-type elements, and it was enough so that even her worst enemy couldn't dissuade her physical response. Even if Rita Skeeter and the rest of the editorial staff at the Daily Prophet thought he was a changed man.

She wasn't quite sure what to think of it.

Glancing back down at the article, she sighed, her mind filling with questions faster than she could register each one individually. And none of them had to do with her work at the Ministry.

Fantastic.

For the rest of the day, Hermione's actual work went untouched. She couldn't bring herself to continue the charade of packing her office bag when she knew it would just be an inevitable delay of her own curiosity. She could hold off and end up giving in later, with the risk of someone coming across her in the office, or she could indulge in the privacy of her own flat.

And indulge she did.

Hours later, after an owl summons for the back issues of the Daily Prophet and a consultation on her own notes, she had a rough map skewed out on the floor of her living room.

It started with some scribbled handwriting on old parchment, her own recollections and memories of the war. Followed by instructions on how to accurately provide multiple copies of her memories for the Wizengamot trials, and duplicates of written statements she provided for various testimonies, Draco Malfoy's included. It was the last time she'd seen him, and the last time she'd given him any thought whatsoever. By her notes, Harry had had better things to say about him than she did, and her own testimony was neutral at best.

Had he helped them? Technically. *Barely*.

After that, the issues of the Prophet filled in the gaps. She hadn't stuck around for the end of the trials, instead setting out for Australia to try and reverse the damage she'd done to her parent's minds and memories as soon as it was safe enough. It was more important than waiting around to hear the verdict on dozens of Death Eaters, morally grey or not.

Apparently, Draco and Narcissa Malfoy had both been sentenced to time served in Azkaban while they awaited their trials, plus two years of house arrest. While Narcissa had done more to assist in the final battle than Draco had, she was pardoned with a clean record after her sentence was fulfilled. Few mentions were made of her after that, and only of sporadic notation when she donated to various causes and charities, making use of the Malfoy family fortune to rehabilitate the tainted legacy of their name.

Draco, on the other hand, was harder to pin down. While his mother had made an effort to distance herself from Lucius, who was serving a lifetime sentence in Azkaban, Draco had simply removed himself from the narrative.

Or at least, he tried. There were two lines, written toward the end of an article that recapped the Malfoy trials, that held a single clue.

"In a surprising turn of events, Draco Lucius Malfoy agreed to provide his own memories during the ongoing Wizengamot trials after the testimonies of Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger, respectively. A source within the trial tells us that the Malfoy heir offered his memories in exchange for an unknown plea deal with the Ministry of Magic."

There was no doubt in Hermione's mind that Malfoy knew the value of his memories, given that Voldemort and his most loyal servants had been living with his family for months. He had to have a veritable trove of information, but it didn't make sense—*why did he wait until after they testified to volunteer them?*

It was a common bargaining chip for most of the Death Eaters and the lower level subjects who clawed their way toward power under Voldemort. Once he fell, they all caved, trying to be the first to point their fingers at each other before they could be charged with worsening crimes. But Draco had apparently held out until the last moment, and it was unclear why. And for *what*?

The mention of Malfoy in that morning's edition of the paper flashed through her mind once more.

"An anonymous source close to Mr. Malfoy has also told us that he has been working closely with the Ministry of Magic since his probationary sentencing by the Wizengamot, and has even made a burgeoning friendship with the boy-turned-man-wonder himself, Harry Potter."

Digging through the pile of parchment to find the two editions, she held them up side-by-side, squinting at the small print as if it might transform into the answer she was looking for. Instead, her vision grew blurry with the strain. Although the answer was unclear, the reasoning was there.

At some point during his trial, Draco Malfoy had had a change of heart. Either that, or his sense of self-preservation finally won out once he saw his future confined in a tiny, damp stone cell. In exchange for his life, he offered *something* to the Ministry—something they wanted badly. The memories, yes, but something else in addition to those wisps of time.

... working closely with the Ministry of Magic since his probationary sentencing by the Wizengamot...

What did Draco Malfoy have to offer the Ministry of Magic, and why didn't she know about it? She'd been around long enough, starting with her tenure in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures before moving to the DMLE with Harry. Her brows furrowed, a headache beginning to bloom behind her right eye. An even harder question followed the first, the articles seeming less and less like drivel from Rita Skeeter and more like something kept intentionally quiet.

What does Harry have to do with this, and why didn't he tell her?

She was waiting for Harry, perched in the seat across from his desk, when he finally made it into the office on Monday morning. His hair was still stuck up at odd angles, mussed up from sleep and Merlin knew what else, and she knew that Ginny had probably tried and failed to tame it that morning before he took the floo into the Ministry lobby.

As soon as he saw her, he winced.

“Can I at least get some tea before you bury me in legal forms this morning?”

Heat bloomed against her neck before she could muster up a surprised response. She hadn't even *thought* about work since the day before. For the first time since starting work at the Ministry, her first thought in the morning hadn't been about her work, or her meeting schedule, or all the paperwork she needed to finish, review, or sign off on.

No. It had been *Malfoy*. Her wince matched Harry's.

“Ah, sorry, go ahead.”

She waited patiently while he moved around the office, getting settled and calling for tea through the doorway where his assistant sat. The folded up front page of the Daily Prophet sat tucked under her arm, growing warmer with each passing moment that Harry didn't sit down.

Finally, after an excruciating wait he collapsed into his chair, hand reaching to push an errant lock of black hair away from his face. It was clear he still wasn't entirely awake, and after close to thirteen years of friendship, Hermione knew better than to expect anything less.

Luckily, she didn't need him to be awake enough to cast spells or arrest rogue wizards. She just needed a few answers.

“I saw this yesterday.” Cutting directly to the chase, she pushed the Prophet clipping across his desk. “Apparently Rita Skeeter thinks you're slumming it with Malfoy.”

She watched him carefully, tracking her eyes over his face while his features morphed from curiosity into confusion, then finally settling on something even more alarming than what she expected.

Resignation.

"I wouldn't really call it a friendship," he said with a sigh, taking a long sip from his tea.

"You— *What?*" The sound that escaped her throat sounded more surprised and less appalled than she intended.

"I mean, he's still a pompous arse but he *has* laughed at a few of my jokes—"

"Harry," she interrupted, hand in the air between them. "When did this start?"

She didn't bother with pleasantries, or trying to pretend this information wasn't exactly what she was after.

His green eyes shaded with confusion. "What do you mean? He's been working with the Auror's Office for years, Hermione. Someone probably saw us walking to the floo together and got the wrong idea."

Years? She struggled to keep her breathing steady. The idea of it was preposterous— *Draco Malfoy, helping Aurors?*

"I was not aware."

Of anything, it seemed, but that went unsaid.

"Really?" Another rogue lock stuck up when he scratched at his temple. "I suppose that would've been while you were finishing up your N.E.W.T.S., but he's been around since the end of his trial. He's only here a few times a month, but I'm surprised you haven't seen him around."

"But *why?*" she stressed, growing frustrated.

Harry paused, his head cocking to the side as he studied her. She could see his own questions starting to surface, but he held them at bay.

"When he gave up his memories at the end of his trial, he also offered to train the Aurors in Occlumency. It was only supposed to be for two years while he finished out his sentence, but he kept coming back as a consultant. He's really rather good at it, but don't tell him I said so. His ego already barely fits through the door."

"Occlumency?" The word felt heavy in her mouth.

Harry gave her a single nod. "Snape trained him, too, I guess. He's better than I ever was, that's for sure."

"And you just—" She swallowed, trying to piece it all together with something that didn't let on to just how desperate she was feeling. "You trust him?"

It wasn't every day that the Ministry made deals with former Death Eaters, but she'd never questioned Harry's judgement like this before.

"I didn't at first, no," he admitted. "But it wasn't my call to make. I kept expecting him to hex me every time I turned around, but he kept to himself and did his job. And he keeps coming back, even though he's repeatedly turned down Robard's offers for a full time—"

“Gossiping about me again, Potter?”

A slow drawl interrupted them from the doorway, and Hermione shot to her feet. Her chest seized, constricting so painfully tight that she could swear her lungs stopped working.

“Try the Prophet,” Harry joked to the tall figure behind her. She couldn’t quite bring herself to turn around and look at him just yet, thinking that maybe she might muster up all the magic in her bones and suddenly turn invisible. *It couldn’t be impossible, right?*

“Apparently we’re good friends now.”

She felt the sound of Malfoy’s scoff settle deep in her abdomen. “Must’ve been a slow news day if they think we’ve sunk that low.”

Hermione wasn’t sure what shocked her more—that Harry’s laugh was genuine, or that Malfoy didn’t take the opportunity to directly insult him. Her jaw must have been gaping wide open, because when Harry looked back at her, he gave her a knowing shrug.

“I should be going—” Inchling around the chair, she tried to scurry from the room, only to find a blond head blocking the door.

“So soon?” His mouth turned up into a familiar, and frustrating smirk. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you, Granger. We should catch up.”

Her heart dropped straight through her chest, panic seizing her for a brief moment, but his grey eyes didn’t even hold the slightest bit of amusement. Even though she could read between the lines of his statement, his face was smooth and impassive, and it did nothing to stem the overwhelming urge to flee.

“No, really, I’ll leave you both to it.” She shook her head and pushed forward.

Malfoy stepped back, but only far enough that she could brush past his chest with a wand-width to spare between their bodies.

“I’ll walk with you then. I only stopped by to drop a book off with Davies when I heard my name and thought I’d see what the fuss was about. I’m on my way out anyway.”

His smirk grew into a full blown grin, and she ground her teeth together. “That’s not necessary. I can walk alone, thank you.”

“And what?” he laughed, his eyes darting back to Harry like it was a preposterous idea. “I should walk five paces behind and pretend I don’t see that massive bush you call a hairstyle blocking the rest of the hallway?”

Frustration boiled over, and a strangled sound erupted from her throat. She couldn’t bother with a response, because she knew if she opened her mouth, she would either shout at him or hex him. *Perhaps both*, she considered. Instead she spun on her heel, stomping down the hall with a determined stride before Malfoy could finish chuckling.

Unfortunately, she only made it around the corner before the echo of a second pair of shoes caught up behind her.

“Seriously, Granger, where’s the fire?”

“Stop it!” Hermione stopped in her tracks, spinning around with a finger in the air. His eyes flashed bright with surprise but he stopped as well, raising his hands like it made any bit of difference.
“Just—stop it. Leave me alone.”

“Ah, I get it.” He nodded once, a jut of his chin up and then back down again, before dropping his hands into a more casual stance. “You can gossip about me behind my back, but—”

“What do you want?”

Her sharp demand cut him off, and any facade of playfulness in his features disappeared at once.

“To explain, obviously.”

She balled her fists at her sides, trying her hardest not to explode in front of her coworkers passing by. *Just keep breathing... In, out, in, out.* It didn’t help.

“And you couldn’t have sent an owl?”

“Would you have read it? Or would you have thrown the letter into your fireplace as soon as you recognized my handwriting?”

Damn. He was correct. Her face must’ve shown it, too, because he continued on.

“If that little gossip session I just interrupted was any indication, you’ve got questions. I assumed that we could make a deal. Seems easier to ask me than to go poking around Potter’s office, doesn’t it?”

“I’m not interested in making any deal with you, Malfoy.”

He ground his jaw together, the hard lines of it becoming even more prominent. “Then at least let me apologize.”

She could have laughed, and she almost did. “I’m also not interested—”

“You know, Granger, I almost forgot how difficult you are. It’s a wonder people willingly work with you every day,” he said as he stepped closer, his eyes blazing bright with annoyance.

She scoffed. “Right, because I’m supposed to entertain an apology after you insult my hair and call me difficult? And I’m not even *addressing* anything else, because we don’t have that kind of time. I know you’re probably used to getting whatever you want, but you should remember who you’re speaking to. I don’t owe you anything.”

His gaze dimmed, and he blinked away. “You’re right. You don’t. However, I figured if I didn’t make some kind of joke, Potter would’ve seen right through me and I didn’t think you’d want him growing suspicious. My additional apologies for thinking you’d rather keep things as unassuming as possible.”

Oh. Her ire cooled just slightly. Unfortunately he was right, and she closed her mouth on the retort she had ready.

“Besides,” he continued, finally looking back down at her. “Your hair isn’t nearly as large as it was when we were younger. It’s almost impressive, really, considering how it used to look. But the thing about you being difficult remains true.”

The surprise at his easy apology deflated instantly.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?” A growing sense of dread began to bloom in her stomach. At her words, his lips drew into another smirk.

“It would appear not.”

“Did you really come here to check in with Davies?” The Auror was known for taking mid-morning naps at his desk and avoiding field assignments. He wasn’t exactly prime-Occlumency material, if she was any judge.

“Nope.”

The dread in her stomach bottomed out, filling her entire body until her limbs felt heavy and tired. He wasn’t going to leave, and the determined glint in his eye told her he would come back every day if she didn’t get it over with.

“My office.”

She didn’t wait for him to answer or follow, nor did he say another word until they reached their destination and she had finished casting a silencing charm on the room.

“I’ll answer any question you have,” he offered, spinning slowly to take stock of her desk and shelves. “But I want something in return.”

Her palms were already growing sweaty, being alone with him again so unexpectedly. His tall frame was so much bigger in the enclosed room, and she watched closely as he stepped towards the shelf on the far wall and dragged a finger against a line of books. They weren’t anything special, just various texts on wizard history and law decrees, but she felt herself growing uncomfortable at his indirect scrutiny. These were her things. This was her space. He wasn’t supposed to be here.

“What?” she ground out. She would do whatever it took to get this over with and to have him leave, so she could wallow in her embarrassment alone.

His hand dropped back to his side, his fingers curling into a fist. He paused, then released it, turning to face her.

“To finish our scene.”

She would do whatever it took... except that.

“Absolutely not!” She recoiled, stepping back until her back hit the farthest wall. At the *Ministry*? In her office? “I would *never*—”

“I swear, you really are daft for someone so smart,” he cut her off. “I don’t mean *that*. I mean *aftercare*. ”

She opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it once more. “What?”

Her brain seemed to have stopped working.

He gave her a skeptical look. “I know you know what I’m talking about. Hermione Granger doesn’t join a secret sex club without doing her research.”

"I know what aftercare is," she sputtered.

"Good, I'm glad we got that cleared up," he said as he rolled his eyes, then stepped towards her. "You and I entered into an agreement, and I'm a man of my word. If The Scarlet Order finds out, I would be the one on the hook for what happened. Not you. They take this sort of thing very seriously, and so do I."

Hermione shook her head so hard that a lock of curls stuck to the lip balm she'd applied that morning. *Great. He already thinks I'm a fool.* Pulling it free, she watched him approach even closer. "It's a little late for that, and I'm not interested anyway. I won't say anything to them, so you don't have to worry about your reputation."

At her harsh tone, his progress halted. "All right then, I suppose you won't be getting your answers."

When he turned on his heel toward the door, her hand reached out on its own accord, stopping his progress. "But—"

"That's the deal, Granger. Take it or leave it."

Another cold wash of panic filled her veins. She'd read about aftercare, and all the touching and physical connection it usually required. And he wanted to do that *here? Now?*

"Tell me why, first," she demanded, raising her chin in a poor attempt at steadyng herself. If these were his terms, there was something he wanted out of it. Something he needed.

His eyes hardened, and she watched as the outline of his tongue pressed against his inner cheek.

"Because you and I engaged in an agreement before we ever entered that room, and we each had parts to play. Even if you didn't know that agreement was with me, specifically. I could have helped."

She almost laughed, and she would have, if his ire wasn't obviously growing even hotter. He was frustrated, but apparently he was also blind. He thought he could have *helped*?

Forcing herself to look away, she focused her eyes on her desk instead. "Staying would have only made it worse."

The truth of her statement was unspoken, but his silence told her he heard every word. His next statement was quieter, and she almost would have considered it soft if it had come from any mouth but his.

"You could have splinched yourself Apparating like that. It was reckless."

Reckless? Hermione's eyes snapped back to his. He had some nerve, judging the safety of her actions.

"Why do you even care?" This time, she couldn't help but throw her hands in the air, frustration boiling over.

"*Because. I. do.*"

He was shaking now, the words ground out between clenched teeth.

“That’s not good enough,” she replied.

“Because I’m not the same person I was before.” He paused after taking a deep breath. “Would I have gone into that scene, knowing it was you? No, because I would have known you wouldn’t want anything to do with me. But did I laugh at you after? Did I insult you? Ridicule you? When you were losing your mind, trying not to get *sick* at the thought of me touching you—what did I do, Granger? Tell me.”

Her mouth was already forming a retort when her brain caught up with his words. A memory of him flashed through her mind, hands out and eyes wide with alarm, begging her to stop. To calm down.

“You—” She had to swallow past the overwhelming shame that filled her chest. It wasn’t the same kind of shame as that night, either—it was fresh, and tinged with cold regret when she registered that he was right. Draco Malfoy was standing in front of her, and he was *right*. “You tried to get me to stop. To talk and calm down before trying to leave.”

His lids fluttered shut as he took in her acceptance, but they were back open in an instant, his grey eyes steady and unflinching.

“This is important to me because I’m a man of my word, and I know that after this, you’re not just going to give up on whatever it is you’re looking for. But you need to know that you can’t leave a scene like that again, Granger, even if it’s with someone else. In that atmosphere, emotions run high for both parties involved.”

She had to admit, she hadn’t thought much about aftercare going into The Scarlet Order that night. She’d read about it, sure, and knew the basics… Something about needing to cushion the “emotional fall” after an intense scene. But their scene wasn’t that intense… *Was it?* Sure, he got her off, but her reaction after had been more because of who he was, not what had happened.

“Is that why you were out drinking with someone else immediately after? Your emotions were *running too high*?” Hermione knew she was deflecting, but it still stung. He couldn’t stand in front of her and act like some kind of reformed saint when his actions were so conflicting.

He gave her a sharp look. “That bothered you, did it? Even though you were the one who ran from me?”

Hermione let out a harsh laugh. “You know, for someone who claims to have changed, you’re still ridiculously evasive.”

Malfoy rolled his shoulders back and lifted a blond eyebrow at her. If she didn’t hate him, it would have been an awfully attractive look.

“I said I’d changed, not that I’d had a lobotomy.” His lips drew back up again into a familiar smirk. “Now, if I’m tracking our conversation correctly, that brings us right back to where we started. You want answers, and I’m willing to give them. For a price.”

Apprehension filled her. It wasn’t fear—he could have hexed her by now if that’s what he really wanted—but more of a tentative awareness of the potential danger that lurked ahead.

“Tell me what you plan to do, first.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Granger, not every partner you have is going to come equipped with a lesson plan to review ahead of time. A large part of this dynamic is learning how to trust, even when you don’t want to.”

“Then at least give me the general overview,” she countered. “Forgive me for not wanting to be blindsided. Again.”

She could practically feel his frustrated sigh, even from the distance between them.

“You will sit down in that chair.” He nodded to the chair sitting across from her desk. “And I will go over the basics of aftercare for you. The things you need to look out for. What you should know, or what to expect. Different styles, depending on who you’re with. What’s acceptable and unacceptable behavior for *both* parties, including panicked fleeing immediately thereafter.”

His dig at her had her rolling her eyes, but she took a tentative step forward. “Do you have to touch me for any of this?”

She’d heard that most aftercare included cuddling, but the image of Malfoy cuddling with anyone was about as absurd as trying to wrangle a Christmas hat onto a dragon. It seemed both dangerous and ill-advised. When he hesitated with his answer, her feet stopped moving.

“I don’t have to, no.”

A strange feeling began to seep into her veins. Not quite apprehension, but similar. Hesitation, perhaps? *Did she want him to touch her?* No, that couldn’t be it. The idea was preposterous.

“Would you, though? If it weren’t me?”

She grimaced when she registered how desperate her question sounded. It wasn’t that she cared, really, about what he thought of her. It was that her curiosity stemmed more towards this new, unknown side of him. She had always been hungry for knowledge, reaching towards new facts and figures like they were gulps of air that could sustain her burning lungs. Figuring out mysteries was the closest thing to satisfaction she’d ever known, and apparently, learning about Malfoy’s secrets was going to become her newest obsession.

He paused. “I would, yes. It’s typically a very tactile process, soliciting the body’s response to bring you back into awareness after a scene. For some it should be relaxed and soothing, while others might prefer to discuss how the scene went. It depends on each person.”

Lowering herself into the chair, Hermione let her mind run back through her own preferences. She’d always been a touchy-feely sort of person, leaning on Ron and Harry for hugs or resting her head on their shoulders when tired. Being absorbed into the Weasley clan had felt like coming home to a second family with all of their natural, physical affection.

“You can touch me on top of my robes, then,” she told him. “But nowhere inappropriate.”

Her additional condition made him snort from his spot behind the chair. “I wouldn’t dare dream of it.”

This is just another experiment, she told herself, finding her stomach beginning to flutter with nerves again. An experiment to find out how she really felt about this whole thing with Malfoy, and if she could—or would—have the same response to his touch once she knew it was him.

Most of her skin was covered, anyway. Her work robes were more muggle than most, and looked more like a wool business dress with longer sleeves and a tapered waist. The only thing that was really different were the charmed pockets and the matching, removable cloak, which she shrugged off her shoulders quickly.

“May I?” She felt a slight tug on the cloak behind her, and she leaned forward so he could remove it. Once it was out of the way, he returned. “Granger, I—”

His heavy pause had her holding her breath, careful not to disrupt the silence. The slight *tick, tick, tick*, of the clock on her shelf filled the space, but she didn’t bother counting each passing second. With her increasing curiosity of Malfoy and whatever this new development was, she knew that she couldn’t waste time getting distracted. She had to be alert and ready for whatever he said.

She couldn’t be taken by surprise again.

Clearing his throat, he tried one more time. “Before I do or say anything else—I’m sorry. For everything. I never thought I’d see you again, and I didn’t think it would be this way, but... I have a long list of things I regret in life, and the way I treated you is near the top.”

Her heart stopped.

“And please, don’t say anything,” he continued before she could suck in a lungful of air. “I’d rather just get through this without wanting to *crucio* myself after, if you don’t mind. But please know that I’ve thought about apologizing to you a thousand different times, in a thousand different ways, and none of them would ever be enough. I know that, and you know that too, but it doesn’t change the fact that I still needed to say it.”

“I—I—” It was her turn to stutter through a response, the word barely coming out as a whisper.
“Okay.”

What else could she say? What else *should* she say? Her life had devolved into chaos in a matter of days, and was rapidly getting worse, while Malfoy stood dead center in the middle of the wreckage.

Turning her head, she blinked up at him. He wasn’t looking at her, but his sharp jaw was pressed tight as he stared ahead. His shoulders were stiff under his jet black robes, but his head was still high. It was a look she remembered from a long time ago, when he was just a boy trying to pretend he knew he was a man.

Something inside her chest cracked open.

“Thank you.”

His frame softened, just slightly, but his face transformed again when he looked back down at her. Gone was any lingering presence of uncertain vulnerability, and in its place was cocky determination.

“Face forward then.” When she did, she heard him take another step closer. He was immediately behind the chair now, a heavy presence even though she could no longer see him. “Since this is really just a lesson, and I’m sure you know the basics, I won’t go through all the motions.”

A whisper of sensation across her scalp had Hermione shivering. Another one followed closely after, and she realized he was softly touching her hair, pulling each of the coils into place.

“In a normal scene, it’s the Dominant’s job to help their partner come down after.” His ministrations continued, and she fought off another wave of goosebumps. “Since this isn’t technically a scene, I won’t pretend that things are intimate, but I will tell you that this is typically the time when many would discuss what they did or did not like.”

Holding completely still, she let her eyes fall closed.

“Okay.”

Apprehension fluttered in her stomach like a swarm of pixies, but there was something else underneath it. Something deeper and more forbidden, and not anything she wanted to think about while Malfoy’s hands were softly stroking her hair.

His touch was so delicate that it barely felt like the gentle caress of a breeze—and not something she realized he was capable of.

“You don’t have to tell me how you felt, since you made it fairly clear already, but I would like to know… Why did you choose to use a glamour spell?”

Her shoulders went stiff, and his hands paused.

“Why did you have me blindfolded?”

His response was a sharp tug on the curl between his fingers and she let out a soft gasp.

Despite the reprimand, he answered. “Believe it or not, I didn’t blindfold you because I was afraid of my partner seeing who I was. I’m not ashamed, Granger. I did it because your file said you were new, and a blindfold gave me the ability to give you an experience that was purely physical. One that could force you to focus on your body’s response and heighten your other senses to make it more pleasurable.”

You. Your senses. Your body. Another shiver climbed up the back of her neck. He was speaking to her freely, intimately, with none of the formal pretense she expected of him. Draco Malfoy *should* have been distancing himself, sneering at her, spitting insults about how disgusting she was or how far beneath him he believed her to be.

“Let me rephrase my question, then,” he said. “Why did you choose to use a glamour spell and not a polyjuice potion?”

With a quick breath through her nose to steady herself, she decided on honesty. “Because I wanted my body to be mine. I needed to know if I really liked it, and I couldn’t trust my response if I wasn’t completely me.”

A second hand added to her hair, and a heavy sense of relaxation settled across her shoulders. “That’s good. Exactly how it should be.”

Before she could process the surprise at his praise, he spoke again. “I know you’re probably used to trusting that gigantic brain of yours, but with this, you’ll need to learn to trust your body more.

Your head is what made you go looking for this in the first place—don’t let it scare you off from finding what you need, Granger.”

“Like I did... before,” she finished for him, forcing the words out.

He chuckled lightly. “Obviously.”

For a moment, silence grew around them, and she let herself fall into the lull of his touch.

“Your hair is much softer than I expected.”

Annoyance flashed in her chest, but it was barely a spark compared to the anger she’d felt at the sight of him earlier. “I’m sure there’s a lot of things about me you wouldn’t expect.”

“Too true,” he readily agreed. “Although aside from your insults, I’d say it’s been a fairly pleasant set of surprises so far.”

Her cheeks heated, a blush blooming across the back of her neck and up to her ears. *Thank Morgana he can’t see my face*, she thought. She’d never been good at hiding her emotions, and having her back to him helped to ease some of the tentative vulnerability of the moment.

“Did you—” The words came about before she could stop them, but once she started, she couldn’t back out. “Did you enjoy it?”

When he didn’t immediately answer, the embarrassed blush flooded across the rest of her chest, threatening to swallow her whole. “I just—I mean—that’s what I should be asking, right? That’s what would be expected?”

Not that she wanted to know if he’d enjoyed it. *Definitely not*. It was a hypothetical question to a Dom or partner that was not, and would not, be him.

His hands dropped, and she heard him step away. She breathed steadily, rolling her lips between her teeth, and debated what to do. Had she gone too far? Was he done? Should she get up? Turn to him and start demanding answers for her own set of questions?

“I—” His delayed response was interrupted by a sharp knock on her office door.

“Miss Granger? I have those files ready for your next meeting.” The muffled sound of her secretary’s voice through the wood had Hermione shooting up and out of the chair, distancing herself from Malfoy as quickly as possible.

“Ah, yes, thank you, Cecelia,” she responded with as much professional bravado as she could muster. “I’ll pick those up from you on my way out.”

She waited until the older woman’s footsteps retreated from outside her door before looking at the man across the room. His grey eyes were focused on her, but his features were carefully blank.

“Looks like you’ll have to wait just a bit longer for those answers.” He took a step towards the door. “Are you free tonight?”

“Tonight? Yes,” she said with a slow nod.

“Same time, same place, then. If you wear the necklace, you can Apparate straight in.” His lips curled into a slight smirk as he placed his hand on the doorknob. “And since I know you’re looking for full honesty—yes, I did enjoy myself. More than you’d probably like to hear, and likely quite a bit more than I should have. But perhaps we’re both learning things about ourselves with this little foray.”

He left her in her office, mouth gaping at his audacity.

Chapter End Notes

A big, big thank you to my beta, Brit, for coming back to this with me to fix all my original errors and typos. Apologies to all my early readers who had to slog through that!

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Some days I feel like a raccoon banging on a typewriter, and this story is proof of that.

And to my trash gang: thanks for helping me clean up my the dumpster that is my WIP pile.

Enjoy!

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

Malfoy was waiting for her as soon as she Apparated into their shared room at The Scarlet Order house. The same room she'd left him in just days before, surrounded by dark paneled wood and leather furniture. The same books sat on the shelves against the wall, untouched, but this time Malfoy's lean figure was stretched out against one end of the couch.

If he responded to the slight *pop* of air as she appeared just feet away, she didn't notice it. His eyes were distant and focused on the far wall, one elbow propped up on the arm of the couch and the other hand holding a small glass of amber-colored liquid. With a slow, easy movement, he raised it to his lips and took a long sip.

"I half expected you to stand me up."

He still didn't look at her, and Hermione chewed on her lower lip. She watched, oddly entranced, as his shoulders expanded on a sigh underneath the lines of his suit jacket, and he finally turned to look at her.

His eyes were bright, but not judgmental, and something loosened in her chest. While she still didn't trust him, it was a start.

"I considered my options," she said carefully, feet still keeping her in place. "But I figured that since I already fulfilled my end of the bargain, I would only be missing out if I didn't come."

With a keen eye, she surveyed the room. She could stay standing, but that wasn't exactly conducive to a conversation. There were two chairs to choose from, one of which was somewhat close but still out of reach, and the other was far enough it would be awkward to speak from across the distance... Or there was the couch, right next to him. As her eyes fell on it, her mind flashed with memories.

Her body, draped across the hard surface of his thighs. His hand, snaking underneath her skirt. His palm, slapping at her aching skin. His fingers...

She shook herself, blinking hard several times, and when her vision cleared, his features were painted with knowing amusement.

"I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge how much self-restraint I'm showing by not following up on that comment," he said, lips turning up just slightly. It was a flash of a somewhat boyish

smile, but it was gone as quickly as it came. “But I meant what I said earlier. I don’t make promises I don’t keep, and if answers are all that you want from me tonight, that’s what I’ll give you.”

“Really?” Hermione still couldn’t shake the last few tendrils of hesitation that bound her to her spot.

Malfoy sighed through his nose and drained the glass in his hand. “Merlin, you don’t make anything easy. One day I might die of shock if I manage to do something without you questioning my motives. Now, would you like a drink?”

He stood, reaching to his full height, and circled the couch. Her breath caught at the sight of him, so confident and assured, as he raised a single eyebrow in question.

“I—” The instinctual refusal was on the tip of her tongue, but she shook it off. “Yes, actually. Thank you.”

While she had agreed to The Scarlet Order’s rule of “sober play only,” she had no intentions of making this into another *session* with Malfoy. It was simply a conversation between two consenting adults, and there was no reason that she shouldn’t use whatever tools necessary to keep her courage up.

“Have a seat.” With a nod toward the couch, he turned his back to her and approached the drink cart that was set in the corner of the room. “I’m going to assume you don’t like Firewhisky, but I do have wine if you prefer it.”

Was that there before? Or did he have it summoned for tonight? She hadn’t noticed it during their first meeting, but the thought that he’d even put forth an ounce of planning for a simple conversation was... odd. The Draco Malfoy she remembered wouldn’t have cared enough to give her the time of day, let alone prepare something that might make her more comfortable.

“Yes, wine would be good, please.”

Something in her wanted to take him by surprise and choose the whisky instead, to balance the scales and uproot any assumptions he might still have of her. She’d been knocked off balance by him for days, and the petty side of her wanted to return the favor. But she didn’t—she couldn’t, and wouldn’t, be someone she wasn’t just because she found herself voluntarily meeting with her former enemy. He simply nodded and grabbed one of the bottles from the back of the tray, uncorking it without a word. While he worked, she took advantage of the freedom to move without his eyes following her, but she came back to her original dilemma.

Chair, or couch. It seemed like a deceptively dangerous choice, and one she wasn’t quite ready to make.

Settling into the chair closest to the seat he’d just vacated, she crossed her legs and waited for him to return. When he did, he handed her the drink and sat back down, brushing off an invisible piece of lint from his trousers. He’d refilled his own glass, but he didn’t drink it; instead he waited, gauging her reaction. She held the stem of the glass in her fingers, watching as the pale liquid reflected the light. A small, shameful part of her wondered if it might be drugged, or worse, poisoned.

Stop that, she chastised herself. She might not know of his motives completely, but she had no reason to be that paranoid, especially after his stunted apology in her office that afternoon. Besides,

luring her to The Scarlet Order house, where there was a monitored log of visitors, would have been more trouble than it would be worth. She might not like him, but even she knew that he was smarter than that.

"I'm sure you remember Blaise Zabini." Malfoy noted her interest in the wine. "It came from one of his family's vineyards in Italy. It's very good, even if he does charge me an arm and a leg for it."

She let her eyes move from the wine to his face, blinking slowly. She considered her options... She could keep quiet and let him lead, or she could do what she did best.

"I was wondering if it was poisoned."

Malfoy stared at her for several long moments, features frozen at her bold accusation. Then, he did the one thing she didn't expect... He didn't sneer, or grimace, or even roll his eyes. He *laughed*. It was a bold laugh, with a wide smile and more mirth in his eyes than she'd ever seen before. He was truly entertained, and she was surprised once again by her own reaction.

He should laugh more.

It wasn't something she'd experienced while they were in school. While she had been on the receiving end of plenty of disgusted sneers and mocking jokes, she hadn't been witness to anything that could even resemble true joy.

"I should have expected that," he said when his laughing died off. "Honestly, if my mother hadn't taught me otherwise, I would have handed you the bottle and had you open it yourself, just so you knew that it wasn't tampered with. But please, go ahead and check if it would make you feel any better."

He nodded toward her glass, unhurried.

Hermione paused. She did know several charms to detect certain potions and poisons, but going through the list of them would take several minutes. Minutes she would have to spend with his eyes heavy on her wand as she proved to him that nothing had changed, or that she didn't believe him. It felt like another test, just like her choice of seating. Did she take the safest option and put herself farther away from him? Or did she toe closer to the ledge, and put her trust into someone she wasn't entirely sure of?

She raised the glass to her lips and drank, holding his gaze until she swallowed. The flavor of the wine burst across her taste buds, tart and dry. It was slightly citrusy, and left a warm honeyed taste at the back of her throat, and she watched as his eyes dipped to her neck, darkening just slightly.

Goosebumps broke out across her arms, and she licked the remaining alcohol from her lips. Her heart was beginning to thump wildly in her chest, adrenaline making her feel jittery and on edge. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced in so long, doing something she knew was a bad idea. Something that could get her into trouble. Taking a risk, calculating the odds and betting that she would make it out on the other side. Not necessarily unscathed, but victorious nonetheless.

She missed it.

Logically, she knew that if she started feeling any ill effects, she would only have minutes, if not seconds, to Apparate herself to St. Mungo's. They began to tick by, and any lingering doubt evaporated as they stared at each other.

"All right, then." Malfoy cleared his throat and sat up in his seat, straightening his shoulders. "I've made you wait long enough. Have at it."

"Why?" The first question fell from her mouth before he'd barely taken a breath. "What happened to you? You were an awful, terrible boy in school and now... You're this?"

She waved her free hand towards his body, indicating his general *self*. She couldn't find the words to describe the enigma that he had become in the years since the war. He was grown, yes, and more mature, but seemed like a completely different version of the Malfoy she'd once known.

Noticing the way his fingers tightened around the whisky in his hand, she watched as he swirled it around, coating the sides of the crystal glass while he tried to find an answer. His jaw worked, grinding just so, as he mulled over the question.

"A lot of things happened," he said finally, his voice gone rough. Gone was the flirting, roguish man from her office that afternoon. "I didn't have the luxury of growing up with a good influence, teaching me how to be good and righteous and fair. I suppose it just took me a while to catch up once I finally opened my eyes."

Her eyes narrowed. "So, what? It's everyone else's fault you were so bigoted?"

Malfoy shook his head, and when he looked back at her, his lips were set into a thin line. "Not at all. But it should at least give you some insight into how it started. If you want that answer, you'll need to hear things that won't make you happy."

"Fine," she sighed. She had hoped this would be quick, but it apparently wouldn't be so easy. With another sip of her wine, she motioned for him to continue.

He took a matching sip of his own drink. She watched his mouth as he rolled the liquid around, tasting it, savoring it, before he swallowed. The lines in his neck tensed, and he began.

"My father wasn't an easy man to live with. He was prone to outbursts if he felt that I, or my mother, defied him in any way. I'm sure you remember him from that day in Diagon before our second year—he thought he was a king. *Untouchable.*"

He practically spat the word out. "When I was younger, I wanted to be just like him. My mother—she—she had trouble conceiving me, which is why I was an only child. She was protective, overly so at times, and I wasn't allowed to leave the Manor much. Theo and Pansy were allowed to come for occasional visits, but for the most part, I was on my own. With my mother so scared of letting me leave her sight, my father seemed... Legendary, almost. He had power and such a demanding presence, and he wouldn't allow anything except total obedience. For a long time I thought that my mother was the only one who worried about me, but my father did as well. However, his way was much more twisted. He used his power and his influence to make sure that I hung on every word he said. They isolated me, and because of it, I believed everything I was taught without question."

"That muggleborns were disgusting. That we didn't deserve our magic," she said the words he wouldn't, and when he nodded, she washed away the bitter taste in her mouth with more wine.

"Even if I could have known better, I wouldn't have been allowed to. Theo once brought over a muggle magazine that he'd picked up off the street, and when my father saw it, he burned it to ashes in front of us. When Theo left, I had a bruise in the shape of his fingers on my arm that lasted for a week. He wouldn't let the elves heal it, either. He said I needed it as a reminder."

Hermione's stomach churned. "But when we were at school, you could have at least *tried* to be better, to not be so cruel—"

"I *couldn't*," he snapped, his eyes burning. "Every move I made, he knew of. Even if I had wanted to, if I'd somehow known better or been brave enough to defy him, it would have been impossible. I'm not telling you this as an excuse, Granger, or to justify my actions—"

She couldn't stop herself from letting out a dry, humorless laugh. It was horrifying, yes, but so far his only reasoning was to place the blame on someone else. "It sounds like it to me."

"I'm telling you because it's the reality in which I lived until after the war. The home I was *stuck* in. Surrounded by Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself. And the longer it went, the more dangerous it would have been for me to step out of line, even when everything was falling apart and unravelling. I had no other choices but to look the other way and to do what I was told. I took the Dark Mark to protect my mother and to keep myself alive. It was given to me so that I could atone for my *father's* sins, not because I *wanted* it. If I hadn't, the Dark Lord would have killed my mother in front of our faces just to teach us a lesson. Then I would have been next. And my sacrifice? It would have been for nothing."

Any retort she might have had died on her lips. He barely took the time to register her shock before he kept going.

"At one point, early on, I believed it all too," he said, disgust curling his features. "I bought into the lies my father taught me. It was easy when I couldn't see the other side, and then I was so indoctrinated that I wasn't willing to look past my own nose. I wanted his approval and affection so desperately that I was willing to mold myself into his shadow."

Something loosened inside her chest, seeing him so broken. It was an echo of the same haunted features she remembered from their fifth year, when the bruises grew under his eyes and shadows darkened his cheeks.

"You were just a child; we all were," she managed, but Malfoy shook his head. It wasn't meant to justify anything, but it was a truth that she'd come to terms with long ago. They were all just children, stuck fighting a war that they hadn't started. Dealing with and fixing the poor decisions of the adults who came before them.

"I was *weak*. And it wasn't until Dumbledore offered me a way out that I broke completely. After that, the only thing I wanted was to survive. I should have done more to protect you when the snatchers brought you to the Manor."

Hermione grimaced at the memory, her eyes glancing down just briefly to the scar on her arm. It had faded from purple to pink to white as the years went by, but it still shimmered in the light when she looked for it.

"You bought us time," she admitted. "We wouldn't have gotten out if you hadn't."

Malfoy took another drink of his whisky and looked at the wall, his gaze going unfocused. "All I could think about that day in the drawing room was keeping it together so I didn't get sick on the floor or faint and crack my head open on the mantle. If I had, Bella would have done so much worse to the both of us. I had nightmares about it for years, hearing you scream, knowing that I couldn't do anything but stand there and watch. I was never so disgusted with myself than at that moment."

Warmth spread through her stomach, and she focused on the wine in her hand. It had to be the wine, not his words.

“Me too.” Her quiet agreement hung in the silence between them.

After the war ended, she spent years in weekly therapy appointments with mind healers. For months she would wake up, every night, tangled in her sheets and screaming at the ceiling. Ron was her rock during those days, keeping his arms wrapped around her until she could breathe again, making sure she knew that it was just a dream and not reality. It was more than just that instance, though—it was all of it. Watching Ron get spliced, thinking Harry was dead, running from the Fiendfyre and not knowing if they would get out alive to finish what they’d started.

“I know now that you were right about it all. You always were, even if I was too blind or scared to admit it. Even though I don’t believe in any of it anymore, I know there’s no amount of apologies that can make up for the things that I said and did to you. I recognize that our past will always be our past, and nothing will change it, but I hope you understand that if I could do it all over? I wouldn’t make those same choices again.”

When he finally looked back at her, she shook her head. “Everyone says that. It’s easy to, when you’re not in the moment. Everyone thinks they would be the hero, but few rarely are.”

She didn’t miss the way Malfoy flinched. “I never said I wanted to be the hero, just that I don’t want to be the villain any longer. I’ve been trying to prove my word ever since. That’s why I gave up my memories during the trials.”

His words stirred up a memory of the news article she’d unearthed about him during her frenzied research.

“I thought you did it as part of a plea deal? And that it wasn’t until *after* the testimonies? Everyone gave up their memories, Malfoy, that’s not special.” Hermione narrowed her eyes, looking for cracks in his story.

He considered his drink for a moment, but instead of emptying it, he set the remaining alcohol on the low table in front of them.

“I had my reasons for waiting,” he said, tense. “And I was ready to serve my time for the things I did and took part in. I know that I’m not innocent. But as for why it took me so long... I guess you could say that I thought certain things would come to light, and when they didn’t, I made sure the curtain was pulled back the rest of the way.”

“What? What did you have?” She leaned forward, eager. *This is it*, she thought.

His chest shuddered with a deep breath, and he shook his head. A few pieces of his white-blond hair fell onto his forehead, and he quickly brushed them back into place with his fingers. “I—I won’t speak of it. I can’t. Not here, not now. It’s in the past, and digging up those details will only cause more unnecessary pain. We’ve both dealt with enough of that, I think.”

“I want to know,” she argued. “You expect me to trust you, and yet you openly admit to hiding information from me?”

Malfoy’s sharp features softened just slightly, sadness flickering behind his grey eyes. “I know you want to know, Granger. But I hope you never will. As much as it probably twists up that brain of

yours into knots, you're better off not knowing this, I promise."

She would figure out what he was hiding, and what he had to give the Ministry that was somehow better than the same memories that every other Death Eater offered up. For now, though, she let it settle. It was clear that force was the wrong way to go about solving that particular puzzle.

"And the plea deal?" She circled back.

Seeming pleased at her apparent acquiescence, he relaxed just slightly. "The deal wasn't for me—it was for my mother. I could've survived Azkaban, but I don't think she would have. They weren't convinced, so I offered my skills to train the Aurors in Occlumency, for free. The ones that interviewed me were rubbish at it."

She gave him a measured look. Everything he was saying was aligning with her own research and the information Harry had given her. "Harry said your agreement was only supposed to last for two years."

"Did he?" The edge of Malfoy's lip lifted just slightly, the ghost of a smirk. "That sounds about right."

He was dodging the question.

"And? Why did you keep coming back?"

"Consider it my own personal debt to the Ministry. The one thing I have to offer that they desperately need."

"We do *not*," she said, indignant. Sure, Aurors fresh out of training weren't always perfect, but the way he spoke implied they were completely inept.

"Trust me, you do. It's a miracle that they manage to stumble into altercations and come back with any memories at all. A half-concussed Legilimens could get through most of their minds without even trying." He gave her a dry look and picked his drink back up, seeming to have transitioned back into the overly-confident man she was familiar with. Whatever he was withholding made him deeply uncomfortable, and it was clear he didn't want the information out in the open. *But why not?* What could be that bad? They'd both seen the same horrors of war, so what was it that she was missing?

Rolling her lips between her teeth, she moved on to the rest of his confession. It wasn't a surprise that his father was abusive, or that he tried to save his mother. She remembered the way Narcissa had clung to Malfoy right after the battle, softly weeping tears of relief that he was alive. At the time, she had been disgusted. Now, she saw it in a slightly different light—a worried mother and a scared son, trying to do what they could to save each other. Not that it changed anything, but it did add a new dimension to the increasingly complicated man sitting before her. A man who had claimed to be changed, and perhaps had, but was still holding on to his own secrets.

She switched tactics, moving on to her next round of questioning. "Okay, you served your sentence and did your time, so now what? You spend your days repenting by training Aurors and your nights finding a willing sexual partner to submit to your deviant needs?"

The word *deviant* was accompanied by a lift of her eyebrow, but he only smirked at the barb.

"I suppose it is a little cliche, isn't it? The former Death Eater, preferring to tie up his women?" His finger trailed along the edge of his glass, dragging in a slow circle. "But I know you've already done your due diligence, even if you are trying to get a rise out of me. I'm no more deviant than you are, and I'd be willing to bet a substantial amount of gold that we like it for the very same reasons."

"I highly doubt that," Hermione scoffed. The idea of it was ridiculous, even if he *had* read her profile when they were matched. They couldn't be more different.

Malfoy gave her a measured look. "How much research did you do into the *other* side of our little accidental arrangement?"

"Well." She paused, and cleared her throat. Not... a lot. Not enough, really, but she'd been focused on herself and her own needs. More concerned with the *why* behind her lack of attention span in the bedroom, and what the solution might be. Not the motivations behind said solution. "Some. But I'd like to hear it in your own words, if you don't mind."

He hummed in thought, his eyes raking over her in a clear calculation. She grew warm under his regard, her skin heating just slightly, and she had to focus on steadyng her breathing. There was something so *intense* about him, and when he turned it toward her? It felt like she could catch fire. Logically, she knew it was most likely a bodily reaction from their accidental tryst—he was the first man in ages to give her an orgasm, and now her hormones couldn't forget.

"Take another drink of your wine," he directed. When she paused, he waited. They sat in silence for seconds, each ticking away slowly, but he didn't say anything else. Heat clung to the back of her neck, bleeding through her chest, and she fought the instinct to lift the wineglass to her lips. *If she looked down, would she be flushed red?*

"Why?" she asked instead.

He hid his grin with his hand, dragging his thumb across his lips. Her eyes caught on the movement, enraptured, as he traced it back and forth. *Gods, that shouldn't be so attractive.*

"Because it will help make my point. It's not like you haven't already been drinking it, or that you don't like it. But you should know that by resisting, you're only making this harder for us both."

Her throat was dry, and she fought to keep her voice steady. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, that I'm trying very hard to be a gentleman and do the right thing. But your natural inclination to defy everything I say only makes me want you more, as much as I know I shouldn't. It makes me want to take your glass from you and drink it myself, just so you can taste it from my lips instead."

"Oh." The word was barely a sound, more of a squeak than anything else, and she raised the glass to her lips. If he noticed her fingers were trembling, he didn't point it out. She was playing with fire, that much she knew. Her plan for tonight was only about answers, not to continue anything else with him, but the longer she waited the more the risk grew. He was too magnetic, too dangerous, for her to want. When she finally swallowed, he nodded.

"What do you taste?" he asked, as if he hadn't just implied he wanted to kiss her.

What? What did the wine have to do with their sexual proclivities?

"It's bold, and fairly tart." She furrowed her brows, considering it. "Almost sour, if it weren't for the touch of sweetness at the end, but it's still drier than most white wines."

She didn't know a lot about wine, but after years of raucous holiday dinners at the Burrow and stuffy Ministry galas, she'd learned the basic differences and flavors.

"Exactly." Malfoy nodded, seeming pleased with her observation. "In its simplest form, it's a matter of taste. Some might prefer the cloying sweetness of an ice wine, or the dry heat of something elf-made. I've always been partial to something in the middle."

"Are you comparing me to *wine*, Malfoy?" she challenged.

He sat forward, never losing the gleam in his eye. If he were playing quidditch, she was the snitch, and he was inches away from snatching her out of the air completely.

"You say that as if you don't have your own tastes, Granger. That you, too, don't prefer a bit of *bite*. If you didn't, you wouldn't be here—you'd still be with your boring dates, having boring, sweet sex."

The heat under her skin doubled. "So? If that's your only reason, it's not impressive. I read your profile just as much as you read mine. I know your tastes go further than mine do, but we wouldn't have been matched if we didn't have at least something in common."

"You're right," he agreed. "But that's not all. That just means we're *technically* compatible. It doesn't take into consideration any... chemistry that there might be. However, the more important part stems from your need to have someone to focus on you, to make sure you have what you *need*. Men like me thrive on the puzzle. I live to figure out that mystery just so I can take you apart, piece by piece. *That's* where I get my pleasure. On the other side of yours."

Her breath caught, and need filled her lower abdomen. It was heavy and aching, and she shifted in her seat just to try to relieve some of the throbbing between her legs. *I can take you apart, piece by piece.* She shouldn't want this. Not with him.

His nostrils flared as he watched her, taking in her reaction. There was no question about it—he saw right through her.

"So you came here to find it," she finished for him, clutching at the stem of her almost empty glass. She wanted to swallow the rest in one big gulp.

"I tried to stick to good, nice girls, but it only made the desire worse. I grew bored with them easily, and disinterested, as much as I wished it weren't the case. But I couldn't exactly go about openly asking for a woman to let me have complete sexual control with my reputation, could I? The Scarlet Order offered me discretion, just like you were looking for. It's just... unfortunate that this was your first experience. When I realized it was you here the other night, it wasn't horror that it was *you*, but rather that I've been thinking about this moment for years—seeing you again and finding the words to apologize—but then suddenly you were in my lap. It felt wrong, taking advantage of you like that."

"Please." She rolled her eyes, pushing a curl from her face. She was half tempted to dig a hairband from her bag just to get the mass of it off the back of her damp neck. It was only serving to make the heat of the room worse, and she felt like she might suffocate soon. "You hardly took advantage. My participation was entirely voluntary."

His pale eyebrows lifted in surprise. “That wasn’t my impression the other day.”

“Yes, well,” she huffed, finally giving in to the urge to drain the last of her wine. Once it was set on the table, she wiped her damp hands on the fabric of her skirt. “As much as I don’t like to admit it, I appreciate your honesty tonight, and I can at least return the gesture by accepting that my reaction was more emotionally driven than I might have liked. That doesn’t change the fact that I came here as a willing submissive.”

It was true. Her reaction had been instinctual, but the combination of horrified surprise and the emotional release of her orgasm hadn’t made for the best of scenarios.

“I appreciate that. However, I’ll make sure that the Order knows that our match was not ideal, through no fault of your own. They should be able to find you someone else soon enough if you wish to continue,” Malfoy said, but the devious glint had disappeared from his eyes. The grey of his irises was completely shuttered, back to something more composed and polite. He stood, moving back toward the drink cart to replace his glass. “If you don’t have any other questions, I’ll leave you to enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Wait—what? No— she was shocked by her immediate response to the idea of him walking away. “You’re leaving? Already?” *Of course I have more questions!* she wanted to shout at him. Not that they would likely result in any answer she would be happy with, but she was growing increasingly interested in figuring out the mystery of Draco Malfoy.

Who was he, really? What were his motives now? What was he hiding, and how had he become so considerate? And the worst one of all: *Why did she want him so badly?* She shouldn’t—just like she knew she shouldn’t chew through six sugar quills in a single afternoon while she researched cases for the Ministry. But knowing better never stopped her... She would indulge until her stomach ached from the sugar and her teeth and tongue turned shades of purple and blue.

“Was there something else?” he asked, tilting his head. “I believe that fulfills the terms of our agreement, does it not?”

“Well, you didn’t answer *all* of my questions,” she pushed, and her chest tightened when his features registered her defiance. Gone was the polite restraint, and in its place was something darker, more challenging. Her stomach fluttered, and she pressed her thighs together.

He took two steps toward her, placing his hands against the back of the couch and resting his weight forward. It was a commanding stance, with the width of his shoulders outlined under his tailored suit and the lean musculature of his body on display. Even if he was her childhood nemesis, he had grown into something... Enthralling. Like a shard of smoked glass, he was all sharp angles and impossible to see through. One wrong move, and she felt like he might very well cut her to the bone.

“I believe I answered every question you asked,” he challenged. “To the best of my ability, at least. Unless there was something I missed?”

Hermione felt her throat tighten. *Oh, Gods.* This had been a bad idea. There was a question at the tip of her tongue, one that had been buried underneath the rest.

“You—you said you liked it.”

Malfoy lifted his chin, looking down at her. Instead of sneering, though, it was calculating. *Was he trying to figure her out? Strategizing what it would take to pick her defenses apart, piece by piece?*

“That’s not a question.”

Forcing her shoulders back and her head high, she looked him straight in the eye. “How did I do?”

A satisfied grin stretched its way across his features, and he held her gaze. “Hermione Granger wants to know if she got an O for Outstanding in submission? Color me surprised.”

Heat suffused her cheeks, but she didn’t look away. She couldn’t. “You’re more experienced than me, so I would like to know. Proper research depends on feedback and observation, and it’s not like I have anyone else to ask.”

He thought for a moment, considering her question, and when he spoke, she almost melted into her chair.

“You did beautifully. You’re everything a man like me wants, and everything I know I shouldn’t.”

“Thank you,” she said on a shaky breath.

“I really should go.” He finally looked away, severing their connection.

“What’s going to happen now, then? If you tell them that we weren’t a compatible match?”

Malfoy rubbed his jaw with his knuckles, absentminded. “They’ll make a note in our files so we’re not accidentally matched again. Then they’ll find you someone new. It’s usually a fairly quick process—you’ll probably have someone new by the end of next week.”

Someone new. Some nameless, faceless stranger. The thought of it doused some of the arousal in her veins. How had she come to this place, not knowing who or what she would find? The idea of it seemed ridiculous now, after experiencing what she had with Malfoy.

He lifted himself up again, straightening his back, and she couldn’t stop herself from blurting out another question. “How many people have you been matched with?”

It was simple curiosity, that was all. Nothing more.

“Including you? Five. And to answer your next question, none of them were long term. A few months at most.”

“Why not?” She remembered his admission that she was the first witch he’d been matched with in a while.

He gave her a bland look. “I really should have known it was you, even with the glamour. I must be losing my touch. There’s only one witch who asks as many questions as you do, and yet I was still blind to what I had in my hands.”

“That’s not an answer.” Hermione slowly stood. Something deep inside her kept forcing her forward, one step in front of the other, even though she knew how close she was getting to the ledge. This was a dangerous game, but the only thing she could think about now, being back in this room with him, was the commanding presence he held as he worked her body over the last time they were here.

Her body was a terrible, awful traitor.

“You don’t want this, Granger. Not from me.”

She hated that he *should* be right. Earlier that day, she would have agreed. But now, with his explanation and his apologies and the memory of what it felt like to have his skin against hers, her mind was at war with her body.

She was at another impasse with her research, and had two options to choose from.

First, she could take his apology and never look back. She could allow The Scarlet Order to find her someone new, and hope that it would be a good enough match. That it would be someone she could trust, who knew how to light her on fire as easily as Malfoy could.

Second, she could convince him to give her another shot. She could continue her original research, with her original partner, and see how the new element changed things. There was no question that she was physically attracted to him, as much as she might wish otherwise, and they certainly had chemistry *before* she knew it was him. *Could it continue?* Or, they could try, and if it wasn’t sustainable she could move on to a new partner.

But most importantly, the second option had an advantage that the first one lacked: the opportunity to figure out what he was still hiding. Not that she could seduce him with her feminine wiles, as she fully recognized how far out of her element she was, but keeping him close would make it easier than if they continued on as strangers.

“What if I do?” she asked, fisting her hands at her sides. “What if I said I wanted to try again?”

“You don’t,” he insisted. Shaking his head, he turned toward the door. “Trust me. You made that abundantly clear, and I don’t wish to traumatize you again.”

Every step he took closer to the door had panic ratcheting higher up her throat. “What about just once? Just to see? You said you enjoyed it, so why not?”

He paused, his back to her, and looked toward the ceiling. She didn’t need to see his face to know that it was most likely tensed with frustration.

“That’s where your problem started, Granger. You keep going after men who are only concerned with what *they* want.”

“I *do* want it. I want to try again, with you. No one else.”

He turned so slowly that she could count every second that passed by with the rapid beating of her heart. It pounded in her veins, thumping against her skin and roaring in her ears. *Sweet Circe*. She couldn’t believe she was practically begging Malfoy to have sex with her.

When he faced her again, his features were carefully closed off. She’d seen a myriad of expressions on him that night—teasing, sadness, amusement, flirtation—was this his Occlumency at work? Was he shutting his emotions away so she couldn’t see how he felt about her? About her admission?

“A test, then.”

“*What?*” Couldn’t he just *agree*? Perhaps it was selfish, or impatient, but she wanted to throttle him. He complained about how she never made things easy, but he was no better. First the bargain

for the answers she wanted, and now this.

He suppressed a smile at her indignation. “You might have admitted your response to me this weekend wasn’t the best, but you still didn’t want anything to do with me in your office today. Am I wrong?”

“No,” she admitted. She wouldn’t waste either of their time by lying.

He moved toward her, shoulders back and hands in her pockets. She held her breath once he reached her, but instead of stopping, he circled her.

Like a predator.

A shiver wracked her body.

“Cold, Granger?” he asked, amused, but didn’t wait for an answer. “It’s easy for your body and your mind to want two different things, and I’m sure you think you can just turn that little voice in your head off that’s still disgusted by me and the things I did. You think that it’ll be easy because you remember being here the other night. But what happens when I touch you and you *know* it’s me? What then?”

“I—” She let her eyes drift closed when he came to her front, unable to hold his heavy stare. “I don’t know.”

“Mmm.” His hum of approval sent another wave of goosebumps skittering down her arms. “Look at you, being so good, telling me the truth. Earlier you would have lied, stuck your nose up in the air and told me it wouldn’t matter. What’s changed?”

Forcing herself to look at him again, she swallowed and summoned every ounce of honesty and courage she had. “You kept your word.”

He did. As much as it surprised her, he followed through. He promised her answers, and swore he wouldn’t try to touch her again. Now, she was asking him to. Her confirmation made him inhale sharply, his gaze growing even hotter as he looked down at her. He was so much taller than her that he could rest his chin on the top of her head, and the size difference made her want to step into his body and see what it felt like to place her cheek on his chest.

“Arms up against the bookshelf, palms out,” he directed her with a hard voice, one palm on her shoulder to turn her toward the wall to their left. She didn’t let herself stop and think, but her heart began to hammer in her ribcage. *What is he about to do?* Fear mixed with the excitement in her chest, swirling and tightening until it felt like she might burst. When she lifted her arms to the shelf, wrapping her fingers around the cold edge of the wood, he nudged her shoe with his own foot. “Stand wider.”

“What—” She paused, calculating her words. She was good at tests, and if that’s what this was, she was going to pass with flying colors... But that also meant being careful, and not running into anything headlong without considering her options first. *He wanted to gauge her response, right? To see if she could adequately accept him as a submissive?* Then that should mean she should play the part. “May I ask what you’re going to do?”

As much as she might want to get mouthy, to goad him into bending her over the couch, she knew that it wasn’t the right time. She had to be *good*.

His chuckle was deep, and she wanted desperately to twist around to see him. Instead she faced forward, keeping the position he placed her in.

“You’ll see soon enough.” He dropped his voice lower, leaning forward to speak closer to her ear. He lined his body close with hers, and she could feel the soft brush of his suit against the back of her dress. “Now, you can move, correct? If you wanted to.”

With her hands perched on the edge of the bookshelf, there would be more than enough space to duck out from underneath him if she wanted to. There was nothing beside them, and plenty of room to move. To run if she panicked again. “Yes.”

“This is your first test, Hermione. You’re going to stay there, and you’re not going to move until I tell you that you can. This is the moment that you have to choose to submit. To agree to do this with *me*. If you don’t like what I’m doing, you say the word ‘red,’ and I will stop everything.”

Red. A safe word. Easy enough. “Okay.”

His body went rigid in an instant, the hard lines of his chest pressing into her back as he inhaled sharply. “Close your eyes. Do not open them until I say you can.”

The tone of his voice was almost as hard as the frame of his body, and she could feel the heat of him beginning to seep through her clothes. Rationally, she knew she should probably say no, to keep her eyes cracked open just in case, but she remembered enough from their last visit. She had to listen, and trust him completely, or this would be over before it even started. Darkness shadowed her vision, and she waited as her other senses began to grow in the absence of light. The silky feel of his suit, sliding against her with every expansion of his chest. The scent of his cologne, fragrant and heady. The whisper of his breath, waiting, watching to see what she would do.

“Good.” His praise sent a bolt of warmth through her. “Now I want you to imagine that you’re at home, in your bed.”

The image of it came clearly to her mind. A midnight blue comforter, with matching pillowcases. Her favorite quilt was folded neatly at the bottom, ready in case of a chilly night. “Okay. I’m there.”

She hadn’t expected a theoretical role play, but if this is what he wanted...

“You’ve just woken up...” His voice was so low she had to strain to hear him. “It’s been a rough few days at the Ministry, and you’re tirelessly overworked. You wake up and know that you’ve got another day of paperwork and meetings and red tape ahead of you. You dread another day when no one will listen to you, even though you know better than all of them. But when you come to, you feel me behind you, and you freeze. You’re so tense, Granger.”

He placed his palm on her shoulder, dragging his hand down the length of her arm until his fingers wrapped around her wrist. Bodies aligned, he squeezed her lightly. “We’re laying together, and you’re just so tense.” His fingers gently stroked the inside of her wrist, along the delicate skin, and he pressed his hips lightly into her backside. She could feel him growing hard, and she let out a shaky exhale. Something warmed within her, knowing that he was responding to their position just as much as she was. “You need the relief, and you know that I can give it to you. Is that what you want? For me to make it better? To help you let go and relax?”

The sound of her own breathing was starting to drown him out. She could see it—the light filtering in from the window in her room, tucked under the covers with the length of his body behind hers. *Could he?* She let the vision continue. Malfoy's pale skin against her own as he ran his hands along her arms, her shoulders, her neck. She shouldn't want this. *Gods, she shouldn't*, she thought. But the feel of him was too much to resist. His index and middle finger stroked an easy pattern on her skin, reminding her of what he could do so easily.

"So, you start to rock against me," he continued, and used his free hand to pull her hair from her shoulders until the side of her neck was exposed. Malfoy trailed his nose up the column of her throat, and she couldn't stop the full-body shudder that coursed through her. It was so gentle and delicate in comparison to the sharp edge of his commands. "But it's not enough, is it?"

It's not, she thought, but her mouth wouldn't open. Instead, she shook her head, angling so her neck was open to him further. He pressed his hips against her again, starting a soft rhythm that had her rocking against him, just like he told her.

"You can feel yourself getting wetter, but you want more, you greedy girl. Do you want me to help you?" He nuzzled at the sensitive skin behind her ear, and she suppressed the needy sound that mewled in her throat.

"Yes." She couldn't stop herself, even if she tried. He was so commanding, overtaking all of her senses, and she no longer knew which way was up.

"Do you want my hands again?" He moved his hands, sweeping them down her shoulders, before trailing lower. His fingers skated across the edges of her breasts, squeezing at her ribcage, then settled on her waist. "Or maybe my mouth this time?"

The vision shifted, and Malfoy was crawling under her covers, hiking her legs over his shoulders and holding her down while he pressed open mouth kisses to her core. A flash of heat settled between her thighs, and she shifted on her feet. The feel of him behind her was starting to drive her mad, the hard length of his cock pressed into her arse, but it wasn't enough. With her feet so wide, she had no chance of getting friction where she needed it the most.

"I think you like that idea," he growled, and his fingers skimmed around her waist, pulling her body completely flush with his and pressing his palms into the front of her hips until they spanned across her lower stomach. His fingers were close, *so close*, and she would give anything to have him reach just a little farther forward to cup her with one large hand. *Just one press*, that's all she needed. She could rock against his hand, taking her own pleasure... Her breathing grew shorter, more shallow, and she could feel the rise and fall of her chest with each desperate pant. "What if I used both, instead?"

She imagined it, feeling his mouth on her cunt, lapping at the sensitive bud while his fingers thrust inside her.

Pressing back against him, she writhed, unable to control her reactions. She was so slick between her legs that she could feel it in her knickers, the fabric sliding just so with her movements. He was barely touching her, yet he was still driving her mad—more so than any other man had been able to before—and he was managing to do it with just his words.

"Maybe..." He kept one hand on her lower stomach and brought the other up to her head, burying his fingers in her hair to pull lightly. When he did, she let her head drop back to his chest, letting him hold her up completely. "Since you're being so good, I would let you climb on top of my face

and take what you needed. Let you set the pace while I lick your cunt and fuck you with my fingers. Would you like that, Hermione?"

"Oh—" Hermione bit down on her lip, squeezing her eyes tighter as she panted. She had to keep her composure, she *had* to. The sound of her first name on his lips, combined with the filth he was whispering into her ear, was enough to send her spiraling out of control.

Everything below her waist was beginning to ache in a painful throb, keeping in time with the pulse of her heart. It was impossible to tell where her arousal stopped and he began. She could see it, see him, buried between her legs. She could feel the cold metal of her headboard in her palm, the wrought iron bars digging into her skin while she rode his face, taking while he gave. What he *allowed* her to take. Her fingers itched to thread themselves through his blond hair, to scratch at the pale skin of his shoulders. To mark him, desperately, as he was doing to her. Her hands flexed on the bookshelf instead, the wood growing damp underneath her palms.

"But if you let go, I'll have to stop."

"*No!*" She was well aware of how pathetic her plea sounded, but she shook her head to prove how good she could be. *Couldn't he see it? Couldn't he see how hard she was trying?* She would do anything he asked, if it only meant he wouldn't stop. "No, I won't let go. I promise."

"That's it," he growled in a low tone. His reward was an open mouth kiss to the delicate skin beneath her ear, dragging his teeth across the sensitive area and sucking hard. Hard enough it would leave a bruise, and the noise that escaped her throat sounded more like a desperate animal than herself.

"That's good; you did so well." Malfoy nipped at her skin again, but it wasn't the same. When she tried opening her neck to him further, pressing her hips back against his cock, his chuckle vibrated against her back. "Open your eyes, Granger."

It took a moment for her body to respond to the command, and once her eyes fluttered open, she realized just how worked up she'd become. Her arms were shaking against the bookshelf, struggling to hold their place, and her legs were trembling. With the rise and fall of her chest in rapid, short gasps, it sounded more like she'd run a marathon than let him talk her to the ledge of an orgasm. But worst of all? It was how desperate and out of control she felt. He could ask her to do almost anything, and she would let him.

"Oh my Gods," she gasped, trying to steady herself. Her fingers felt numb, and she brought her hands to her chest. Cradling them between her breasts, she tried to focus on the books in front of her. *Calm down.* When she blinked, she could see him beneath her again, eyes locked with hers as he licked at her core. Intense desire shading his face, determination blowing his irises until they turned black with want. Another wave of arousal flushed through her, and she bit her lip. *This was a test, she remembered. Nothing more.* She felt him step away, his body heat disappearing from her back, and it took everything in her power not to follow him. *Don't, she thought. Don't be so needy.*

"Look at me," he commanded, breaking through her haze of lust, and her body instinctively turned towards him. His hand stayed firmly in place on her waist while she twisted around to face him, but the other drifted to her chin, lifting it up until she was forced to look up and into his eyes. The smirk he gave her was practically devastating, and she could feel it between her legs. "I'd give that an O for Outstanding, I think."

Hermione's legs were still weak when she Apparated into her flat, all but running to her bedroom as soon as the ground steadied beneath her feet. If she held her breath, she could still smell the faint whisper of cologne on her dress, and she didn't bother stripping before she fell onto the plush surface of her mattress. Her hand dove between her legs, fingers sliding through the thick coating of arousal that Malfoy had drawn from her.

Just moments before, he'd placed a soft kiss to her cheek and bid her goodnight, despite the way he'd worked her up so desperately. She felt out of control, totally wild, and completely unable to stop herself from burying her fingers into her cunt as soon as she reached the privacy of her own home. Her fingers didn't feel nearly as good as his would have, but when she slid two fingers inside, it eased some of the ache.

Her breath rushed out of her, and she rocked against the mattress when she brought her second hand to her clit, rubbing in soft circles with the pad of her middle finger.

"Now, this is the second part of your test," Malfoy told her as he looked her in the eyes, unblinking as he gave her the next set of directions. "It's easy for you to feel this way now, in the haze of everything. But I want you to go home and go to sleep. If you still feel this way in a few days, send me an owl. If you don't, then I won't ever speak of it again."

A whine surfaced in her throat, and she thrashed her head against the comforter. Her fingers weren't *enough*. They were too slim, and not long enough to reach the sensitive spot at the front of her pelvis. Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift back to the vision he'd created. His pale body spread out across her bed. Her thighs, bracketing his cheeks, his mouth and nose buried between them while she rocked against his face. Letting her mind take over, she increased the pressure and the speed of her fingers against her clit, the circles becoming tighter and faster.

Would he growl against her? Let the vibrations run through the bundle of nerves while he teased her? Would he dip his tongue inside her opening, desperate to taste her when she came? Would he use his other hand to rub himself while she took what she needed? *Oh, oh*, her entire body clenched. It wasn't taking long, the pressure rising in her pelvis. She didn't know what he looked like naked, and her fantasy shifted—he was wearing the same suit he had on that day. It was jet black, like his outer robes, and tailored to perfection. Equally imposing as he was enticing. A new wave of desire overtook her, and she felt her core flutter around her fingers. The thought of it—her, completely naked and undone—with him, buttoned up in his expensive, tailored suit? It was one of the most erotic things she'd ever considered.

Maybe he had designed it that way, their meeting for the evening. He'd left her instructions to be naked, ready and waiting for him, and he took her as soon as he stepped through the floo. He couldn't wait, pulling her down to the floor so he could taste her. His hands, splayed around her thighs, digging into the soft flesh when he moved her into place. One hand lifted up to squeeze at her breast, flicking the nipple, while the other thrust deep and she pressed down against his tongue

She crested, her body seizing, the orgasm squeezing her fingers while she worked at her clit. It washed over her fast and hard, starting in her legs before moving up to her pelvis, then spreading further. It filled her body with warmth, sparking sensation across her nerve endings, and she rode it out with a loud cry. She basked in it, letting the vision of Malfoy fade from her mind, and when it finally subsided she let out a deep exhale. Her legs still trembled, and her fingers slowed as she shook in the aftershocks. It was good, but it had only taken the edge off. She had a sinking feeling that while it was her first and only orgasm of the night so far, it most likely wasn't her last. Arousal

was still tight at the base of her spine, and her fingers still traced lazy circles around her opening as she considered what to do next.

Through heaving breaths, Hermione took big gulps of air, trying to soothe the stuttered beating in her chest. Not only had she just begged Malfoy for a chance to be his submissive, but she'd let him work her up into a frenzy, then immediately came home to masturbate to thoughts of him.

Just a few days before, she'd nearly gotten sick at the thought of him touching her. Even that morning, she'd considered him a traitor. Guilt soured her stomach, and she stilled her hands completely as her mind started to put the pieces in order. So far, there were several things she knew she was sure of.

First, she was somewhat attracted to Malfoy. Physically, at the very least. Her mind wasn't too opposed to him either, if that evening was any indication. Especially now that he'd managed to coax her guards down. Somehow, he seemed to know exactly what she needed and how she needed it, and it would be a pointless endeavor to try and pretend otherwise. She knew she would only be missing out if she tried.

Second, Malfoy was attracted to her in return. Why, she wasn't sure. That answer would have to be figured out later.

Third, as much as she loathed to admit it, he seemed genuine. He claimed to be a man of his word, and he'd kept his promises to her so far. There hadn't been many, but she could at least step back from her emotions long enough to recognize that he hadn't lied or taken advantage of her, despite the few opportunities he'd had. He'd been evasive, yes, and a little condescending, but some of that was to be expected, given who he was.

And last, but almost more important than anything else, was that he was keeping some kind of secret that was valuable to the Ministry. Valuable enough to save both him and his mother from a lifetime sentence in Azkaban, despite the last minute confession, and incriminating enough that he wouldn't speak of it now, years after the war had ended.

Whatever it was, she would figure it out some way or another. She could only hope, though, that she managed to make it out on the other side unscathed.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Tags and chapter information have been updated. Now that I've managed to get a bit of a head start on my writing and have officially closed out my other WIP, this story will be shifted into a regular update schedule for every two weeks.

Thanks to everyone who has sent me messages and comments about this story--enjoy!

NSFW art by the incredible [Mignonettes](#) is at the end of the chapter.

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

In just a matter of days, Hermione had run the full gamut of responses to Malfoy's touch. Before, she'd woken with the remaining tendrils of shame and guilt wrapping around her throat, choking her with deep disgust at her wanton actions on his lap. But now? She opened her eyes after a fitful night of dreaming, plagued by thoughts of his hands and his mouth and his body, waking herself from her constant tossing and turning. Still drowsy from sleep, she pressed her thighs together under the blanket, but it was a poor attempt to alleviate the ache between her legs and to lessen some of the heavy arousal that had settled into her bones. Like a spell had been cast over her, she felt like a completely different person than the week before.

The rational side of her brain wanted to fight it—she *knew*, on some level, that Malfoy was the wrong choice. He was dangerous, even after his apologies, and she knew it firsthand. Secrets and mystery aside, he shouldn't be her choice for a sexual partner. Even their match was strange, considering his breadth of experience to her own. Doubt crept into her thoughts, dimming her mood. Wouldn't he be happier with someone he didn't need to teach? Wouldn't she be better off with someone who wouldn't expect so much from her?

The thought of it sent a shiver skittering down her spine. He *would* have expectations of her, if she pursued something with him. She might not know him personally, but she knew enough *of* him... Draco Malfoy had grown up with the best of the best, and she didn't think he would suddenly be happy to settle for someone who was only half-committed.

Anxiety dampened her arousal, and she tossed her arm over her eyes to block out the early morning light. *Could she do it? Could she be his?*

Did she really want to?

Yes. Her body answered before her brain could catch up. Even through her questions and her apprehension, he was the first man who had ever been able to tune into her needs so easily. With her other partners, her desires were practically a locked book written in a dead language. With Malfoy, not only did he have the key, he was fluent in that language as well. Their two encounters together made that plenty clear—he wasn't lying when he said he knew what she needed.

Perhaps she was overthinking things. *He said you were good*, she reminded herself. *That he enjoyed it.*

Tossing the blanket from her body, Hermione climbed from her bed and padded into her office, greeting her tawny barn owl with a treat and a scratch on the head. The sun was barely pressing into the horizon, but she didn't let herself stop to think. With her quill scratching across the parchment in a messy, haphazard scrawl, she admitted the truth before she could lose her nerve.

Malfoy,

Perhaps as a surprise to both of us, I've passed your test. Let me know how you'd like to proceed and I can arrange another meeting at The Scarlet Order.

Hermione

She watched, feeling oddly calm as her owl disappeared into the London skyline. There was no taking it back, and she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Her owl drifted in through the open window in her office as she was sipping her tea, hair still damp from her morning shower.

Fear curled in her stomach at the sight of the return letter curled in its talon. *Already?* She wasn't expecting a response so quickly, and she untied it from the owl's leg with trembling fingers. She was confident in her abilities, she trusted her mind and she knew that after he'd talked her to the edge of orgasm, she wanted him. There was no doubt about that. Had she misread something? Did he change his mind? Was the test just a joke?

His penmanship was neat and tidy in comparison to hers. Well thought out and practiced, with a flourish to her name at the top of the parchment.

Granger,

When I said to take a few days, I meant it. Not twelve hours.

I know you know how to follow instructions better than that.

Regards,

D.M.

Her cheeks grew warm at his light reprimand. However, he was right—she had jumped ahead, eager to push down any lingering doubts that brewed in her chest. But her doubts didn't stem from her physical reaction to him, but rather the risks that came along with an agreement like the one they were considering. She let her eyes roam over the note several more times, her teeth digging into her lower lip as she considered her options. She tried to ignore the frustration at his rebuff—wasn't this what he wanted? Her attention? Her explicit agreement?

Fine, she thought. Maybe he was holding her at the same arm's length that she was with him in an attempt to protect himself, but at least she was taking his word seriously. And if he wanted her to wait, she would. Malfoy was so convinced she didn't want him that she'd just have to prove him

wrong—if he wanted to hear it every day for the next week, she would send him daily letters if that's what it took.

With a smile, she tucked the letter into the bureau in her hall that held her extra mail.

Perhaps that's exactly what she would do.

On Wednesday, she waited until lunch to floo home and send the second letter.

Malfoy,

As suspected, we are 36 hours in and I am still willing and interested. Consider this a check-in of sorts, just to prove my point.

Hermione

As expected, his return letter was waiting for her by the time she got off work.

Granger,

Cheeky. I hope you know what kind of danger you're flirting with. However, 36 hours is still not 'several days.' Perhaps I should send you a calendar, since you seem to need to be reminded of the proper days of the week?

Regards,

D.M.

On Thursday, she had her letter written and sent off as she stepped into the floo to start her day at the Ministry.

Malfoy,

Perhaps I should send you a dictionary, as the term 'a few' means 'a small number of people, items, or things.' Technically, two days does fall under those parameters. However if you still are not convinced, consider this a polite reminder that I have made it to day three without scorning you completely and pretending our evening together on Monday never happened. If anything, the increase in our correspondence should convince you of my seriousness. If not, I would suggest you lay off the treats—my owl is now refusing to take my own. What are you feeding her, fresh fish?

Hermione

His letter back was delayed, arriving just as the sun was setting that evening.

Granger,

Yes, actually. I have my house elf set up a veritable buffet every day now that she's become a regular visitor to my house. It's not my fault she likes me more. Perhaps you could learn a few things from me.

Regards,

D.M.

On Friday, she was stewing in frustration. Her handwriting grew more spiked and hurried as she dug her quill into the parchment so hard she ripped a hole in her first version.

Malfoy,

Surely you realize that's precisely what I'm trying to do, correct? And yet you refuse to acknowledge my agreement to your terms and the fact that I've passed your test—with flying colours, I might add. If you've changed your mind, please speak bluntly and just say so.

Hermione

As with Tuesday, his letter came almost immediately, and her satisfaction at the short response burned out any annoyance that soured her mood.

Granger,

7 PM. Tonight.

See you soon,

D.M.

Things had settled back into a quiet normalcy at the ministry, save for one new feature in Hermione's schedule: keeping an eye out for Malfoy in the halls of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement. She wasn't sure of his schedule, but she knew his standing meetings with the aurors had to come with some kind of regularity.

It made her consider something she hadn't thought of before—discretion. It was one thing to consider starting a physical relationship with Malfoy during her personal time, but what would she do if they ran into each other while she was at work? Before, she wouldn't have even considered the details of it—she didn't keep her personal life *private* per se, but this wasn't a normal relationship. They weren't dating, nor did the men she typically dated come into her very own department, either.

They would need to agree on a plan of action to make sure they maintained the appropriate amount of caution around each other while in public spaces.

That afternoon, during a break in her schedule, she slipped from her office and left a stack of memos and case files on her secretary's desk.

"These need to be sent out before the end of the day, and the updates to the files need to be duplicated for Robard's approval. If you need me in the meantime, I'll be in the archives doing some research."

"Not a problem, I'll have them done by the time you get back." Cecelia nodded, already flicking her wand to sort through the memos. "Will you need any duplicates made from the archive files?"

Hermione tried to hide her grimace behind a kind smile. Her research wasn't on any current, *active* case in the department's ledger, and the fewer eyes the better. "Ah, no, I don't think so. I'm just double checking a few details on something."

Heading to the lifts, she focused on keeping her shoulders back and her chin up, but nerves were beginning to flutter rapidly in her stomach. It felt like a repeat of her childhood days sneaking into the restricted section of the library or skulking about in the abandoned girls bathroom, knowing that she had no business doing what she was about to do.

The direct lift down to the archives was a creaky old thing with blinking lights and a slightly stale odor, set in the back of the Ministry halls far away from where visitors might be. It wasn't used often, and Hermione gripped her wand in her damp fist while it lowered her down to the bowels of the building. There were two departments within the archives—those that housed the paperwork for public cases and historical records, and the private archives that only Ministry employees could access.

When the lift doors opened and she stepped into the dimly lit hall, Hermione took a deep breath, pushing past her apprehension. *It's not against the rules*, she reminded herself. Not technically, at least. With her clearance, she had access to almost any record she might want or need, save for those that were housed in the Department of Mysteries.

The sound of her heels clicking on the old stone floor echoed around her in the empty hallway, and she smiled when she rounded the corner to find the Archive Specialist sitting at the main desk. Stacks of files and boxes were piled high on floor to ceiling bookshelves behind her, spanning into the distance as far as Hermione's eye could see.

"Afternoon, Beatrice," Hermione greeted the woman. She was somewhat older, with greying hair around her temples and a chunky cable knit sweater that looked like it could have come right off Molly Weasley's knitting needles. She'd been the Archive Specialist since before Hermione was hired in at the Ministry years before, and had always been helpful when she couldn't find a particularly tricky case file.

"Oh, hello Miss Granger!" Beatrice looked up from her book, closing it on her finger to keep her place between the pages. "Looking for something specific today?"

With a reassuring smile, Hermione waved her off. "Just coming to double check some details from an old case. I know where they are."

"Are you sure?" Beatrice moved to stand, slipping a bookmark into her hardback. She was eager to help, as always, and Hermione tried not to let her annoyance show. It wasn't her fault—the woman was locked in the basement of the Ministry for hours and hours at a time, with no one else to talk to unless someone came looking for a file or the night archivist arrived for their shift. She was talkative by nature, and lived to regale anyone who was listening about her six grandchildren or old stories from her husband who had since passed.

The last thing Hermione needed was for her to be chattering behind her while she dug through boxes of files, searching for incriminating evidence against the man she'd agreed to be dominated by.

She mustered every ounce of composure in her body, quickly burying the thought. She wasn't doing anything wrong. Malfoy might not have given her an answer to her questions, but he also hadn't told her she couldn't go searching for them, either. "Of course, I checked the file numbers before I came down. B117."

Beatrice's face fell slightly, but she nodded, setting back down and running her thumb over her weathered knuckles. They were red and raw, Hermione noticed, and she paused before heading into

the stacks. She shouldn't be rude, even if she was eager.

"Have you seen the salve that they're selling at the apothecary? It might help with your hands."

It was most likely a combination of the dry air in the archives and constantly handling parchment, but she'd noticed that Beatrice had a nasty habit of picking at her dry skin.

"I haven't." She grimaced. "It's gotten worse these last few weeks. I should pop over there this evening before they close."

"Let me know if it works?" Hermione offered, even though she didn't mind much either way.

"Will do, dear. Summon me if you need any help after all."

"I will." With another smile, Hermione edged into the stacks before heading to her section. She'd been planning for days, and knew exactly where she needed to go—the case files were archived by type, then subsections for each year, and she counted the aisle numbers as she searched for the correct spot. She'd planned each meticulous detail of her search all week. She'd patiently waited until Friday afternoon, when fewer people might be looking for her. Since many of the Aurors held strange off-hours for night calls, the office grew sparse by the end of the week, and those that did remain were typically distracted enough by the approaching weekend that they weren't interested in working.

The section she'd identified, B117, housed most of the arrest records and general case details for DMLE cases over the last ten years. Duplicate copies were available for certain file types that belonged in multiple designations, and Hermione was banking on being able to find what she needed in the DMLE files. Their department had enough overlap with the Wizengamot trials that there *should* be records for each arrest and subsequent plea deals without directly searching through those directly associated with the trials or the war.

If anyone *did* happen to come by, it would simply look like she was looking for something that corresponded with her own cases, or something related to an active case on the Auror docket.

When she reached the back corner where B117 stood, dusty and overflowing with boxes full of moth-eaten papers, she took a quick look over her shoulder. No sign of Beatrice, nor anyone else so close to the end of the day on a Friday. *Good.* Pulling out her wand, she tapped a quick series of letters on the metal shelving, summoning case files from the same era as the post-war trials. She included those for cases with last names between L and O, and stepped back when several boxes lurched forward from their spots on the high shelves above.

Charming them to float to a nearby table, she settled in. It was eerily quiet, only the sound of papers shuffling to fill the silence as she began to pull the overstuffed folders from their spots within each box. Hermione worked quickly, trying to keep her head straight while keeping an ear open for approaching footsteps.

Labret. Lennox. Livingston. Mabins. MacCay. Malfoy.

Her heart jumped at the sight of the thick file, her fingers growing cold as she reached to pull it out. Upon closer inspection, it wasn't just one file—there were *three*. The first, and largest, was tabbed with a crooked label.

Malfoy, Lucius A.

The next two were much smaller.

Malfoy, Narcissa D.

Malfoy, Draco L.

Disregarding his parent's files, Hermione opened Malfoy's record, taking quick stock of the paperwork.

His initial arrest warrant. His processing paperwork for Azkaban. Visitors logs, with only one name listed. *Ambrose Patterson*. The "APPROVED COUNSEL" check box directly to the left of his name indicated he was likely Malfoy's solicitor, and Hermione noticed that his visits became more frequent, almost daily, toward the end of the trial dates.

Beneath it all was a packet of purple duplicate copies, and Hermione couldn't help but to hold her breath. *This is it, this is what—*

She paused, shuffling back through the trial records. *This can't be right.* There were records missing—most Wizengamot trials included written records of any official statements or testimonies. She'd authorized her own right after the war, and signed off on those that were involved with the cases she worked as an employee of the Ministry. While there were a few testimonies listed, they were all on *behalf* of Malfoy. None of his own.

She thumbed through the documents, noting her own statements of his actions at Malfoy Manor and at Hogwarts. Underneath hers were the corresponding statements from Harry and Ron, as well as one from his mother. Then, underneath those, was another copy of his discharge paperwork from Azkaban.

There was nothing else. No details of his plea deal, no transcript of his trial or any statements from his solicitor. Not even a copy of the final ruling, stating his innocence or guilt.

That couldn't be right.

Hermione had seen petty theft cases with thicker files than this. Dropping it to the table, she picked up Narcissa's. There were several more purple documents enclosed, including a more detailed account of her actions in the Forbidden Forest during the Battle, transcribed from her surrendered memory. Her solicitor's official notes were included, as well as the shorthand transcript from the trial stenographer. Everything looked normal—right up until the details of her final ruling.

Based on the testimony and evidence provided, the Wizengamot recommends deferring time served and sentencing Mrs. Narcissa D. Malfoy to two years of house arrest.

Wizengamot Vote: 41 to 9.

Hermione flipped back to the beginning of her case details and arrest charge.

Name: Narcissa D. Malfoy

D.O.B.: March 14, 1955

Proposed Sentence: 5 years Azkaban; 5 years house arrest

Charges:

Accomplice to Lucius A. Malfoy, known Death Eater and member of the Dark Lord's inner circle

*Harboring wanted fugitives
Witness to the murder of:*

Hermione closed her eyes, flipping the paper over as her stomach turned sour. The list was long enough that it spanned the rest of the page, and she had no desire to read it. She knew those names—there was no way she could ever forget them. Instead she quickly stuffed it back into the file and closed the folder, shoving it back into place beside her husband and son's. There was no sense in looking in Lucius' file—it would take her hours to get through and wouldn't result in any information she most likely wasn't aware of.

Besides, she thought. Malfoy only mentioned the plea deal for his mother. Not Lucius. She knew, just from vague awareness, that the older Malfoy was serving a full life sentence, with no chance of house arrest or parole. Whatever had been offered up, it either wasn't enough to spare Lucius, or it condemned him even further.

Had Malfoy given up his own father? Was that it?

She went back to Malfoy's file, searching for his original charges.

Name: Draco L. Malfoy

D.O.B.: June 5, 1980

Proposed Sentence: 15 years Azkaban; permanent confiscation of wand

Charges:

Known Death Eater

Attempted Murder of Albus Dumbledore

Accomplice to Lucius A. Malfoy, known Death Eater and member of the Dark Lord's inner circle

Accomplice to the kidnapping of Harry Potter

Hermione tapped her finger on the file, thinking back to what she'd learned in her original round of research on Malfoy. Both he and Narcissa had served six months in Azkaban while they awaited their trials, then were *both* sent home for two years of house arrest, despite the differences in the original sentences. Additionally, Malfoy still maintained possession of his wand *and* he was now working for the Ministry. It was a sharp contrast from the fate of the head of the Malfoy family, but another possibility drifted into the forefront of her mind. Malfoy had told her, in general detail, about how difficult it was to live with his father. Was Lucius directly involved in whatever criminal evidence that had been offered up? Or did Malfoy just not care enough to bargain for his father's freedom, and instead had seized the opportunity to live his life free of his influence?

Apprehension curled at the base of her spine, cold and full of warning. Something wasn't right. The case files were, according to Ministry regulation, supposed to serve as a historical record for any arrest, trial, or sentencing. The fact that Malfoy's file was missing complete sections, not even redacted documents, was alarming. Even Narcissa's file had copies, which begged the question... If she went looking in the original Wizengamot archive boxes, would she find a file for his trial at all?

Footsteps echoed in the distance, heels tapping lightly on the floor from several aisles over. Hermione hurriedly stuffed the files back together, ignoring the panicked adrenaline that spiked in her chest, then stuffed them all back into their proper box. Instead, she pulled out a random file from another—

CASE #5209H

Name: Oscar O'Connor

D.O.B.: August 1, 1973

Charge: Impersonation of a Ministry Official

She'd barely gotten it opened, strewing the copies about in front of her, when Beatrice poked her head around the corner.

"Still doing all right back here?"

Hermione popped her head up, blinking rapidly as if she was clearing her head. "Oh, yes, just getting lost in the details. You know me."

"I think you're the hardest worker in the DMLE." Beatrice laughed. "No one else from your department ever spends much time down here at all—they just have the files summoned instead."

Gathering up the files, Hermione shuffled the papers around and stacked them neatly. "I've always preferred doing the research myself. Makes it easier if I find something that needs more attention."

"And that's what makes you the Brightest Witch of Your Age." Beatrice winked, oblivious.

Hermione let out a light laugh, trying to summon a good-natured smile at the overused moniker. "I suppose so."

"Henry should be here soon for the evening shift, but I wanted to see if there was anything you needed before I left?"

Hermione glanced back up at the wall, surprised to see that over an hour had passed. "Ahh, no, I don't think so. I have just a bit more to look through here and then I should be done. Have a good weekend."

"You too, dear."

Hermione set back to the stack of papers in front of her, running her eyes over the information several times until Beatrice's footsteps retreated back toward the front of the archive. When they ceased completely, she let out a tense breath.

She would have to come back to check the Wizengamot files on another day, perhaps when she could hide behind the distraction of someone else pulling files alongside her. Every so often, Robards would need information from old trials to reference as justification on sentencing—she would have to wait until he needed something specific, then grab the files she needed at the same moment.

Taking her time as she packed the boxes back up, making sure that they were arranged in the same order she'd found them in, she considered what she found. Or rather, *hadn't* found. The missing pieces still left an outline in the puzzle, and she was starting to map the edges.

It was unlikely that the case files and trial duplicates were simply *missing* from his arrest record. Official archive files were magically barred from being removed from Ministry property, and couldn't be destroyed through anything short of Fiendfyre. The more likely scenario was one that was much more unsettling than theft or a cover-up, and could only mean one thing.

The files didn't exist in the first place.

And the only department in the Ministry to hold that power was the Wizengamot themselves.

Their room was empty when Hermione Apparated in. She was slightly startled at the sight of it, expecting Malfoy to be lounging on the couch, waiting for her with that air of semi-annoyed expectation. Double checking her watch, she confirmed she was on time. Insecurity began to brew in her stomach—somehow, she didn't think he was the type to be late. Not when he'd specifically told her to be there.

Unless... She paused, stepping forward into the room. Everything was as it should be, nothing new or out of the ordinary from their last visit. No instructions for her laying on the table, or a blindfold like their first scene.

Unless he was making her wait on purpose, annoyed with her constant badgering this week.

The back of her neck flushed warm, feeling the first inkling of regret at her tenacity. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but what if she *had* upset him?

Waving the thought away, Hermione moved to the bookshelves, letting her eyes scan across the titles quickly. It was a wide selection of works, with history books spanning several centuries, and another section that housed antique literature. Another shelf had autobiographies and popular fiction. Her hand reached up to stroke at the spines, her fingers trailing across the gilt lettering as she perused. She'd give him ten minutes, grab a book, and if he didn't show then—

“Evening, Granger.”

She whirled around, her heart jumping straight into her throat at the sudden sound of his voice. He stood near the door, close to where she'd been standing just moments before, one hand tucked into the pocket of his trousers, and the other holding a few sheets of parchment.

“You—” she sputtered, her hand clutching at her chest. She wasn't used to being taken by surprise so easily, but how... “You can Apparate silently?”

His answer was a slight nod of his head and a chagrined look.

“Oh.” She realized, belatedly, what he meant. “I guess I hadn't ever considered it before.”

Apparating with silence and stealth was most likely a key skill to have as a Death Eater, and he would have been taught by the best.

“Most don't. Nor should they. But it's second-nature at this point, and I often forget that it can be so startling.”

She narrowed her eyes, stepping forward. There was a gleam in his eyes, and he was looking at her *too* easily.

“Mmm, I'm sure. I can't imagine you would want to do it on purpose, just for the upper hand.”

“Me?” His lips pulled into a sharp grin. “Never.”

“Prat.” She rolled her eyes. “And I'm sure you weren't just standing there watching me, either.”

Malfoy shook his head, eyes wide. “Definitely not. If I had, I'm sure I would have seen you gazing at those books with such intense desire that it would have made me uncomfortable to witness.”

“Something you’re not used to, then? Shame, really.”

Her snark had his grin pulling into a full smile, and the sight of it had her stomach fluttering. It was the opposite of her intent, but she didn’t hate it.

“Careful, Granger,” he said, moving across the room to sit in one of the leather chairs. “A tongue like that could cut a man down to the bone.”

“Only if you’re lucky.” She continued to stand in place, watching as he set the parchment down on the coffee table. Fighting the desire to investigate, she waited. She needed to see what he would do first.

His lips pressed together, amused, as he pulled out his wand and waved it over the sheets. Ink blossomed across the pages, black script scrawling in a familiar pattern. *Lists*.

“I’m sure that tongue of yours is plenty capable of other things as well, don’t you think?” He glanced at her, then back at one of the lists. “Or at least it says so here.”

Hermione sucked in a breath through her nose, ignoring the hot embarrassment that crept up her neck and up to her ears.

It was her kink list.

“What are you doing with that?” She swallowed, balling her fists at her sides. It was taking everything in her not to snatch it up and hide it from him, even though she knew it was pointless. He’d already seen it once, and had full access to copies of it since they were matched.

“*We*, ” he said with emphasis. “Are going to start with something I think you’ll enjoy. Negotiation.”

Her feet drifted closer on their own accord. “What?”

She meant *why*, but her eyes were locked on his much longer list.

“Come now, don’t play coy. I know you’ve done your research.”

“Yes, but—” she paused, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. “I thought we were supposed to
—”

“Dive right in?” Malfoy cut her off with an amused look. “Think I’d walk in here and rip your knickers off? Bind your hands while I had my dirty way with you? No preamble, just sex?”

The heat of embarrassment melted into something hotter, more heavy and molten, and it sunk down into her abdomen. *Would he do that?* She could envision it—his confident steps, striding across the room before she had a chance to know he’d even arrived. One large hand wrapped around her smaller wrists, pinning them above her head while he rucked up her dress and shoved his thigh between hers. He wouldn’t give her any time to second guess herself. No time to *think*, just to feel and take and enjoy.

“Well.” His smirk told her he saw how affected she was. “Apparently so. I’ll mark that down.”

“No—” Hermione slapped her hand over her mouth and forced herself to breathe through the intensity that had settled between them. She’d lost control of the situation and it had only been a

few minutes. “I don’t—I’m not. Interested, that is. That’s not what I meant.”

He was silent for several moments, watching her with a keen eye. Finally, when her skin was beginning to cool from the surprise fantasy, he spoke again. “Do you remember the first time we were here together? What I told you before... everything fell apart?”

He waved his hand in the air as if he was referring to a broken chair, not her emotional meltdown.

“You told me a lot of things,” she said, unable to keep the impatience from her tone. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

She couldn’t help it, really. There was something about him that made her want to push, to poke and prod and pick because she knew he could take it. Between them, there was no forced politeness... She could be herself, and it was freeing.

His chuckle was a warning. “I believe it was something along the lines of ‘while I find your snark endearing, I don’t tolerate lying.’”

Hermione froze, and he continued.

“It still stands. Maybe more so, now that I know it’s you and we both know how clever you are. Now, come here.”

His tone shifted, hard and demanding, and Hermione knew there was no questioning him. She closed the remaining distance between them, but when she moved toward the couch, he held up a hand to stop her.

“This is your final warning, Granger. You want this—you begged me for it all week. You wanted a taste of submission and I’m giving it to you. But from this moment forward, while we’re in this room, you *will* follow my rules.”

“I—” Any refusal died on her lips when she saw the heat in his eyes and the determined set of his jaw.

“If I make a decision, or ask you to do something, I expect that you will trust me,” he continued. “I’ll admit that while I enjoy your tenacity, I don’t particularly favor the way you hide things from me, or yourself. It helps no one.”

Guilt trickled down her sternum, and she averted her eyes. He might have been talking about the way she quickly denied the fantasy, but there was so much more. If he knew, he would be *furious*.

“You’re so eager to push it out of your mind. To pretend you don’t want the things you do. It’s no wonder you got to where you are now.”

“And I’m just supposed to follow your directions without question?” She mustered the courage to look back at him, despite the way her heart was beginning to pound beneath her ribs.

“Please,” he said, blinking at her like it was the most ridiculous question in the world. “There’s a difference between asking questions and trying to pretend that you don’t like or want something. I vow not to lie to you when we’re together, and I expect the same in return.”

Trust. Everything in her research and her time with Malfoy so far came back to that one thing.

With another steadyng breath, she nodded. “Okay.”

He shifted in his seat, his shoulders still tense as he widened his legs. He was wearing a black suit, and the fabric stretched taught on his thighs.

“Good. Now, you might not like this bit but to be totally honest, I don’t care.” His smirk was back. “You may sit on my lap. Not the couch.”

“What?” She balked.

“We have things to discuss and I don’t quite trust that you won’t attempt to suppress your reactions again. I need you close so I can keep an eye on you.”

“That’s just silly—”

“I will not repeat myself again, Granger.” His tone held zero room for argument.

A hot, traitorous flush of arousal warred with the growing apprehension in her veins. Logically, she didn’t want to sit on his lap. With a glance back down at his thigh, she licked her lips. He let her grow used to the idea, silent as she stared at his legs. They were long, with obvious muscle beneath the expensive fabric of his suit, and she knew instinctively that being on his lap would most likely reduce her to some pathetic, writhing, wanting thing.

That’s what he wants. The realization struck her a moment too late. Her body was already moving on its own accord, taking the few steps necessary to reach him. She’d barely lowered herself down when his hands came to her hips, pulling her over and back against his chest before she had the chance to situate herself.

“I said on my *lap*,” he chastised, his voice gone low as he spoke into her ear. “Not my *knees*.”

Perhaps she had set herself down on the edge of his legs, but really, she would have scooted back at *some* point. In her current position, she was bracketed against his chest and arm, which snaked around her waist to hold her in place. It kept his other arm free and gave her enough room to look at him from the side, though she still had to glance upward to see his face. Though not quite fully perpendicular on his lap, the angle had her knees draped across his.

“Comfortable?”

She *was*, but something in her resisted letting him know that. His body was solid and warm against hers, even through their clothing, and the feel of his thigh underneath her legs had her heart fluttering high in her throat.

“Does it matter?” she asked instead.

Using his free hand to pull his wand from the inner pocket of his jacket, he summoned the parchment from the table. “Of course it does.” He gave her a quick frown. “If you are *mentally* uncomfortable with anything, I will stop immediately.”

“But only mentally?” Hermione couldn’t help herself. Her mind was warring with her body, wanting to push back so badly while fighting the instinct to sink into his embrace.

Malfoy’s arm squeezed her tighter, his hand drifting from her waist to her thigh. Her skirt had ridden up, and he wasted no time in palming the bare skin that was exposed. It was possessive and

confident, with his fingers spread in a sure grip, and heat spiked between her legs.

His response was accompanied by an amused noise. “You might be my most inexperienced partner, but we both know that you already know the answer to that. You’re a smart girl, Granger, so why don’t you tell me?”

A blush rose to her cheeks, and she was thankful for the brief reprieve that he couldn’t see her face too clearly.

“No,” she answered on an exhale. Just as everything else she dedicated her time to, her research on the dynamics of a dominant and submissive relationship had extended into the specifics of rules *and* order between partners. “A Dom will stop if their submissive is truly upset or uncomfortable with a scene.”

Malfoy hummed his approval. “There are different levels of discomfort, which we both know. Being uncomfortable because something is new is much different than if you have an actual problem.”

“And it’s your job to show me ways to be comfortable with things that are new,” Hermione finished. She knew the rules of submission—she’d read up on them, memorized them, committed each and every detail to memory before ever applying to The Scarlet Order.

His thumb swept across her skin, gentle as it dipped down to the inside of her thigh. “Still determined to be the best student in your class, aren’t you?”

A pleased thrill ran through her body. With one hand resting on the arm of the chair and the other tucked against her stomach, she straightened her posture with pride. It inadvertently shifted her bum against his thighs, and she felt a slight hardness press into the side of her arse.

The thrill turned molten in an instant.

He didn’t acknowledge his growing arousal, and let his thumb drag careful circles across her thigh. The delicate skin on the inside of her legs was already sensitized, but his touch made her shiver.

“And because you’re such a good student, I actually think you’ll like this bit. Before we get started, we both need to agree on whatever our ground rules are.”

At his suggestion, her body grew heavy. *Rules*. She loved rules. She loved *structure*, and knowing exactly what to do and how to do it. It removed any questioning or doubt from her already muddled mind, and she nodded quickly.

“Okay. Yes.”

She could hear the eagerness in her voice, and so could he. Malfoy chuckled, the sound deep and vibrating against her back.

“My first rule, and this is nonnegotiable, is that while this isn’t a formal relationship, I do require your exclusivity. Either one of us may end the arrangement at any time, but I do not share what’s mine while I have it.”

A quick squeeze of her thigh accompanied his words, and she inhaled sharply. Typically, she wasn’t attracted to possessive, jealous men. But there was something in his words, something buried in the

tone of his voice, that had her settling further against his chest. Sitting in Malfoy's arms, held by him, she had no doubt that he would be changing her mind rather quickly.

"Agreed. I don't want anyone else right now. But you have to tell me the moment that changes for you."

The Prophet article with his mystery brunette companion flashed quickly in her mind, accompanied by a sharp spike of anger. The thought had her pausing, digging her fingers into the soft leather of the chair arm. Perhaps he wasn't the only one with a jealousy problem.

"That won't be a problem," he said, moving on quickly. "I prefer having a consistent routine, and would appreciate having at least one night a week dedicated to our meetups. You can let me know which one works better for your schedule."

She turned to give him an incredulous look. "At *least* once a week? That much?"

His eyes darkened and his hand slid higher on her thigh, dipping completely beneath the hem of her skirt. He palmed her cunt and held her tight, satisfaction curling his lip when he realized how hot she was beneath his fingers. At once, she averted her eyes, embarrassment burning at her neck and ears.

"My apologies for assuming that the woman who sent me an owl every day for four days would want to meet regularly."

"Sat—Saturdays would be fine," she said quickly, her voice cracking. When he didn't remove his hand, she wiggled her hips. Her heart was pounding so hard she was sure he could hear it too, roaring in her ears and beating against her veins. When she moved, he only gripped her tighter. "We—" She shuddered when Malfoy's middle finger pressed against the seam of her lips. "We usually go for drinks after work on Friday."

He mused over her answer for a moment, considering it. "Saturdays it is, then."

"Aren't you—" Hermione exhaled, struggling between the desire to pull away from his touch or to grind into it. "Are you going to let go?"

Pressing his lips together in an amused smirk, he shook his head. "No, I don't think I am. I quite like being able to feel your body's response to me, even when you try so hard to hide it."

She felt her insides clench, the heat turning into a dull ache between her legs. In his hold, she was powerless.

"This way," he continued. "I can feel just how hot you get when I tell you all about my rules for you. You like those, don't you?"

She could only bite down on her lip to muffle her whimper. Dropping her head back down to his shoulder to stare up at the ceiling, she tried one last attempt to resist him. "This isn't fair."

"It's not supposed to be." His ring finger began stroking lightly at the edge of her knickers, and the soft touch had her clamping her thighs tight around his hand. The move backfired, and shoved his hand even tighter against her cunt. It was like she could feel every finger against her skin, even through the fabric.

"I have to say," he said, his voice growing strained and rough. "When I first thought about your thighs wrapped around me, I didn't quite think it would be like this."

Forcing herself to release the grip of her legs, she relaxed her muscles one by one. When she did, he rewarded her by resuming his gentle ministrations. "You've thought about that?"

"Likely more than you." He paused just long enough to dip his head over to her neck, nuzzling her lightly. It was strangely soft and affectionate considering the way he was holding her in place, but it only served to force her arousal even higher. Her mind couldn't catch up to him, couldn't anticipate his next move, and she could feel herself growing more mindless with every passing moment she was under his care. "But that's a conversation for later. First, we need to discuss titles for when we're together."

"What—what would you like to be called?" She knew, from her research, the seriousness in which many Doms took their titles. Some were personal, and others were formal.

"Though you called me Sir the last time we were together, that would be fine. I do not appreciate the term *master*; however, so if you could avoid that one I would appreciate it."

Hermione nodded, growing entranced by the way his fingers were beginning to flex and move in tandem. He'd graduated from soft, barely there strokes, and was now directly caressing her above her knickers.

"Could I—" The question formed on her lips as quickly as she registered it in her mind, but she was too late in snapping her lips shut.

"Say it," he commanded, his hand going still. "Don't hide from me, Granger."

It took her several breaths to work up the nerve, embarrassment burning at her chest once again. "Could I... call you Draco?"

It was *stupid*, really. It was his name, for Gods sakes, not a title. And just because she wasn't used to saying it didn't mean it was something that he might—

"Say it again," he ground out through his teeth. His hand was cupping her tightly, and she registered, belatedly, that she could feel the strain of his body underneath hers. "My name."

"Draco." It was as soft as a whisper.

He swallowed audibly. "I don't care what you call me outside of here, but when we're together? I want you to call me by my name."

"Yes, Draco," she agreed, growing breathless. She could feel his cock growing harder, prodding against the side of her arse, and she couldn't help but shift against it. When he hissed a breath through his teeth in warning, she stilled.

"You're going to ruin me," he sighed. "I know it."

"That makes two of us, then." When her quip made him laugh, she didn't bother to hide her smile.

"Do you have any preferences on titles?" While one hand stroked her aching cunt, he reached the other around to drag his knuckles up to her waist. "I could call you *pet*, or *darling*. Kitten? You do have sharp little claws..."

Her heart stuttered at the reverence in which he said the word *darling*, but it felt much too tender for what they were. “Whatever you want is fine.”

He hummed, continuing. His fingers skated up to the curve of her breast and then back down again. “What about my good girl, hmm? The best in her class?”

Hermione’s breath caught, and she shook lightly as he chuckled. “You are a good little witch, aren’t you?”

Warmth flooded her entire body at his praise. She was *predictable*, and it made her want to scowl. Perhaps it was the same reason that she liked rules and structure, but getting praise and recognition had always come along with a high that she couldn’t find anywhere else. On Malfoy’s lips, though? It was like a newer, better drug, and so much more dangerous.

“Yes,” she finally agreed. “I don’t mind what you call me, really. Just as long as it’s not degrading.”

At her qualification, he paused, both hands going still. “Look at me.”

She didn’t question his command, and turned to find her face nose-to-nose with his. His grey eyes had gone dark, the pupils blown out, and he held her gaze. “The moment I insult you is the moment that you can Avada me with no regrets. I will *never* speak ill of you again. That much I promise.”

For a brief moment, she thought he might kiss her. His eyes strayed down to her lips, lingering just slightly, before glancing up again. He paused, his mouth opening on a slight exhale, and she couldn’t stop her eyes from fluttering closed. She *wanted* it, his mouth on hers. He hadn’t kissed her their first night together, nor had they been in any situation that would have brought them close enough. But now, sitting with only a whisper of space between them, she craved it just as much as she craved the rest of his touches.

“I was going to continue our negotiations,” he said softly, and she opened her eyes to see him still staring at her. “But I can’t bring myself to care at the moment.”

“Then don’t,” she urged, moving her hips against his hand to spur him to move again. Now that he’d begun to unravel her, she was turning wanton. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it later. Call it my homework, if you want to make it dirty.”

His eyes sharpened at her suggestion. “Don’t think I won’t.”

“Please, Draco,” she begged him, though she wasn’t quite sure for what, exactly. Anything, *everything*, if he’d only put his lips on hers and use his fingers to finally delve beneath her knickers and touch her where she ached the most.

His free hand, which had been paused on her ribcage, lifted to hold her chin in place. He’d barely grasped her jaw when his other fingers pushed the fabric of her knickers aside, sliding one long finger through her wet folds. She gasped sharply, body tensing at the sudden feel of him, but his lips only curled into another grin.

“This what you wanted?” He circled her clit, grazing it just barely with the pad of his finger, before sliding back down toward her opening. “Is this what you’re begging me for?”

She bit her lip on a sharp cry, digging her teeth in as she arched against him. “Yes, yes—” She panted, unable to keep herself from babbling already. If this is what he could do to her with a few

simple touches, she might not survive having sex with him.

“Before I give it to you,” he teased, his finger stroking and dipping into her opening, but never fully pushing in. Her hips chased after his touch, but he was elusive. “Tell me—what did you think of the other night when you went home? After you left here?”

Hermione struggled against the fog of lust that was clouding her mind, rendering her stupid. *What had she thought of? When? Monday. Monday...*

“You,” she confirmed, finally realizing what he was searching for. “I thought of you, using your mouth on me, like you described.”

He showed her his approval by repositioning his hand, and adding his thumb to her clit. It circled lightly, and her eyes fluttered shut in his hold.

“What else?”

With her throat beginning to go dry, she struggled to remember the details. “It was fast—on the floor. I was waiting for you, like you instructed me to do the first time. You came in through the floo and took me, immediately. Like you couldn’t wait. Nothing else mattered.”

“Good girl.” He lowered his head to kiss her cheek, then her jaw, and the shell of her ear. “Let me guess... You’d spent all day thinking about it,” he added to her fantasy in between kisses. “Getting yourself worked up until you were desperate. I would’ve been, too. Falling to my knees as soon as I see you, just so I could get a taste.”

Hermione moaned, pressing her hips down against his hand just slightly. Not too much, not enough for him to stop, but she needed to chase more friction than what he was currently giving.

“Wait,” he paused. “What else?”

“There’s nothing else.” She shook her head, keening at the way the hand between her legs stopped moving as well. “That’s it.”

“I didn’t rip off your clothes? Tear your knickers with my teeth? Sneak under your dress? Which is it?”

Heat bloomed in her stomach, remembering the unsaid portion of her fantasy. Her core clenched, another wave of arousal washing through her at the mere thought of it, and when she opened her eyes, she knew that *he* knew.

He bloody knew.

“What aren’t you telling me, darling?” The fingers against her jaw gave her a quick, coaxing caress. “I felt it, whether you wanted me to or not.”

With her cheeks burning, she averted her eyes.

Licking her lips, she faced her shame. “There was no... I was naked, in the fantasy. Already.”

He was silent for a moment, and she risked a glance. His eyes were closed, his nostrils flared, and his jaw had gone tight. But the moment her eyes landed on him, his shot open.

When he spoke, his voice had dropped back to that rough, commanding tone that made her shiver. “You have two choices. You can stand up and take your dress and knickers off yourself, or I will vanish them for you. Which is it?”

“Vanish them.” She didn’t allow herself to hesitate.

The hand holding her jaw disappeared, but she couldn’t look away. They were caught, staring at each other, until she felt the whisper of magic as her dress disappeared from her body. His mouth hadn’t even moved.

Wordless magic. Again. If it was at all possible, she grew even hotter.

“Look at yourself,” he ordered. “Look at you, naked and wanting on my lap.”

She followed his instruction, moving her head just enough to look down. Her stomach clenched at the sight, sprawled out across his lap. The dark material of his suit was a stark difference to her naked skin, his buttoned-up formality a contrast to her blatant sexuality. Carefully controlled versus wild and needy.

“This is it,” she confirmed, though she recognized he hadn’t asked. “This is what I thought of.”

The burn of her embarrassment mixed with her arousal, heavy and potent in her veins.

“You’re so beautiful, darling,” he praised her, running his nose up and along her cheekbone until it was buried in her curls. “And so perfect.”

His hand was still pressed over her cunt, and like a reward, he finally thrust one finger inside. She let out a low moan, her body going limp over his chest, and he chuckled again.

“You’re even wetter.”

Finally, blessedly, she was too turned on to care. She worked her hips against his hand, riding his finger as he pushed it in, deep and to the knuckle. With her fingers flexing against the arm of the chair, she tried to focus. “What about you?”

She could feel his cock, hard and insistent against her bum, but he made no move to do anything about it. Instead he stroked her with an almost lazy reverence, in no hurry to add a second finger or to circle her clit like she liked.

“What about me?” he prompted.

“The last two—” Her words stuttered when his finger curled upwards, rubbing at the sensitive spot at the front of her pelvis as he pumped in and out. After several times, she squirmed, pressing down against it. It was enough to send her need coiling tighter, but not quite enough to get her there. “—times we were together, you didn’t—”

“Just because I didn’t do it here, with you, doesn’t mean I didn’t get my own.”

Turning her head, she met his eyes once more. “Tell me. Please.”

She needed it like she needed air—to know how he stroked himself to thoughts of her, the same way she’d done with—

"You hadn't even been gone for a handful of seconds on Monday before I broke. I couldn't keep myself composed enough to Apparate home. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

It wasn't accusing, but she nodded nonetheless. Looking at him, his eyes dark and intense, she could see it. She could imagine him, ripping open his trousers and fisting his cock.

"How did you do it?" She needed to know the details. *Fast? Hard? Slow? Did he imagine her on her knees, gazing up at him?*

His eyebrow lifted at the request. "You had me so worked up that I was barely able to touch myself without coming. I haven't gotten off that quickly since I was a teen."

Oh. Though not a direct compliment, she took it as one, biting her lip on a smile. Her smugness was cut short, however, when he added a second finger to her core.

"Don't think I don't feel you," he chastised. "Getting hot at the thought of it. Of making me mindless for you. Even now, I'm aching just as much as you are."

She gasped at the additional sensation, her legs tightening around his hand. His thumb went back to her clit, swiping up and over, and she whimpered.

"Let me help you," she begged. "Let me touch you. *Please, Draco.*"

The words "*I need it*" were stuck in her throat. Her hands were flexing, desperate to give something back to him that was half as good as what he was giving to her. She wasn't a greedy lover, either—but the thought of him giving her permission to touch him the way she wanted? It was undeniable.

He let out a sharp breath, exhaling through his nose. "Tonight wasn't supposed to be about me."

"It's not," she corrected, letting one of her hands drift to his thigh. It was strong, with taught muscle, and she gripped it with every thing she could muster. "It's about *us*."

"Fuck," he swore, his own head dropping to the back of the chair as he paused to consider her plea.

She wiggled on his lap, shifting her body just enough that she was at more of an angle. This way, she could easily reach him. Loosening her grip on his thigh, she let her hand drift up toward his pelvis, dragging her palm along the hard length beneath his trousers.

"Please, Draco," Hermione said again. "Let me be your good girl."

"Gods," he laughed, but it sounded pained. "You're already too good at this."

Raising his head, he looked at her in warning. "If you do this—if you touch me—there is no going back. Do you understand? This is no longer just about you learning a thing or two. The moment I feel your hands on my skin, it becomes serious."

Holding his stare, she tugged at his belt. "I want this," she told him. "I want you. All of you, Draco, even if it scares me."

She might've been boneless with arousal and ready for whatever he was willing to give her, but that didn't mean she wasn't capable of making her own consenting decisions. And for some reason, something was still holding him back.

With his free hand, he helped her pull his trousers open and his cock free. It was long and thick, and when her fingers wrapped around the base, he bit back a groan.

“Touch yourself,” he told her, slowly removing his fingers to make room for hers.

“Wait—” She froze. “But I thought—”

He cut her off with a shake of his head. “Slow down that great big brain of yours. Trust me.”

While he resituated himself underneath her, she moved her own hand between her legs. It was a poor substitute, her fingers feeling much too small and short in comparison to what she’d just had inside her. But she pushed through, feeling the way she’d grown so slick and hot that she wouldn’t be surprised if she left a wet spot behind on the leg of his trousers.

The thought made her blush again.

After a few pumps of her fingers, his hand stilled hers, his fingers wrapping around her wrist.

“That’s enough.”

Slightly confused, she watched as he lifted her hand and brought it to his cock. It wasn’t until he wrapped her wet, glistening fingers around the head that realization set in.

“*Oh,*” she gasped. *Oh.*

Together, he worked her hand up and down the shaft, showing her how he liked it with confident, hard strokes. Their fingers intertwined in her arousal, sliding over the hot, velvet skin of his length.

“Just like that,” he told her, but his hand didn’t leave hers. It was incredibly intimate, working him over with his help, and she shifted her hips as she felt herself grow even wetter.

“Draco.” Her voice sounded weak to her own ears.

Sensing her impatience, his lips lifted to the side. “Needy girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she agreed readily. She wouldn’t bother denying it, or playing coy. This is what he wanted—to drive her mad, to see her fall apart from the pleasure he bestowed on her body. She might resist it at first, unable to let go until he *made* her, but that sense of self-preservation was lost the moment he’d palmed her cunt and held her like he owned her. “For you, yes.”

His eyes fluttered when she gave him an extra squeeze near the flared head of his cock, but he released her hand. “Let’s make this interesting, then. I’m going to see how quickly I can make you fall apart, but if you stop at any point—so do I.”

Her eyebrows raised at the challenge, her breathing going shallow.

“I can do it,” she promised him, nodding quickly. *She could. She would*, for him. She would do anything he asked of her, it seemed.

Her confidence would be her downfall. His grey eyes lit up with determination, and he shifted forward. He moved the hand that was wrapped between her legs up to her breasts, skating across her nipples, and used his opposite to begin caressing her cunt. His damp fingers left a trail of sticky

arousal on her breasts, and the shock of it sent shivers racing across her skin. It was filthy, and only added to the heat of her desire.

“We’ll see about that.” He said it like a promise, and immediately let loose on her. His mouth ducked down to her neck, sucking and biting at her clavicle. His fingers, which had been focusing more on her clit, moved back to her opening and thrust in with two fingers. Though she was warmed up it was still a shock, and she jolted at the spike of pleasure.

His thumb sought out her clit once more, resuming the careful ministrations from earlier. He was consistent, setting a steady pace, but it was relentless. His fingers crooked upward on every pull, and he swiped across her clit with every push. Together, it made her pant, squirming and moving against his touch. It was almost too much to bear, and she fought her eyes closing with every thrust of his hand. Glancing down, she tried her hardest to focus on the task at hand.

Her chest fluttered at the sight of them together, her hand around his cock squeezing and flexing involuntarily. Her bare legs, spread across his and open to his touch, was enough on its own, but the addition of his cock pulled free from his trousers made her clench around his fingers. Every other inch of him was put together so seamlessly, save for the open belt and the rumpled boxers pulled down haphazard. It was just like her fantasy—her, naked and ready for him, but both of them riding high on the frenzy.

Another spike of pleasure tightened in her abdomen, and she let her eyes rake over where they were joined. His forearm flexed as he fucked her with his fingers, but the head of his cock was growing red from her attention.

Her grip stuttered again, and he groaned against her neck.

“Don’t stop,” he taunted, thrusting his hips up so he was fucking her fist. It had her tightening her thighs around his hand again, chasing after his touch with a shuddering desperation. She was getting closer, she could feel it. Her orgasm was just out of reach, spinning and spiraling tighter with every touch of his fingers and every glance at their bodies. It was everything—the feel of his mouth, the smell of his cologne, the sensation of the fabric of his suit, rubbing against her arse. It was *decadent*, and completely overwhelming.

This, she fought to keep her eyes open, choking on a moan as he increased the pace of his hand to match hers. She watched, enraptured, as they worked each other over with an increasing sort of desperation she’d only dreamed about. The intensity of it was enough to consume her, and she wanted nothing more than to give in—to fall completely, knowing and trusting he would catch her.

“Oh—” Hermione whimpered. The tension was building between her legs, her muscles growing tight on their own accord. A sheen of sweat beaded between her breasts, and Draco’s mouth trailed up to her ear. His breath tickled her ear, and he nipped at the lobe. A pinch at her nipple served as a reminder.

“Don’t stop, darling, don’t you dare stop.”

She was shaking, writhing against his lap and his hand, her grip on his cock growing more and more unsteady with each stroke. Precome beaded at the tip, and she let her thumb swipe over it. When she did, he let out a groan.

The telltale sign of her orgasm drew even closer, flushing through her body right before the crest.

“Good girl,” Draco murmured. “Keep going. Say my name when you come.”

She nodded, erratic, as she chased her pleasure. Finally, with one strong push of his fingers, she shattered.

“Oh—*Gods*—Draco—” She squeezed his cock, her grip faltering, but he made up for her lack of focus by thrusting up and into her fist. “Draco!”

She was lost to it, the white hot pleasure sizzling through her legs and up into her torso with a startling intensity. With her eyes screwed shut, she gave in, basking in the feel of his hand as it wrung every ounce of pleasure from her cunt.

“Draco.” She couldn’t stop panting his name, chasing after his fingers as he brought her body down from her orgasm.

“Fuck, don’t stop,” he begged her, and realization set in when he pulled his hand from her center to replace it around her fingers. He tightened her grip, squeezing and pulling with more force than she had been capable of in her distracted state. His focus was on the tip, swirling her palm and fingers around the head with every pull before pushing back down. “*Gods, Hermione—*”

He broke with her name on his lips, his come arcing up and onto her thigh. Another bit splashed over her hand, warm and thick, and she glanced down just it mixed with her own slick between their fingers. It slid between their hands, gliding over him through the last few pumps and he finally stilled, his body jolting with the aftershocks of his own pleasure. His head was still buried in her neck, and she struggled to catch her breath as he peppered her skin with soft, praising kisses.

“*Gods*, you were perfect. My perfect, good girl.”

Hermione chewed the inside of her lip, letting herself settle into his embrace. Slowly he unwrapped their hands and pulled his arms around her waist, anchoring her body to his. It was clear that the embrace was intimate, and the after effects of her orgasm had her pressing her cheek into his chest.

“Thank you,” she said, though she wasn’t sure what for. The pleasure was making her feel slightly discombobulated, and much more eager to show affection than she usually would. It wasn’t sexual desire, but something warmer, more comfortable, and she let her hand come up to caress his chest. Her fingers snuck beneath the lapel of his jacket, and she felt his steady, pounding heartbeat.

“I should be thanking you,” he corrected her. “But that’s a fight we can save for another day. For now, I’m going to need a moment.”

She would give him as many moments as he liked, as long as it meant not leaving his lap. Closing her eyes in contentment, she let herself be lulled by the slow rise and fall of his chest, unaware as she drifted off to sleep.



Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

Malfoy had apparently taken her seriously when she'd offered him the option to assign her homework.

He gave her a day's reprieve to recover from their night together before sending his owl, its leg laden down with a heavy envelope of parchment. Inside sat the rest of his negotiations. It arrived Monday morning, before her alarm had even gone off, and she opened the window to let his great eagle owl in before the sun had finished rising.

With bleary eyes, she looked it over.

Granger,

Because you're such a good little student, I know you won't mind getting homework first thing on Monday morning. Since your interest list is so short, I would like for you to add anything that might have changed since your first intake survey. After, please review mine. Though I know there will be many listed that you might not be familiar with, I would like for you to choose three that you would be comfortable trying. If it helps, consider it a challenge to that sense of Gryffindor bravery you hold in such deep regard.

Three, Granger. No more, no less.

Send them back to me as soon as you've finished, and I'll send your next assignment.

D.M.

Beneath his letter, as expected, were their profiles from The Scarlet Order and their corresponding list of sexual interests. Though she knew it was an irrational reaction, she averted her eyes at the sight of it. Not because she was ashamed of him or her attraction, but because the reality of their arrangement was so much harder to logically reconcile in the light of day than she originally anticipated.

Friday night, when she'd awoke pressed up against his chest, she found that he'd removed his suit jacket while she'd been sleeping and transfigured it into a light blanket. She was boneless and warm, cocooned against his chest and safely tucked into his arms. It had taken her several minutes to fully come to, and when she did, she found him looking down at her with an amused smile.

"Evening, Granger."

His casual tone was an instant reminder that the scene was over, and she scrambled off his lap as quickly as she could manage without tripping over her own legs. Even without a mirror, she knew she was a sight. Her hair was mussed with her curls sticking up at all angles, the transfigured blanket barely covered her from her chest to her knees, and she could still feel the bruise of his teeth on her neck.

She'd attempted to apologize for falling asleep on him, but he'd quickly stood and brushed her apologies off. She didn't usually do such things... Even in her short forays into one night stands, she'd never felt so sleepy or content after. But he refused to hear it.

"I'm fairly certain that means I've done my job well," he said, lifting her chin up with a single finger. Sometime, while she was asleep, he'd put himself back together. His trousers were buttoned once more, his shirt tucked in, and he showed no signs of the same chaotic ravaging that she did.

Thinking about it, she blushed again. His ability to stay composed while she fell apart was becoming her newest obsession. Shortly after, once she'd charmed the blanket into a new dress to Apparate home in, he'd bid her goodnight with the promise of an owl sometime that week.

Her experiment with dominance and submission was only supposed to be temporary—a way for her to explore her own sexuality and find the things she liked so she could bring those elements into her own relationships moving forward. It hadn't been an opportunity to start a clandestine arrangement with the one man that could ruin her reputation, or for her to fall so quickly to her knees for him.

The worst part, however, might have been just how much she *wanted* it. She'd assumed, somewhat naively, that she would find a passing interest or the key to her orgasms. Like a quick lesson, it would be something that she could learn and take back home to use on her own. Not that she would develop an all-consuming craving after a single taste of pleasure. Or that she would be powerless within the dynamic she found with Malfoy, all while being ready *and* willing for whatever he wanted to give her. It was terrifying, but her sense of self-preservation was second only to her lack of impulse control.

Her feelings were a complicated swirl of emotions, fluttering through her stomach and pulling her in every direction. She recognized, and couldn't deny, her attraction to Malfoy, even if the intensity of her sudden desire for him was enough to make her want to go into hiding. Her curiosity over his secrets added a layer of complexity to the situation that made her fingers itch—she'd always been a fan of puzzles. While Malfoy had compared figuring out *her* pleasure to a puzzle, he had no idea that she was facing down a puzzle of her own.

Him.

Was that part of her desire? Her need to figure him out? Would it all disappear, as soon as she figured out what he was hiding? Or would it only grow more intense as time went on? From her reading, she knew that a relationship between a dominant and submissive, no matter how casual, could grow complicated if each party wasn't careful. With that level of trust and care, it was impossible for feelings to stay separate.

Pain spiked behind her eye, and she flinched. Thinking too hard had that effect sometimes, and her attempt to rationalize it all into an easy to understand bit of information was apparently too much for her early morning brain.

Chewing on her lip in thought, Hermione cast a quick glance at the parchment he'd sent. Though it felt like stepping closer toward the edge of a cliff, she knew she wouldn't be able to ignore his instructions. Even more so, she *wanted* to do it, just like she'd told him several nights before—she wanted him, even if it scared her. That much was true, and she was a big enough woman that she could admit it to herself.

“Fine,” she muttered to herself, snatching it up. She would get it done before work, because she was a good student. There was no sense in dragging it out, was there?

After her shower, while she picked at her breakfast, she let her eyes scan over the paperwork. She remembered her own answers, and her fairly *bland* selection of interests.

Oral Sex

Hand play

Intercourse

Blindfolds

Spanking

Sex toys

Nipple play

He hadn’t been kidding about how short hers was. With a grimace of embarrassment at her inexperience, she scribbled down a few additional items.

Female nudity/Male clothed

Following instructions

Wordplay

Sensory deprivation

She wasn’t entirely sure what some of the things she was interested in could be called—like the way she’d been fantasizing about him giving her instructions to wait for him. To be ready, building on the natural anticipation to get her worked up and desperate for him without him needing to lay a single finger on her skin.

Just as she remembered, his list was much longer and more detailed than her own. Scored with varying levels of interest, she took a closer look. Her glance at it during their first night together had been more of a cursory assumption, and more concerned with the *quantity* of items listed as interests rather than the values. Taking a sip of her tea, she looked at it to see if she could find any discernible pattern.

After a few moments, she started to see a trend. His highest scores reflected on items that had some element of control or power—bondage, shibari, restraints, edging, impact play—while some of the other interests were more cursory, like an afterthought. Role play, age play, and group sex had scores so low they might as well be zeros.

So he doesn’t hate those, but he doesn’t love them, either. She rolled her lips between her teeth, her interest piqued as she considered his preferences. Malfoy had always seemed to be picky and particular as a spoiled, bratty child, and definitely not the type to be open to anything and everything.

The only items that were crossed out or listed as hard limits were the ones that were associated with genuine pain or torture. Not just spanking or flogging, but whipping, firewands, and bloodplay. She shivered as she read them, feeling grateful that she didn’t have to even consider it, but her eyes caught on the last few limits he had.

No humiliation, gag restraints, or degradation.

A memory flashed through her mind of her initial research, remembering some of the photographs of gags and gag restraints she’d seen. There were some which were intended for the submissive to

simply hold in their mouth and drop if they needed to speak. The other type, and the one she suspected he listed, was an involuntary gag—meaning that they were unable to speak if something was wrong. Used in conjunction with another signal, it made tapping out of a scene much harder.

Leaning back, Hermione studied his list, and by extension, him. He liked power, craved it, even, and didn't enjoy inflicting pain. He would try anything, even if it wasn't his personal preference. Combined with her knowledge of their time together, it made sense. He was the most impressive when he was comfortable and in control, his presence turning into something deeply commanding that she had a hard time saying no to. But he didn't want to use it to be cruel, or to hurt anyone.

It aligned with everything he'd told her, assured her of, and contradicted every assumption she'd had about him from their past.

Guilt tinged her interest a shade darker, reminding her of how horribly she'd acted. It stung now, knowing that she'd likely hurt him, even if she hadn't meant to. Had he been the old Malfoy? She wouldn't have cared. She would have let herself become righteous in her anger, and dug her heels in as far as she could just to make sure he felt the full force of her fury.

But now... Now it seemed misplaced. With more understanding of him, though not the full scope, she could see at least some of his perspective. She might not particularly *like* his reasoning, but she could appreciate his honesty and the things he went through. As an adult, she could admit that the war wasn't nearly as black and white as she might've thought at one point. Malfoy aside, she'd come across many people during her tenure with the Ministry that hadn't been able to take a side, for whatever reasons they might've had. Safety for themselves, their loved ones, children, parents, communities that depended on them. In a perfect world, everyone would have been able to join the fight, but the world wasn't perfect, nor would it ever be.

With a sigh, she shoved the thoughts away and picked up her quill once more. Studying the list, a few stood out to her. Before, when she was looking up each and every interest from a neutral perspective, many seemed too intimidating to *want* to try, or even unnecessary. It had seemed counterintuitive to add more to her plate when she was trying to find a simple solution, but she was beginning to realize that it wasn't about having too many distractions—it was about not having enough.

Quickly, she circled three.

Light bondage

Voyeurism

Cock warming

The mere thought of the last one made her blush a deep red, her skin burning at the thought of it. At first, she hadn't seen the appeal. It seemed awkward and slightly uncomfortable, if she was being honest. But now, imagining herself on his lap, fully naked with his cock pulled free of his suit? Lowering her body down but not being allowed to move? To work her hips? Being at his mercy until *he* was ready to fuck her? He could command her to stay still, seeing just how much she could take and how long she could take it for. He could hold her hips tight until she was desperate to move, challenging her to be a good little witch and follow his directions, all while being impaled on him.

She could, she let out a shaky exhale before realizing how quickly she'd lost herself to another fantasy. Warmth was blooming between her legs, a deep and familiar ache beginning to build. *Gods*. He was turning her into an absolute mess.

“Kneel.”

Malfoy’s commanding tone sent a spike of heady fear through Hermione’s veins. When she’d arrived at their room at The Scarlet Order, he’d been ready and waiting for her. Sitting casually in the same chair they had enjoyed during their last visit, he didn’t wait for her to make herself comfortable before giving her his first order.

His legs were resting wide, one foot set closer than the other, and his arms were spread across the leather-bound arms. His suit was a dark blue, and the color reflected in his eyes like the cold waves of the sea. When she didn’t immediately obey, he lifted a pale eyebrow.

“I will not repeat myself.”

Hermione spurred herself into motion, moving to the center of the room. The coffee table was gone, and in its place sat a thin black cushion. More of a pillow, almost, except it was flat and square, and Hermione immediately understood the assignment. She’d seen photos of this—with submissives carefully posed in a variety of stances—to show their obedience and understanding.

With a swallow, she slowly lowered her body onto the floor, pressing her knees and shins into the pillow. When she began to sit back onto her heels, he raised a hand.

“Stop,” he ordered. His eyes raked over her, obviously appraising her appearance. She’d left her hair in its braid from her bout of housework that afternoon, but she’d chosen a simple grey dress for their meeting instead of her ratty old denims and stained t-shirt. It wasn’t anything special, but the memory of his easy access to her legs during their last visit was enough for her to ensure that she never wore anything that might restrict her movement, or his hands.

He blinked a few times, mulling over his next order. She squirmed under his gaze, and as soon as her hands fisted in her skirt, his eyes sharpened. “Take it off.”

“Already?” She felt her eyes widening, panic beginning to set in. This was faster than anything they’d done before—no warmup, no preamble, no introduction to let her get used to him.

Apparently, he was done waiting.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Unless you came here for something else tonight?”

Earlier in the week, he hadn’t responded once she sent him back her updated list of interests. His only other owl had contained a sharply written message—to consider her safe word.

Have your safe word ready by Saturday. You’ll need it soon enough, so make it count.

D.M.

Clearing her throat, Hermione pressed her shoulders back and raised her chin. His eyes flashed with surprise at the action, but she continued. “No. Just curious why—”

“Curious why I’m suddenly ordering you around? Like your Dom *should?*” Malfoy leaned forward, his elbows dropping to his knees as he gave her a hard look. In her position on the floor, they were almost eye to eye. “Isn’t this what you thought about, last week? That you *fantasized*

about, over there by the bookshelf? That I'd take you by surprise and not give you a chance to say no? Or have you changed your mind?"

Her answer was a slow shake of her head. *No.* No, she hadn't.

"Or maybe you forgot when I told you that if you chose this, with me, there would be no going back. You didn't seem to have a problem with it when I was fucking your soft little palm. Was this not what you wanted? What you meant by agreeing to be mine when you begged to get your hands on my cock?"

Her hands itched at the memory, and she swallowed, feeling like she'd been caught in a web. He was right, about all of it.

"I meant it."

"Good." The word was clipped. "Then consider this your first official lesson in becoming my submissive. I'd like to see how well you've studied."

My submissive. The term had heat fluttering through her abdomen, mixing with the cold anxiety of this new unknown with him. It pulled her in two directions, unsure if she wanted more or if she should run.

Logic said one thing, but the will of her body was stronger. When she didn't reply, he tilted his head slightly.

"You were instructed to decide on your safe word. Did you?"

Another spike of apprehension buried any building arousal, and Hermione rolled her lips between her teeth. Her idea, which had seemed so clever just that morning, turned sour under his hard gaze.

"Well?" he prompted.

She let her eyes fall down to the cushion beneath her knees, and counted to three to build her resolve. She found it, nestled deep in her chest, and raised her eyes back up until they met his.

"Buckbeak."

Malfoy's reflexes were quick, but not fast enough to mask the surprise that flashed across his features. His lips pursed, and he slowly lifted an eyebrow at her as he processed the word.

"Clever."

He paused, shaking his head and running his tongue across the sharp point of his incisor. Hermione's gaze caught on it, the expression so confident and predatory that she couldn't stop herself from dropping down to her heels just to put a bit more space between them. She could feel her heart thumping in the vein in her neck, pulsing as she waited for his reaction. She thought, perhaps rather naively, that they would discuss it first. Not that she would have to drop to her knees and admit it to him from the floor. Embarrassment began to heat the tips of her ears—not quite from the failed joke, but the way he'd put her on display to fail.

She *hated* failing.

Slowly, without looking away, he lifted himself to stand in front of her. His stance was wide and commanding, and Hermione had to crane her neck back to look up at him.

“Proud of yourself for that one?” he asked, dropping his voice low. It wasn’t accusatory, but it wasn’t entertained, either.

Hermione lifted a shoulder. “I thought it was funny, yes.”

“You know,” he started, taking a step to the side to circle her body. His hand trailed over her curls from the side, and she suppressed a shiver at the delicate touch. It was in direct conflict with his hard demeanor, but she had a feeling that was his intention. To keep her on her toes, wondering what he might do next. “Other Doms might see that as a sign of disrespect.”

“Do you?” she asked, glancing up when he came around to her other side.

“Would you care?” It was a challenge, judging by the way he crossed his arms.

Yes. The answer bubbled up before she could think it through. Yes, she would care if he was offended, or disrespected. He’d been clear that their arrangement was built on trust, which, by her definition, was an extension of respect. So far, he’d done nothing but respect her, and it didn’t feel right to purposefully offend him when he had been so understanding.

“I would, yes.”

His hand reached down to brush his knuckle against her jaw. “And that, my darling, is why I won’t spank you raw tonight.”

Hermione sucked in a shocked breath, looking away quickly. Her heart was still pounding, but any residual embarrassment began to ebb away with the flush of heat from his words. She still hadn’t forgotten how good his hand had felt on her backside that night, and how it made her cunt pulse with every slap.

As an apology, she lifted her hand to her side to release the zip of her dress. Once open, she fisted her skirt once more and pulled it over her head, dropping it into an untidy pile by the couch.

Malfoy’s stoic expression turned warm, his lips pulling up into a satisfied smile. “Good girl, Hermione.”

His words made her heart flutter, but she wasn’t entirely sure if it was from the praise or the way he used her first name alongside it. Like he was directly referencing *her* in a way that he couldn’t with the nickname he’d used as a child. Was that the same way he felt when she said his given name, too?

“Put your hands on your knees, palms down,” he instructed her next, stepping back in front of her to drop back into the chair. She did as directed, pushing her shoulders back with a deep breath. Her skin was beginning to pebble in the cool air of the room, almost totally exposed save for her black bra and knickers. It wasn’t fancy lace or silk, and was really rather basic, but it at least matched. Most of her underthings were more practical than pretty, but Draco’s eyes roamed over her body with obvious appreciation anyway.

Leaning back, he took his time as he drank her in. His gaze lingered on the freckles that dotted her shoulders and chest, dipping down to her cleavage before sweeping down her abdomen and pausing

at her thighs. Her hips shifted of their own accord, arousal beginning to pool between her legs as he looked at her. The look he gave her was crystal clear—he was hungry for her.

“Beautiful. Shift your knees open a little wider.”

When she did, he nodded. It exposed her core to a cool draft of air, and Hermione’s cheeks blushed at the sensation of it. If she’d been totally naked, he would likely see her beginning to grow wet.

And all from him telling me what to do.

Shaking her hair off her shoulders, she readied herself for his next command. When he licked his lips, Hermione felt her lower abdomen tighten.

“Hands behind your head, arms out. Lace your fingers together.”

The position pushed her chest out, stretching her breasts until they were straining against the cups of her bra. Her nipples tightened and her breath began to grow shallow, but she held strong.

Draco moved his hand to his jaw, casually running his thumb across his lower lip. Several of his fingers were wrapped with thick metal rings, and the light glinted off a monogrammed *M* when his hand paused in the light. His eyes were growing dark as he watched her, and she could see the bulge growing in his trousers.

“Tell me what you’re thinking right now.”

Again, it wasn’t a question. When Hermione managed to find the words, her voice sounded weaker than she’d have liked.

“Your mouth on my chest,” she answered truthfully. She could imagine it—his hot tongue, lathing across her nipples, licking and sucking and biting the sensitive flesh while she suppressed her needy whimpers. He would tease her as she struggled to hold the pose, and would reward her with squeezes to her hips, her ribs, her waist when she succeeded.

He made an amused noise, but if it was accompanied by a smile, it was hidden by his hand. “Good to know we’re on the same page, then. Take off your bra for me, please.”

Hermione’s fingers trembled as she moved, her arms shifting and twisting so she could reach the clasp. Nervousness sparked beneath her ribs, and she focused on the task at hand instead of letting the embarrassment creep back in. This wasn’t like before, when she’d been so worked up she hadn’t cared if she was naked or that he had vanished every scrap of fabric *for* her with a flick of his wand.

Now, she was aware of every aching move. Of every inch of skin she exposed to him, and how voluntary it was. She was choosing this, with him, for him. Once her bra was dropped to the pile with her dress, she knotted her fingers in her lap.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, and she felt her nipples tighten even further under his stare.

“Thank you.” As her chest rose and fell with her breathing, his eyes tracked each move with steady focus. Hermione shifted, drawing her arms closer together in her lap until her palms were pressed tight, and his attention snapped up to her face.

“Granger,” he said, like a warning, and her chest flooded with heat. The action had pressed her breasts together, jutting them out further for inspection, and Draco’s nostrils flared. “I’m inches away from tossing you back onto the floor and fucking you so hard you’ll have friction burns on your back for the next week. Your teasing is not helping my restraint.”

“I’m sorry.” She wasn’t.

“You’re not,” he called her out, just as quickly as she had thought it, and she couldn’t hide the coy smile that stretched across her lips.

His earlier words had her hips shifting, an ache growing deep in her pelvis. Though this was their fourth time at The Scarlet Order together, they still hadn’t had sex. They hadn’t even *kissed*, for Merlin’s sake, and her smile fell away.

“If you want it so badly, why haven’t you pushed for more? Isn’t that what this is supposed to be about?” She only briefly considered keeping quiet, but she needed to know.

Draco leaned forward, and he was close enough that she could see the black beginning to ebb from the grey of his eyes.

“This,” he paused, looking down at her body in a slow perusal, “is about you. Remember? Learning? Taking you apart, piece by piece, so I can see what makes you tick? So I can put you back together and make you tick *better*? ”

Hermione huffed out a frustrated breath and dug her fingers into her thighs. “You’re scared I still don’t want you.”

His eyebrows lifted at the accusation. “Oh, darling, trust me—I know you do. I can see it in your face every time I give you a command. Your eyes blow out every time I call you my good girl and tell you how lovely you are. I can see it in the way your body responds to the mere *sight* of me, whether you want to or not. You don’t think I’ve caught on to the way you bite your lip or shift your hips when you start to grow wet for me? You think I don’t know every thought that’s in your head, at this very moment? I promise you this—I know more than you think I do, and the sooner you accept that, the better this will be.”

By the time he was finished speaking, Hermione had grown breathless. It was true, all of it.

“What am I thinking now, then?”

Cocking his head to the side, Draco took his time answering, his tongue wetting his lower lip while she waited.

“That you’re frustrated at the power imbalance, as much as you love it.”

Frustration pushed her to want to rise up to a standing position, because he was right. She reveled in it almost as much as she hated it. He continued.

“I think you’re less worried about why I haven’t fucked you yet, and more concerned with the fact that I haven’t kissed you. That I haven’t given you the casual intimacy that you’re used to with other men, so that you can put me in a neat and tidy little box with everyone else.”

“That’s not true,” Hermione sputtered, but she heard the lie in her voice.

Pressing his lips together, he gave her a disbelieving look. He settled his elbows on his knees further, his stance still comfortable and casual considering she was mostly naked and on her knees in front of him.

“No? You don’t want me to kiss you then?”

The words caught in her throat, and she knew there was no way for her to answer without incriminating herself. Part of her, the soft and needy part, needed his mouth on hers. She wanted to know what his lips would feel like, working against her own. Would he be rough and forceful? Would his lips be soft and coaxing?

“Answer me, Hermione.”

His command had her exhaling, deflating as she looked away from him. “Yes. I do. Is that so bad? Is it so terrible that I want something normal and familiar from all this?”

“Not at all.” His features softened just slightly. “But if you want something, I expect you to use your words.”

“Why should I have to if you’re so smart that you already know what I’m thinking?” she challenged, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

At her response, his chest expanded on an inhale, and he slowly stood again. He didn’t look at her immediately, and instead began to take off his suit jacket. Once it was carefully draped over the arm of the chair, his fingers went to the silver cufflinks on his shirt.

“Stand up.”

She didn’t need to be told twice, rising to her feet unsteadily. Her legs had started to tingle, and she had to clench her teeth while the blood flow returned.

“Go to the other side of the couch, please, facing me. Put your arms on the back.”

Dread began to curdle in her stomach, but she followed his instructions. By the time she was in place, he’d removed both cufflinks and had started rolling his shirt sleeves up to his elbows, exposing the pale skin of his forearms. Her breath caught in her throat when he dropped his arm to the side, and she saw the faded, blurry outline of his Dark Mark. It was marred, almost like a dark, mottled scar that had sunk below the surface of his skin.

“I usually glamour it,” he said as he moved around the couch to join her. “Does it bother you?”

His tone was incredibly casual for the position they were in. If she would have been blindfolded, she’d have wondered if he was asking her if the weather bothered her instead of the proof of his mistakes.

“I—” She hesitated, swallowing past the lump in her throat. Whether it was from apprehension over what he was about to do next, or the Dark Mark, she wasn’t sure. “Not as much as I thought it would.”

In the end, she chose honesty. It was still an ugly, horrid looking thing, but it didn’t fill her with disgust or terror like she thought it might. It was changed, obviously, as if he’d tried to get rid of it, and no longer the same as it once was.

Like him, she thought as he stepped behind her.

“Thank you for your honesty, darling,” he said, meeting her eyes when she glanced back over her shoulder. “But I am afraid I misspoke earlier when I said I wouldn’t be spanking you raw.”

“What?!” She tried to scramble away, but his hands came down to lock her hips in place before she could even take a step.

“It’s not just a punishment, I promise.” His voice was faintly amused, but the hold he had her in didn’t allow for her to turn around. “Though it may feel like it to begin. Consider it a lesson, a punishment, and a reward, all in one.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why I—” she tried to say, desperately clamoring for an apology. She knew she’d been combative, but the regret was coming just a bit too late.

Cutting her off, he nudged her legs further apart. “Why you push? Yes you do. You’re holding on to any scrap of power you can get your hands on. But you forget that the reason I’m here is because you want someone to take it away from you. That’s your problem, Hermione. You forget that I’ll *always* give you what you want, even if you resist.”

His palm came down between her shoulder blades, pressing her forward until her cheek was pressed against the leather of the couch and her back was completely straight. With her feet wide apart and her hips jutted out, she scrambled to dig her fingers into the back of the couch so she didn’t topple forward.

“Mmm, I don’t think so,” he chastised her. She felt his hand leave her back, and there was a rustle of fabric. “Hands crossed behind your hips.”

Carefully, slowly, she followed his instruction. The familiar sense of fear was swirling in her chest, and she took several steady breaths to calm her racing heart. When his hand wrapped around her wrists, she jolted.

“Steady,” he coaxed, but she only stiffened further when she felt something cold and hard wrap loosely around her wrists. Craning her neck, she saw a strip of black, and her heart dropped. His belt.

“No,” she whispered. “Please, I—”

“You’re afraid.” His own voice was calm as he spoke, tightening the leather around her wrists until they were bound. “But I promise you that it’s okay. You said you’d try light bondage, did you not? And you have your safe word if you need it. Now pull.”

She felt two light taps to her left hand. Tentatively, she tugged. The belt was looped around her wrists in a way that she could feel a slight gap between the leather and her skin, and she wiggled her hands around. The fear began to ebb when she realized that it wasn’t very tight at all—it was somewhat snug, but loose enough that she could likely pull her hands free if she kept trying. It wouldn’t be easy or immediate, but it was definitely possible.

He’d tied her up and given her just enough slack to get loose if she needed.

She exhaled in relief, her cheek pressing harder into the couch. “Thank you.”

The belt was still heavy on her skin, and she couldn't resist trying a little harder to pull her hands free. When her palm began to slip through the leather, she stopped. As soon as she pushed it back through, Draco gave her hip an assessing squeeze.

"Good. The moment you pull free, this ends, Hermione, just as I would if you used your safeword. You have to choose to submit... Can you do that for me?"

He was giving her one last out. Her knees were beginning to shake, and she shifted her weight to steady herself.

"Yes," she said finally.

Draco's hand drifted up to her waist, his palm sliding across her skin. His other hand came to join, caressing her body with ease. He was comfortable exploring, his fingers dipping around her ribs and stomach, down to the waistband of her knickers before moving back up again. It was warming her skin with every pass, and when he leaned forward just slightly to cup one of her hanging breasts, she bit her lip to hold back the noise that squeaked through her throat.

Leaning over her, his hips were pressed into her arse, and she felt him thrust forward just slightly at the same time he pinched her nipple.

"Oh!" She stiffened, her body immediately pushing back against his. Heat rushed through her, feeling his cock through his suit, and she screwed her eyes closed when his other hand came up to give her other breast the same treatment.

"The other two poses I had you in were more for resting or display purposes," Draco started, pulling himself back up. "Though I've always been particularly fond of this one, since it works well when you're standing or kneeling."

In the pose, she was completely at his mercy, and a thrill ran through her body when his hands came back to rest on her hips, his fingers hooking through the sides of her knickers. "Let's take these off then, shall we?"

He pulled the material from her body in one swift movement, leaving them pooled around her ankles. When one palm came to rest on her arse, she couldn't help but to tilt her hips up, arching her back so she was presented to him. It was a natural instinct to sink into, and his fingers gripped her tight.

Draco let out a sharp exhale.

"Fuck," he bit out the curse. "You look perfect, darling. But you're about to look even better."

Before she could wonder what he meant, his left hand came up to wrap firmly around the belt that held her hands together. It pulled her arms down further, effectively limiting any movement she might've had. "Count for me," he instructed, his other hand coming down to slap the soft flesh of her arse immediately.

Hermione cried out at the sudden, sharp flash of pain. "One."

She strained under his hold, but he didn't stop. "Two."

On the third, he paused, his hand pressing against her flesh. It was beginning to sting, the blush of heat starting to burn slightly. From her memory, it would get worse before it got better.

“You’re a smart girl,” he said, switching hands so he could focus on the other side. “Tell me, why would it be important that you tell me what you want?”

Fighting to find the words, she sagged against the couch. It dug into her cheek and muffled her words, but she knew the answer already from her research. Which he very well knew, too.

“Clear communication is necessary for—” his palm came down on the crease between her arse and thigh, and she stuttered over the words. “—for partners to avoid making mistakes with boundaries or desires. So someone doesn’t get hurt.”

Another spank, and she continued. “Five.”

“Good. But there’s another reason, as well.”

She counted the next hit, then another, and the burn bled into an inferno. Her breath was coming in short pants, and she shifted her weight between her feet in anticipation of the next blow.

Draco paused. “I pride myself on being an observant man, Hermione. It was ingrained in me from a young age—I had to be cunning, to make sure that I was a step ahead no matter what. But just because I am capable of seeing your tells and anticipating your needs, it doesn’t mean that I don’t need your confirmation of it. I need to know that *you* value this just as much as I do. That you value me enough to tell me what you want.”

The longer he stopped, the more her skin tingled, the heat building through her pelvis and settling between her legs.

“I did, and you didn’t believe me.” Tears began to prickle at the corner of her eyes, and she blinked rapidly to clear them. Emotions were starting to clog her throat, counteracting the arousal in her lower body, and her head began to swim. It didn’t make sense—why was she getting weepy while he spanked her?

Emotional release. The realization came a thought too late, remembering several references to it from her research before she’d applied to The Scarlet Order. A dominant partner could initiate an emotional release by force, mixing pain and pleasure to overwhelm the body’s senses until everything came tumbling out. With the bleed of emotions, she realized with stunning clarity that his disbelief of her desires *hurt*. He hadn’t taken her at her word, and though she could understand him from a logical perspective, he’d still rebuffed her advances.

Was that why she pushed? Was that why she still felt the need to resist him instead of giving in? Or was it something more?

Before she could let her mind take the lead, his voice brought her back into the moment, his tone gentle. “It wasn’t that I didn’t believe you. It’s that I needed *you* to be completely sure first. Taking advantage of you during a moment of weakness... I couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t. I’m not that man.”

She knew he was right. Even though her desire for him had become clearer, it was still tangled up with several different other emotions that she was struggling to address. She was still suspicious of him, yes, but she’d believed every word he said. She was incredibly attracted to the man he’d become, and turned helpless under his hard stare and firm hand. He wasn’t like any other man she

might have dreamed of being with, and he was everything she should have hated. She shouldn't want him, or the things he was offering, but she did.

In her silence, he spoke again. "I may be the dominant one in this scenario, but we both have our own power, Hermione. I need you to remember that. I am here to make you feel good, to learn what it takes to dig deep and find the pleasure that you crave so badly. But you have your own power when you give me that control. You try so hard to push me, to *fight* it, and yet you refuse to realize that every move I make is only *allowed* through your permission."

Furrowing her brows, she tried to look back at him, but could only catch a glimpse of his face. *Did she? Did she really still have that kind of power? Even when she was tied up?*

"Three more. Are you ready?"

Gritting her teeth, she braced herself with another nod. "Yes."

They were softer than the previous ones, but each spank still made her nerves flash with white hot pain. Because the blood had had time to settle beneath the surface of her skin, she was even more sensitive, flinching with each hit. "Eight. Nine. Ten."

"You were such a good girl, darling. You did so well," Draco praised her, running his hand softly over her burning skin. His fingers dipped between her legs, slicking through the wetness easily. He gave her a moment to recover, softly stroking between her folds. An ache grew through the hurt, and she shuddered. "Are you ready for your reward now?"

She nodded, her cheek moving against the couch, but he didn't acknowledge it.

"I want to hear it."

Licking her lips, she tried again. "Yes, Draco."

His response was a soft squeeze of her hip.

"You turn the most beautiful shade of pink when you get flushed. It makes me want to taste every single one of those little freckles on your skin," he said, his other hand releasing his hold on the belt that had her wrists tied together. She rolled her shoulders, eyes fluttering closed at the praise, and shifted her hips back. The ache that had been growing between her legs was starting to throb, an emptiness that had her craving his touch, but she was almost afraid to speak for risking whatever he had planned.

She wanted to be his good girl. She wanted to do well, to please him, to take what he wanted to offer her because he knew she would love every second.

"Since I'm feeling generous, I'm going to let you choose. My mouth, or my cock. You wanted them both, did you not?"

Hermione groaned, rolling her head forward until her forehead was pressed into the leather instead of her cheek. The flesh between her legs was pulsing with every rapid beat of her heart, and she struggled to keep her wits about her. His fingers were still softly stroking her, but he didn't allow her enough pressure to relieve any of the tension. It only made her strain towards him further, working her hips as he nudged her clit and swept back up again.

"I can't have both?" she begged, pleading as he teased her. She wanted it all—she wanted his hands gripping her hard while she rode his lap, his mouth on hers while he fucked up into her. She wanted him over top of her, thrusting so hard that she would be pushed across the floor, her moans muffled by his lips. She wanted to be consumed by him, wholly and completely, all at once.

"You can have both when you earn it." He slapped her cunt, and she seized at the shock of pleasure that spiked through her body. "Now choose."

Hermione choked on a gasp, straining forward for another. "Fuck me. Please—Draco—"

She was going to fall to her knees if he didn't give her *something* soon, something to ease the burning ache between her legs. She would worry about his kisses later.

Draco hummed in amusement, his fingers returning to their easy, long strokes. She keened when he teased her entrance, dipping them inside just enough for her to feel the pressure before withdrawing. He repeated the action a few times, her eyes drifting closed, and she struggled to keep herself from rocking back further onto his hand.

"I'm going to fuck you just like this," he told her, pulling his hand away. She heard him move behind her, and the quick mutter of a charm. "Watch, Hermione. Open your eyes."

Opening her eyes, she looked to the side, inhaling sharply when she recognized what he'd done.

To their left, propped up against the wall, was a conjured mirror. It was large—taller than them both, and wide enough that she could see both of their bodies from her vantage point. Even from a distance she could spy the red blush on her backside and thighs, her nude form in direct conflict with his dress clothes. His trim trousers and rolled up sleeves sent a spike of arousal through her, and she bit down on her lip to muffle her whimper.

"Are you ready for me? Or do you need more of a warmup?" he asked as his hands began to work at his trousers, taking his time as he undid the button and lowered the zipper. Standing behind her, his legs wide, he glanced between her body and the mirror. When he met her gaze, his mouth lifted just slightly as he waited for her answer.

"I'm ready," she nodded, unashamed of her eagerness once more. It was beginning to feel like she might suffocate from the desire if he didn't give it to her soon, and she didn't want to wait any longer—she would beg him, if she had to. It was a miracle how he could get her so out of her mind, but she loved it. There were few times in life when she could fall back completely on instinct alone and not get tripped up by her mind or her thoughts making her second guess each and every choice she made. But this, with him, was one of the most freeing things she'd ever experienced. "I want it now, Draco. Please."

He glanced back down at her, licking his lips as he fisted his cock and pulled it free from his boxers. "So needy," he murmured, almost to himself, as he ran the head of his erection through her folds.

"Is this what you want?" He rubbed the tip against her clit, and she whined at the sensation.

"Yes," she gasped. "I want it. I want you."

"Are you sure you can take it?"

Hermione almost couldn't answer, her gaze locked on the sight of their bodies so close to joining. Draco had only pulled his shirt and boxers out of the way, staying fully clothed to give her what she was begging for. Like he couldn't be bothered to undress—the only important thing was getting inside her. The thought made her clench, and she pushed back against him.

"Yes, I have my safeword—I can get out. I can take—"

Before she could finish coming up with reasons to prove to him that she was ready, he pushed inside her with one smooth, forceful stroke. She shrieked at the feel of him stretching her inner walls, and her hands fisted, straining for purchase but finding nothing but air.

"Yes, you can." The words were practically a growl as he struggled to stay still, and Hermione watched, completely enthralled, as his form stiffened. The mirror was showing her everything—the impressive length of his cock all the way to the strain in his shoulders. She was only halfway impaled on him, and she could tell he was struggling not to push much further than he already had. To help, she began to rock her hips back and forth, beginning to fuck herself on him. With every movement he slid a little easier, the head of his erection catching and pushing as she worked her hips.

"Fuck," he cursed, his head dropping back. It took him a moment to compose himself, but when he did, his hands tightened around her hips. She felt something hard press into the skin above her hipbone as he gripped her tight. "Ready, darling?"

She didn't have time to answer before he thrust into her, seating himself to the hilt the rest of the way. The cry that came from her chest sounded broken and wounded, but she couldn't care—the feeling of him, *finally*—was enough to make her want to sob in relief.

"Yes, Draco, yes," she chanted as he started fucking her, giving her long, hard strokes with a steady rhythm. It shoved her forward, pushing her cheek into the back of the couch until she started pushing back against him. She could feel every inch of him as he drove into her, giving her everything she'd begged for.

"Is this what you wanted? Is this what your greedy little cunt needed?" he taunted her. "Me, fucking you like you've been dying for it?"

She tried to keep her eyes open, to watch as he fucked her without mercy, but it felt too good. Pleasure washed through her with every snap of his hips, and she could feel herself fluttering and clenching around him each time he hit the sensitive spot at the front of her pelvis. With her hips tilted up and his hands holding her in place, she was powerless to take what he wanted to give her.

And she loved it.

"Yes," she finally answered, struggling to catch her breath. Her nerves were on fire, and each stroke was only serving to send her spiraling closer and closer toward her orgasm. With everything so sensitized from the spanking, it wasn't going to take her long. "I wanted it so bad, I needed it—"

His pace faltered just slightly at the truth in her words, his fingers digging in even harder to her hip. She winced against the pain, but it only added to her pleasure. The bite of his ring into the soft skin was enough to remind her of who was fucking her, and why, and her legs clenched automatically.

"I thought I knew," he muttered, and her eyes opened back up to watch him once more. He wasn't looking at their reflection, as she was, but instead his gaze was locked to where their bodies joined.

He kept thrusting, watching himself as drove her wild. She followed the pace he set, her hips working in tandem with his, though she didn't have a choice with the way his hands guided her with every push and pull. "I thought I could handle this, could handle—fuck—"

His hips stuttered again when she tightened her inner muscles around him, and his head snapped up. Draco's eyes found hers in the mirror, and his features twisted into something dangerous.

"You don't want to try me right now, darling."

A red flush was beginning to bloom on the pale skin of his neck, a stark contrast to his complexion and the white of his shirt. His hair was slightly disheveled from his punishment, and a few strands had fallen down over his forehead. He looked more tousled and unkempt than she'd ever seen him, and the understanding that it was *for* her, *because* of her, was enough to make her feel braver than she should have.

A thrill shot through her, doubling down on the pleasure racing through her veins. His words were a threat, and she wanted it. Tied up in his belt and bent over the couch, she was already at his mercy... *What else could he have in store for her?*

Her response was another purposeful grip of his cock, straining harder and tighter with her core than she'd managed so far.

Draco lifted his brow, going still immediately. "You asked for it, you little tease."

Before she could process the threat, he moved, leaning forward and hauling her upper body up and against his chest. With her hands still bound behind her back, she was even more helpless—now she was stuck in his arms, unable to fight, and with even less room to slip free if she needed. The knowledge made her panic spike, but it had the opposite reaction than she anticipated—the fear added to her arousal, mixing it into something potent and intoxicating.

"I felt that," he bit the words out into her ear, his breath hot on the sensitive skin. "I felt you get wetter around my cock as soon as you realized I had you."

Her answer was a moan, and he thrust up into her with as much force as he could manage.

"Did you know," he kept talking as he resumed his pace, one arm wrapping around her chest and neck while the other drifted down her stomach. His fingers buried themselves in her folds, seeking out her clit. Gone were the teasing, light touches—now, he had a singular focus. "That all I was able to think about this week was fucking you? After getting you naked on my lap, the only thing I could focus on was what it would feel like when I finally emptied myself inside that pretty little cunt of yours."

Hermione's eyes drifted closed, her head falling back on his shoulder. His words were driving her wild, but his fingers were doing even more. His middle finger was rubbing careful circles around the sensitive nub, giving her just the right amount of pressure to make her body writhe against his. She had less leverage in the new position, and she could feel the telltale signs of her orgasm building.

"Do you like that?" he asked her, nipping at her ear. When she managed a shaky nod, he rewarded her with a harder, deeper thrust. "Of course you do. But so do I. I brought myself off more than once thinking about it. About how badly I wanted to mark you with my come, so that you *knew* your body belonged to me."

She knew she should have been ashamed by how hot his confession made her, but she wanted it—she wanted to feel his cock pulsing inside her, filling her completely. There was something illicit about it, something dirty and taboo that came with *wanting* a man's come. She felt it like a primal urge, and she moaned against him again.

"Yes—yes—" she answered as he continued to fuck her. Helpless to stop herself from voicing her thoughts out loud. "I want it, I want it too."

Almost as if she'd given him permission, Draco let loose. He didn't hold back, fucking her with punishing strokes that had her lifting up on to the tips of her toes. His finger worked in steady tandem, driving her higher with each swipe of his finger. He didn't relent, even when she tried to wiggle away, and her pleasure twisted low in her stomach. It built, swirling and tightening, until she could feel herself beginning to crest. Remembering his order from the last time they were together, she tightened down on him.

"Draco," she keened his name. "Draco, please, I'm going to—"

"Come for me," he commanded, keeping his finger steady on her clit. "Be a good girl and come on my cock. I want to feel you squeezing me—show me how badly you want it."

And she did. Her orgasm shattered over her, her muscles tightening through her body as pleasure burst through her. It skittered across her nerve endings, flooding her veins with warmth and fire, and she cried out as he fucked her through it. She barely registered her hands fisting in the front of his shirt, twisting and pulling at the fabric as she thrashed against him. His cock continued to hit the sensitive spot in her pelvis, prolonging her orgasm with every pass, and she shuddered with aftershocks as her body struggled to come down.

"You're so fucking perfect," he praised her, pressing kisses against her neck as she whimpered.
"You were made for—for this."

Draco's own pace began to falter, and Hermione struggled to catch her breath. He didn't slow, but the steady, hard thrusts became shallower, and he pulled out just slightly until the head of his cock was massaging the sensitive area near her entrance.

"Oh, Gods," she whined. It sent another wave of pleasure through her, though not as strong as her first orgasm, but a faint echo of it. It made her tighten, and his chest vibrated as he groaned her name.

His hold loosened around her chest just enough for his hand to bracket her throat, but he didn't squeeze. He held her in place against him, his hips beginning to stutter as he approached his own climax.

Hermione tried to breathe through her nose, focusing on tightening her core with every pass of his cock. She could feel her tissues were swollen and oversensitized, but she needed this—she needed to feel him falling apart behind her.

"Please," she begged. "Please—"

Draco's head dropped to her shoulder the moment his body seized, going almost completely still save for the slight rocking of his hips as he came. She could feel the hot spike of it between her legs, warmth flooding through her with each pulse of his cock. His breath panted across her bare

skin, and she shuddered—she was his, completely. Even if it was just in that room, in that moment, but the realization was enough to make her want to sag into his embrace.

After several long moments, his hands loosened their hold on her, and he braced them against her hips. “Hold on for me for just a moment, darling.”

She winced when he pulled himself out, his finger digging into a tender spot on her hip. She glanced down, seeing a spot of red, but it wasn’t until he had loosened her hands from his belt that she was able to lean forward enough to see what it was.

Imprinted there, where he had been gripping her so tight, was a tiny *M* bruised into her skin.

His signet ring.

Though she was still flushed from her orgasm, she turned to look at him in shock as he began to set his clothes back to right. His chest lifted with every heavy breath, but his eyes were still burning with interest as he took in her body and slowly rebuttoned his trousers.

His satisfied look answered her unspoken question, and he stepped forward to frame her face in his palms once he was buttoned back up. Now that she was aware of it, one of his rings was turned around backwards, just in the right way to press into her like a temporary brand. It was warm against her cheek as he gripped her face. “You already know I’m a petty, spoiled man who doesn’t like to share my things, but I have a bruise salve from the apothecary if you’d like to get rid of it.”

He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, and her eyes drifted closed. She was warm and sated after the orgasm, and she couldn’t find it in her to be angry at him. Perhaps later, when she was back in her right mind, but she was helpless to lean into his embrace once he wrapped one arm around her back and leaned down to sweep her legs out from underneath her.

She squeaked with surprise as he picked her up, carrying her back around to the front of the couch, but as soon as her backside came into contact with the rough wool of his trousers, she hissed in pain.

It wasn’t bruised, but her skin was still slightly raw. Almost like a sunburn, she could feel the heat of it more than she realized before.

“It will also help with that,” he added. Once she was settled on his lap, he began running his hands down her arms and thighs, keeping her warm and relaxed. Hermione’s eyes grew heavy, and she grumbled against his chest.

“You’re a prat.”

“I know,” Draco laughed. She could feel his mouth press against the crown of her head, his nose nestled into her curls. “That’s news to no one, darling. Now, tell me—how do you feel?”

Honestly, she felt *tired*. Completely drained, but in the best way. Her limbs were heavy and loose, and she couldn’t find any fight in her to resist Draco’s physical affection. It felt right, soothing some strange spot deep in her chest that she didn’t know needed to feel the calm strength of his embrace.

She searched for the right words, blinking slowly as her sluggish mind tried to catch up. “Content. Tired. Drained.”

“All good things,” he mused. She could hear the slight smile in his voice as he shifted his hold.

Hermione knew she should be looking for her clothes and getting dressed so she could leave. He wouldn’t want her draped over his lap for too much longer.

“I should go before I fall asleep again.” She tried to resist the pull, but her body felt too heavy. It was like he’d fucked all the fight out of her.

Maybe just a few minutes wouldn’t hurt...

He reached to the side, and she opened her eyes to see him grab his wand. With a wave of his wand, he summoned a blanket from the chest against the far wall, then a tin from his jacket pocket. Once in hand, he draped the blanket over her, and she watched with sleepy, heavy lids as he dipped his fingers into the waxy yellow substance.

“This will be warm,” he warned her, but his voice dropped into a low whisper as his hand ducked beneath the blanket and began to rub small circles into the sensitive skin on her backside. It was warm, and tingled just slightly, and she sighed into his chest. “My job as your Dom isn’t just to tie you up and fuck you, you know. It’s to take care of you in every way while we’re together. Let me do this.”

Aftercare. She smiled at the memory of his insistence of it, that day in her office, dreamily remembering his hand on her hair. Letting herself fall further into his embrace, she let go of any lingering resistance. If he insisted, then it was probably necessary.

“Okay,” she agreed. The last thing she remembered was his hand rubbing soft circles into her skin, soothing the lingering ache.

Harry’s office was a mess.

“Seriously, I don’t know what happened to it,” he told Hermione, running through his hair in agitation. He’d misplaced a case file somehow, and when he couldn’t find it after hours of searching, she was his backup.

With a sigh, she set her hands on her hips. “It’s got to be in here somewhere. Are you sure Cecelia can’t—”

“I’ve got to get Robards’ signature on that release form by the end of the day—I don’t have time to rewrite all those notes from nothing, let alone transcribe them to Cecelia. It took me weeks just to cross reference all those case numbers.”

Harry dropped back into his desk chair with a groan. He was frustrated, and understandably so.

“What did you say it was for?” Hermione asked, moving to the first of several large piles of files and folders on his desk.

It took him a few moments to stand back up, joining her as he sorted through his own pile. One by one they reviewed the folders, setting them into a pile in the middle once they were sure it wasn’t the correct file.

“Some prisoner release petitions,” Harry answered offhandedly. “There’s still a lot of lawyers out there who want to challenge the rulings from the war. They keep claiming the trials were rushed, that Robards pushed things through too quickly.”

Hermione’s hands paused, her heart jumping into her throat. This was her opening—she’d been planning on approaching Harry with her questions, but she hadn’t realized he would create the opportunity for her.

“Is that why Robards won’t give you an extension if you can’t find it?” She covered her curiosity by burying her face in a folder, looking closely at the file numbers before moving on to the next.

Her position in the department was more regulatory—while Harry and the other Aurors focused on *enforcing* their laws, she helped to draft them. She was recruited by Kingsley himself to assist in the review and reformation of wizarding laws, and though she technically worked under Robards as well, she wasn’t nearly as familiar with him as Harry was.

“He’s very...particular.” Harry’s answer was stiff and political, and she hid her smile behind the paperwork.

Ruminating on her next question, she took her time before speaking again. Anxiety was stewing in her stomach, making her mouth grow sour. She didn’t like deceiving one of her best friends, but she would need to tread carefully. “There were a lot of trials at once, though. I can see why they would be capitalizing on an argument like that.”

At the peak of it all, the Wizengamot had been ruling on dozens of cases in a single week. They were overworked, keeping the tribunal running for nearly twelve hours a day. Azkaban had been filled to the brink, and there was no shortage of convictions that needed to be made.

“They were solid convictions,” he assured her, finishing with his pile and moving on to the next. With his back to her, she could breathe a little easier.

Harry had started in the department much sooner than she had, almost immediately after the war, and his experiences with the Wizengamot had been extensive to say the least. Harry made sure to testify at every trial he could, and she remembered the toll it had taken on him when they were all still trying to recover.

“Speaking of,” she said, clearing her throat as she looked through another set of documents. “I know we got interrupted the other week when Malfoy came by, but I meant to ask—whatever ended up happening with his trial? I don’t remember hearing about the specific details. You said he gave up some of his memories?”

It truly pained her to play dumb with her best friend, but she knew it was necessary. If Harry so much as suspected she had an inkling of interest in Malfoy, he would see right through her.

Harry paused, squinting through his glasses at a file before tossing it aside. Letting out a frustrated huff, he continued on. “Honestly, I really don’t know. I was only brought in for my testimony, and he doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Must’ve been something good. Didn’t he have some fairly serious charges?” Hermione moved to the filing cabinet, putting some space between them.

"I think so...yeah," Harry confirmed, though she could tell he was growing distracted. "But Robards sent out a memo to the Auror team when he started consulting that we weren't to discuss it. That we were to focus on how he could 'continue to help the ministry and to move on from the war.'"

Glancing up, she caught the tail end of his air quotes. "That's...odd."

The DMLE department head was notorious for pushing for more transparency within both ranks and processes. It didn't make sense—*why would Robards care about Malfoy and his trial?*

Clarity dawned on her, and she froze. *The missing paperwork in the archives.* Save for the Minister, few people within the Ministry would have the power to control files that went into the archive records. Even fewer employees were directly involved with the arrests and trials of convicted criminals, and there was only a single department that held a voting seat on the Wizengamot committee.

The head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Gawain Robards.

Hermione barely registered Harry's mumbled response from across the room. Her mind was racing through the potential repercussions of what she'd just realized, and it wasn't until she felt a sharp prick of pain against her fingers that she realized she was clutching the papers so hard the edges had nicked her skin. Glancing down, she couldn't register any relief to see that she'd found Harry's missing file.

"Sorry." Hermione blinked to clear her head and loosened her grip before she could get any blood on the edges of the paper. "I missed that last bit?"

Harry let out a dry laugh. "Just a bit of a running joke with a few of us—it *is* odd, because Robards *really* hates Malfoy. Thinks he's a right git, and doesn't care to hide it. You should see his face every time Malfoy comes out of his office. But he keeps paying him to come in as a consultant, so there's got to be something there. I can't imagine Malfoy's giving him a friendly discount on his services, either."

There's got to be something there. Panic flared in her stomach, and Hermione stepped away from the filing cabinet. Her mind was beginning to race, running through the possible scenarios, and her fingers itched for a quill to begin writing it all down.

The missing archive files. The censored trial records. Robards, as the only man with the power to hide such things, having a clear and known dislike for the accused—yet still keeping him on the payroll for some unknown reason, and simultaneously barring his employees from questioning or discussing Malfoy's past.

Suspicion began to eclipse the panic, and she took a few deep breaths before turning back to Harry with her arm outstretched. She had to get back to her office, and quickly. "Found it."

Spinning around to face her, the look of relief on his face was palpable, and his eyes drifted closed on a sigh as he took it. "You're a lifesaver."

"Only once or twice," she teased lightly. "I should get going, though. Let's grab lunch tomorrow?"

"Deal, but I'm buying. I owe you for this." Harry held up the file, waving it in the air, but he was already moving back to his desk.

It wasn't until Hermione was several paces down the hall and out of sight from his office before she let out a strained breath, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. Whatever she'd been expecting from her conversation with Harry, it hadn't been *that*.

Robards was hiding something, perhaps even more so than Malfoy was, and she was determined to figure out what it could be.

Later that night, Hermione stood back from the wall in her office. She'd strung up her articles on Malfoy alongside her notes from her research in the archives. Intertwined were the questions that arose from her conversation that afternoon with Harry, and she took it all in. Though things were starting to weave together she still couldn't find any clear connection, but looking at it in one big picture made things a little less muddled.

First, Malfoy had been charged with enough crimes to send him away to Azkaban for quite a long time. The memories he gave up, in exchange for his and his mother's freedom, must have been well worth *something* of value to the Wizengamot.

Second, Gawain Robards had directly participated in Malfoy's arrest *and* had ruled on his trial committee. Robards had sat through every testimony both for and against Malfoy, and held some amount of open contempt for the man, but at some point he'd had a big enough change of heart that he was willing to not only employ him, but warn off other Ministry employees that Malfoy wasn't to be questioned.

Third, he was one of the few Ministry officials that would have ownership over archive records, and was the most likely candidate responsible for the missing files.

Though she didn't have any proof, her suspicion was beginning to grow clearer. Robards was somehow involved with whatever Malfoy had given up during his trial, and he was *personally* invested in whatever it was. There was no way that the head of the DMLE would become directly involved with a former death eater, unless Robards also had something on the line.

Something that Malfoy must know, and had used as leverage. Something that was worth Robards petitioning *and* convincing the Wizengamot to lessen his charges so he could be a free man, and paying Malfoy whatever "consulting fees" he wanted, just to keep him happy.

But what could it be? What did Malfoy have on him?

Unease was beginning to brew within her. No longer was her interest based on a conflicted sense of curiosity to understand the man she was sleeping with, but was instead growing into something larger and more dangerous now that she knew the Ministry was involved. There was no way she could let this go—she wouldn't stop until she figured out what was going on, and just how far up it went.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

The Wednesday edition of the Prophet had a flashy headline, and it was splashed across every newsstand on Hermione's way to work.

DARLING MALFOY HEIR SPOTTED ABOUT TOWN; AGAIN!

You read that right, readers, Draco Malfoy is becoming the Man About Town he was destined to be. After a long period of social inactivity, it seems the Malfoy heir has come back out of hiding and is gracing London with his presence once more.

This past Saturday evening, Mr. Malfoy was spotted at a local pub with the same mystery brunette we first reported on last month. It was seen by our very own staff reporter that the two spent just over an hour and a half together, sharing the pub's most expensive bottle of wine, before leaving through a private entrance in the back. Though Mr. Malfoy hasn't returned our multiple owls requesting confirmation of the identity of his guest, other pub goers commented that the two were in great spirits together as they laughed and drank throughout the evening.

With his new career work assisting the Ministry of Magic and his budding friendship with Harry Potter, it seems that the young Malfoy is taking quite the strides to reform his image and shuck his Death Eater past.

Given that this is the second occasion we've spotted these two out together, our society editors are certain that we could be seeing a traditional pureblood courting before our very eyes. Could there be a Malfoy wedding on the horizon? Read more on Page Six for our predictions on when we might see the society wedding of the century.

It took everything in Hermione's power not to lose her breakfast on the sidewalk as she stood there, staring down at the photographs like she'd been immobilized. Not even the rough brush of businesspeople on the sidewalk could tear her eyes away. Looping in black and white across dozens of pages, perfectly synced in unison, was the unquestionable proof—it was Malfoy, wearing the same suit and white shirt that she remembered, sitting in a booth beneath a dim light. Even his hair was still slightly messy, one loose strand falling forward onto his forehead as he laughed at his drink.

It was the only indicator of their time together, just an hour or two earlier that same evening, and it was seared in her memory. It was the first thing she'd noticed when he woke her from her contented slumber on his chest, her vision coming to her slowly as she blinked up at him. He'd been smiling down at her, his features gone soft, and the sight of his slightly mussed hair had made her chest flutter.

"There you are," he said, coaxing her back into awareness. Without thinking, she raised her hand to push his hair back into place, but it quickly fell forward again. "Don't bother, it's a lost cause."

It was strange to see him looking at her with such an open expression. He almost looked... fond.

"Come now, it's time to get up. We can't stay here forever." He roused her gently when she tried to close her eyes again. His arms were so strong and warm, and his hands were tracing delicate circles on the bare skin of her arm and thigh that had her floating back towards unconsciousness.

Now, she understood. He'd been eager to wake her after because he had a *date*.

Flexing her fists by her side, she forced herself to look away. Stepping carefully, with one foot in front of the other, she merged back into the crowds bustling to and from the nearby businesses with the morning rush.

Her heart beat a steady tempo in her ears, mirroring her pace, and she struggled to keep calm. She gripped the strap of her bag until it dug into her skin, willing the slight tremble in her hands and legs to go away.

His hair was mussed in that photo because of *her*. Not because of the mystery woman sitting across from him, laughing and drinking over expensive wine. *How could he? How could he have told her those things, then—*

She forced herself to stop. Surely there was an explanation. Surely it wasn't what it looked like. Their entire time together, Malfoy had stressed over and over again the importance of honesty and trust and open communication. He promised her that they would be mutual, and yet he'd immediately left from The Scarlet Order to meet up with another woman. Why would he have made her promise exclusivity if he was only going to turn around and immediately go on a date with someone else?

Her thoughts continued to race as she made her way through the employee entrance of the Ministry, squeezing into the crowded lift until it was her turn to shuffle past the tightly-packed bodies and out into the hallway that led to the DMLE and her office.

It was the same woman. The same woman he'd seen immediately after their first night together, when they hadn't known they'd been paired up until it was too late. A familiar sense of fury curdled in her stomach—was that it? Was he *using* her, and The Scarlet Order, to get his kinks satisfied before going out and courting an acceptable, high society witch? Keeping his dirty little secret tucked away in the dark, then presenting himself as some kind of wholesome, reformed pureblood?

Hermione slammed her bag on her desk as soon as she was close enough, her jaw beginning to ache from the force in which she was gritting her teeth.

It can't be. It can't. The logical, reasonable part of her brain tried to war with her emotions, but it was futile at best. Her anger was burning, scathing hot, and every time she blinked she could see that photo seared into her memory. Amidst it, echoing through her mind, was everything that he'd done to make her pliant. His words, lulling her into trusting him. Confiding in him. *Sleeping* with him, just so he could turn around and—

"Good morning, Miss Granger." Cecelia hustled into Hermione's office with her regular morning tea, oblivious to the way Hermione felt like she was about to burst. "I've got your calendar updated for the day, and the Undersecretary for the Minister sent over some documents they'd like for you to look at—"

While her secretary hustled through her office, Hermione took her tea and inhaled the steam, closing her eyes as she recentered herself. One breath in, one breath out.

He'd made her promise exclusivity, and agreed to it in return, but he'd obviously reneged on his side of the deal.

You should never have trusted him. In her hurry to experience the pleasure that he'd offered, she had overlooked her own sense of self-preservation. She had gone against her instincts, deciding to give into the heady desires that he had to offer, and had forgotten who he truly was at heart.

Cecelia continued, emptying the completed files and memos from her "outgoing" tray and setting the new ones down in the "incoming" tray. "The DRCMC also sent a memo to see if you have any updates regarding their goblin liaison committee? And it looks like the International Magical Cooperation office wants you to make an appearance at their next conference."

"Mmmhmm," she hummed in acknowledgement, though she was barely paying Cecelia any mind. She would look at her updated calendar later.

Briefly, Hermione considered her research on him. Over the few weeks they'd had their *arrangement*, she had never once forgotten that he was hiding something. But somehow, she'd forgotten that his untrustworthiness could extend into their scenes as well.

Two days passed before she heard from him, and in those in-between hours, her anger and annoyance only grew. It never dissipated, always simmering below the surface, and in the quiet moments when she was alone, she would swing wildly between annoyance and regret. She was smarter than that—she never should have let her guard down so easily. He spoke of being a man of his word, but he was apparently the same liar he'd been as a boy.

Even if he wasn't in a relationship with whoever the woman was, he'd all but made her vow to be exclusive with him, even if their arrangement wasn't public. It should have gone without saying that the agreement extended to *anything* that could be considered romantic, especially in the eyes of the press.

So when his eagle owl landed on her windowsill just as she arrived home from work, it sent another spike of frustration through her chest. Clutched in its talons was a flat package wrapped in black paper, and attached was a small note. Once she'd given the owl a quick scratch, she took a look at his note.

Wear this for me tomorrow, and nothing else.

No formal address of who he was even writing to, nor did he bother signing his initials at the very least. It felt cold and detached, like a set of instructions to a stranger, and did nothing to quell her building temper.

Hermione scoffed when she tore open the black paper, unsurprised at his "gift" for her. Tucked inside, neatly arranged into a little pile, was a set of lingerie. It was made of soft green lace, with delicate scalloped edges and matching elastic, and she glared at it as she felt the material between her fingers. The color was so dark it was almost black, and the matching bra and knickers coordinated with a garter set in the same color. It would barely cover her, and she assumed that was the point.

Taking a few deep breaths as she formulated a plan, she reached for her wand.

She waited until exactly 7:05 PM to Apparate into their room at The Scarlet Order. The pendant that allowed her to do so was heavy around her neck, the jewel nestled between her breasts. The red of it matched her new knickers nicely, though more so after her impromptu charm work, and they were completely hidden under Malfoy's suit jacket that she had taken home with her several weeks before.

When she arrived, Malfoy was in the corner sorting through an old wooden trunk when the soft *pop* of her Apparition alerted him to her presence. His back straightened immediately, shoulders going stiff underneath the black of his suit jacket, and spoke in a low tone.

“Making me wait?”

There was something in his hands that she couldn't quite see, so she stood quietly until he turned to her. Truthfully, anxiety had been clawing at her throat for the entire afternoon. She'd glanced at the clock every few minutes, growing even more agitated and anxious for their meeting. Her satisfaction at charming the undergarments was the only thing that pushed her though—she wanted to see his face when she got one over on him. *Especially* when he'd earned it.

All day, she'd considered sending the lingerie back with a note that said “sod off,” but something kept her from being able to place her quill against the parchment. Part of her still wanted to see him—a pathetic, needy version of Hermione Granger that couldn't get enough of his touch. Even if he hadn't been entirely truthful, she realized that she didn't *need* to have his word in order to use him for a few good shags. She was a capable witch, and more than ready to hex him if need be. She knew a few small wandless charms, and if he ever tried anything untoward while she was under his hand? She could handle herself better than he might expect.

When he finally turned toward her, his expression changed from impatient curiosity to something darker and more guarded. His grey eyes slowly perused her body, taking in the way she'd plaited her hair back from her face and the large suit jacket that hung from her shoulders. It almost swamped her, covering her hands completely and hanging down to her thighs, but the middle was open just enough to give a peek between her breasts and bare stomach.

“I said *nothing else*, did I not?” he asked, stalking forward. He fisted the items in his hands and dropped them to his side. She couldn't gauge what it was as he quickly stepped close enough that she was forced to look back up to see him.

She offered him a saccharine smile. “I thought you might like to see me in something of yours.”

His eyes narrowed, darting back down to her chest. They lingered on the jewel of her pendant for a moment, and he raised his finger to trace the edge of the blazer near her collarbone. It brushed lightly against her skin, and he smiled at the way she shivered. Even angry, she couldn't resist the slightest of touches from him.

“Then why do I sense that you're up to something?” He took a step back, placing his hands behind his back in a formal stance. “Go on then. Show me whatever it is that you're hiding.”

Hermione let out a light laugh, satisfaction growing at his visible frustration. “Why would I be up to something?”

“Because you always are,” he declared easily. He said nothing else, and when she didn't immediately move, he lifted his brows. It was an impatient look, and it only served as an unspoken demand that she own up to whatever she was hiding.

Realizing that she didn't have any way out besides leaving and Disapparating back home, Hermione steeled herself. She brought her hands up, slowly opening the lapels of the jacket and sliding it from her shoulders to reveal her body. The expensive lace, thanks to her charm work, had gone from dark green to a deep red beautifully. *Gryffindor red.*

Given the chance, she would still do it all over again.

His nostrils flared as he took her in, paying no mind to the way his jacket pooled on the floor around her feet. Though she didn't wear stockings, the garter was still laced around her waist and thighs, and even she couldn't deny how provocative it was. She'd stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom for almost an hour taking it in, growing wet at the feel of the fabric against her skin. Her nipples had been pebbled for long enough that they were starting to ache—whether from the soft texture of the lace or her anxious anticipation of the evening, she wasn't sure. Her anger had done nothing to quell her arousal, and if anything, only spurred it hotter. It helped motivate her forward, taking a step toward him while he looked at her body, bared before him.

"Don't you like it?" she asked, cocking her head to the side. It was the sexiest thing she'd ever worn, with or without her spellwork. "I just made a few.... improvements."

Malfoy's jaw ticked, and when he looked back up at her face, his eyes had gone hard.

"I see that."

His obvious anger lit a fire in her abdomen, and Hermione embraced it. She was likely too old to be playing games like this, but the satisfaction of getting under his skin was too good to resist. *After all, wasn't he the one who told her she still held her own power?* He hadn't said she *couldn't* charm the lingerie he'd given her, so she hadn't technically done anything wrong.

With a nod, he turned and walked back to the trunk, dropping whatever was in his hand back into the compartment. "Anything you'd like to tell me before we get started?"

He paused just long enough to glance back at her over his shoulder, and Hermione registered the shock at his obvious disinterest. It washed over her like cold water, extinguishing any of the satisfaction she'd been reveling in just moments before.

"No." It sounded strained and uncomfortable, even to her own ears. All the things she wanted to say to him pressed at the back of her lips, stuck on the tip of her tongue. Even if she had wanted to confront him, to demand an answer for his actions with the other woman, something told her it was too late. She'd had her chances earlier in the week, but so had he. She was in no way the only responsible party, especially when she wasn't the one who had broken their agreement.

"Nothing at all? Nothing you'd like to talk about?" He gave her one last out, but didn't respond again when she shook her head.

Instead he bent back over and reached into the trunk, digging around for a moment before pulling out a few items.

"Stand by the table, please," he directed her. Moving on weak legs, she followed his direction. With every second that passed, it seemed like he grew even more distant from her. He felt cold and detached, and not at all like the man she'd come to look forward to seeing every week. Her satisfaction began to putter out, losing the force that was keeping her going. Without it, she struggled to grasp at the familiar sense of anger that had been fueling her for days. She had

expected him to get angry, to shout and yell and push her against the bookshelves so they could burn off the worst of the need—not to pull away entirely.

“You know, this was not the lesson I’d planned on giving you tonight,” he said as he tossed the items down on the couch by her side. When they landed with a light *thump*, her heart jumped into her throat.

Restraints. Four of them.

“But since you don’t appear to be taking to the spanking, I suppose it’s time we try something new.” With two taps of his wand on the coffee table, Hermione watched it transform. The legs grew taller and the surface turned black, puffing up into a padded surface before her eyes.

“Wait—” She took a step back, her feet almost catching on the rug. “You don’t mean—”

His head snapped up, his gaze hard on hers. “I thought we’d gone over this during our last meeting, but apparently I was wrong.”

Her throat grew tight, and she pressed a hand to her chest in a poor attempt to soothe her racing heart. “It was a joke. You didn’t say I couldn’t charm them to be a different color.”

Malfoy’s mouth lifted in a sarcastic-looking smile. Something told her that he saw right through her poor excuse. “If that was all you’d done, I might be inclined to believe you. But the late arrival and the jacket are enough to tell me more than you’re willing to with your words. Now please lay on your back.”

He indicated to the table with a quick jut of his chin, and didn’t give her any opportunity to respond. With the table higher and larger, it would be just big enough for her to lay down from head to toe, and not much extra room to spare.

“You can’t be serious! You really want this much control over me?” As soon as she spat out the words, she wished she could take them back.

He folded his arms across his chest. “We’ve discussed this already, yet you refuse to use your words *despite* my attempts to show you otherwise. If you don’t want to tell me what’s bothering you, fine, but you have two options: you may use your safe word and you can go home, or you will lay down as I directed you to. Choose, Hermione. Now.”

The sharp order had her moving quickly, knowing deep down that any disobedience or continued disrespect would only make him more upset. Deep down, she knew it wasn’t about control. Not really, and not in the way she’d implied. Her argument was transparent, and they both knew it.

Once in place, she tried not to let the building wave of regret and shame consume her whole. Her skin was cold and pebbled, her fingers going numb from the anxiety, and she realized just how stupid she’d been—to allow herself to get upset by something so silly had only backfired on her in a spectacular way. She *could* have cancelled on him. She *could* have sent him an owl, demanding an answer for the Prophet articles. She *could* have done any number of things, but instead she chose to be petty.

She jolted when she felt his hands wrap around her ankle, his hold firm as he wrapped one of the restraints above her foot and buckled it around the leg of the table.

“May I—” She paused, swallowing past the growing fear and forcing herself to remember the way he’d given her an out last time. “May I ask what you’re going to do?”

He didn’t answer until he’d finished restraining her legs and had moved to her right hand. With careful movements, he wrapped the padded restraint cuff around her wrist and buckled it to the leg, testing the slack in the strap to make sure she had a few inches of movement.

“I’m going to show you that sometimes, it *is* possible to have too much of a good thing.”

Her mouth went dry, unable to process his words. For some reason, the implication was much more intimidating than when he told her he was going to spank her. At least, in those moments, she knew what to expect. She sucked in air through her nose, desperate to try to keep calm, but it wasn’t enough.

Once her other wrist was restrained, he gave her hand a tap, just the way he’d done before. “Tug.”

When she did, she pulled on both cuffs. One was slightly looser than the other, and her eyes fluttered closed. She didn’t need to test it to know that if she wiggled and pulled enough, she’d be able to get her hand through. She might bruise her thumb, but she could make it work. Like before, it wouldn’t be easy—if anything, it was slightly tighter than he’d secured his belt—but she could get out if she absolutely needed to.

“Thank you,” she told him, but he stayed quiet as he rose back to his feet, standing over her on the table.

He took a few steps away, blatantly appreciating the view, before he looked at her face once more. “Last chance, Hermione. Anything you’d like to say before I get started?”

Part of her wanted to, it really did. But embarrassment burned at her ears, heating the skin at the back of her neck until she forced her eyes closed. *Since when was she that concerned with what Malfoy thought of her?*

“I really am sorry,” she said instead. “It was just a poorly thought out joke.”

She could practically *feel* the intensity of his sigh, but he only shook his head and gave her an exasperated look. When he walked back across the room, she thought she heard him mutter the words *stubborn witch*, but she couldn’t be certain.

When he returned to her, he had a single item in his hands, and her body went tense.

“Is that—is that a muggle vibrator?”

It certainly looked like one, from her vantage point.

“This,” he paused, holding it up to the light. It was black, and just a touch larger than his thumb. “Is a sex toy, yes. Though it isn’t muggle.”

She watched, the familiar feeling of burning apprehension building within her abdomen, as he tapped it with his wand. It began to vibrate, and he demonstrated with quick efficiency how he could control the settings with his magic. “It’ll do whatever I want it to—get warmer,” he paused, and the black color bled into red. “Grow larger.” The toy swelled to several times its size, distending longer and curving toward the tip.

The sight of it had her legs shifting against the restraints, struggling to press her thighs together, but she couldn't. Her breath began to come in shorter pants, and she pulled at the cuffs around her wrists. It backfired, though, when it only increased the feeling of dizzying helplessness. The same sensation she'd felt in his arms the week before, and she cringed at the heat that built between her legs. With her eyes locked on the toy, she barely noticed that he'd circled the table and now stood by her waist.

"I bought it just for you," he said, though when he didn't look at her, she felt her stomach flip. His distance was in direct conflict with the way he was working her up, and she had a feeling that he knew exactly how she was straining for his affection. "Though I have to admit, I was hoping to use it as a reward more than a punishment."

Hermione couldn't stop the shiver that raced over her skin at the threat. Draco set it down on the table beside her hip next to his wand, and moved to remove his suit jacket. With slow movements, he repeated the same actions that he had the week before. He removed his cufflinks slowly, and by the time he was rolling up his sleeves, she was practically panting. The sight of his forearms should *not* be having such an affect on her.

Smoothing down his tie, he picked his wand back up and waved it over her body. Though she didn't feel anything, once she glanced down, it became clear. The lace was back to its original green color, and the coy smile that played against his lips was enough to have her blushing again.

"If I wanted you in red, I would have sent you a set in red." When she felt his fingers brush lightly across her stomach, she sucked in a breath. "Though you do look beautiful in any color."

His tender compliment had her skin heating, and she screwed her eyes closed tight. Her chest was constricting painfully, torn between giving in to the low tide of panic or sinking deeper into her arousal. Despite her annoyance with him, it had been growing for hours and it seemed like even her fear wouldn't be enough to overtake it anymore.

If someone had told her, just months ago, that she would relish in the feeling of being both afraid *and* turned on by Draco Malfoy at the same time, she would have balked.

"Thank you," she whispered, finally accepting the compliment. His hand was sweeping up her ribs, his fingers toying with the edge of the elastic below her breast. Never dipping under or caressing her, it was like he was simply trying to explore her body with his gentle touch. It was relaxing, lulling her into an almost drowsy state, and he spent several minutes running his hand over her torso, down her thigh, then back up to her shoulder and arm.

"Tell me," he asked, his voice quiet, "out of curiosity, how many times have you brought yourself to orgasm at once?"

The question had her jolting back into awareness, her eyes flashing open. It didn't go unnoticed that he didn't ask her how many times she'd orgasmed during sex, or with a partner. Bracing herself against his judgement, she answered.

"Two."

It wasn't that she wasn't interested in more—because she *was*—but that it tended to get a bit boring when she was by herself. Any more and she started to get distracted the same way she did in bed with other men.

Despite her expectations, his face held no surprise at her answer. Instead he nodded once, a quick dip of his chin as he acknowledged it. “We’ll try for three or four, then.”

“Four?!” she practically screeched, and he huffed out a laugh. “You can’t—there’s no way.”

“No?” He balked at her challenge. “I’ll stay here all night if I have to.”

Any argument died on her lips as she realized how serious he was.

“It’s in your best interest to *try*, Hermione. Now be a good girl and try your hardest for me.”

Without waiting, he fisted her knickers and shoved them down her thighs in a rough pull.

Sucking in a ragged breath, Hermione tried to pull her hips away from his touch. As soon as he felt her, he’d realize how wet she already was.

“Why four?” she asked, trying to delay the inevitable.

“I know you fancy a good challenge.” Draco palmed her thigh, stilling her movements. Leaning down, he spoke directly into her ear. “But so do I. Just be thankful I’m not taking you to the viewing room for your punishment.”

The viewing room? A spike of fear cracked through her chest.

Between the garter and the way her legs were restrained to the table, her knickers could only be pulled down so low, and even then, they only served to restrict her ability to move. Tight around her thighs, the elastic dug into the skin and added a bite of pain that only served to send a spiral of need straight to her pelvis. Her body and mind were responding to the different signals, quickly becoming muddled, and her breathing began to quicken.

When he palmed her, he did so with enough pressure and determination that she knew his light, gentle touches were gone. His fingers dipped between her legs with ease, seeking out her entrance with his middle and ring finger. Tensing, she choked back the whimper that threatened to squeak out of her throat at the rough feel of it.

With his other hand, he held her jaw and forced her to look at him. His eyes were burning, practically black, and she couldn’t resist falling more under his spell. Though this was supposed to be a punishment, it certainly didn’t seem like much of one so far.

“You get one for going against my instructions,” he ground out, gathering her wetness with his fingers and dragging it up to her clit. “One for being late,” he continued.

As his fingers stretched her, she began to pant. He wasn’t bothering with any kind of slow warmup, and was fucking her with a singleminded determination. She couldn’t help but rock her hips against his hand, seeking out the delicious fullness that she couldn’t help but want.

“I—I can’t,” she breathed, shaking her head. “It’s too many.”

There was no way she could get to four orgasms in a single night.

“One for not telling me what’s bothering you,” he continued on, blatantly ignoring her argument. His hand pulled away briefly, and she tensed at the absence of his touch. “And one just because I bloody well feel like it.”

Without warning, he pressed the vibrator against her clit. It was still charmed warm and buzzing lightly, and though she tried to pull away, she couldn't.

"Draco!" Hermione gasped, her torso lifting. It made her breasts pull tight against the lace of her bra, and when she glanced down she could see her nipples pebbled and poking against the fabric. *This wasn't what she wanted—she wanted his—*

"I want this first one fast," he instructed. Though he was still leaning down and holding her in place, he pulled her jaw to the side. "Don't make me wait."

At once, he pressed his torso into hers and pressed his mouth against the spot just under her ear, nipping and kissing with more purpose than she'd seen him use against her so far. This wasn't exploratory—it was *determined*. It wasn't romantic or seductive, but rather a way for him to get her to her first orgasm as fast as possible.

His breath was hot in her ear as he coaxed her, gritting his teeth as he instructed her on exactly how he wanted it. His hand never let up, and he began rubbing the vibrator in tight circles around the bundle of nerves between her thighs.

He was overwhelming her senses completely, and she had no way to fight it. Between the restraints and the buzzing friction of the vibrator, Hermione felt her arousal spiral faster than she ever thought possible. It tightened her muscles, straining through her limbs, and she whimpered as she fought it off. She didn't want to orgasm *that* fast—not if it meant giving in to whatever punishment he was trying to bestow.

"No, no—" Hermione chanted, trying to pull away, but his hand held her head in place. He tightened his grip, lathing his tongue up the shell of her ear. It made her shudder, the sensation sending waves of heat down to her core.

"Yes, Hermione," he countered. "Don't fight it."

Between her legs, she felt the vibrator's setting increase. Instead of a gentle buzz, it stepped up a heavy vibration, and her eyes fluttered closed. He never stopped moving it, using the tip to dance around her clit before pushing down with steady strokes that had her hips rocking against it with wanton abandon. Her orgasm was within reach—she felt it building at the base of her spine, spreading warmth through her legs, but she clenched her teeth to try and fight it.

As good as it felt, this wasn't how she wanted it. Draco wasn't being gentle or coaxing, he was *demanding*, pushing her toward the precipice with a practiced touch that held zero affection. She had grown used to his reverent touches, and the way that he seemed just as taken with their scene as she was. This was... something else entirely. Forcing her eyes open, she saw it in his eyes.

Detached. Cold. Hard. Merciless.

The danger lurking beneath the grey depths had her shivering again, breathing out a light moan when he increased the speed of the strokes between her legs. Her cunt was beginning to ache, the muscles in her core drawing tight as she sped toward pleasure. She could feel her inner walls starting to flutter, searching for something to grab on to, but he didn't grant her any reprieve. Instead he held her down, staring into her eyes, as he forced the orgasm from her body.

The moment it happened, Hermione's mouth fell open on a silent moan, her eyes screwing shut on their own accord.

It wasn't as intense as the orgasms she'd had with him previously, but it slammed through her body quick and hard. She seized from the force of it, pulling tight against her bonds and lifting her head just enough to feel his forehead against hers. It sparked against her nerve endings, and she struggled through the aftershocks, breathing heavily as her hips pressed against the vibrator. Her core clenched, her inner walls tightening around nothing, and she cried out when her body fell limp against the table.

"There's one," Draco mused, but she didn't miss the way his tone was distinctly unimpressed.
"Ready for number two?"

Again, without warning, he slicked the vibrator down to her entrance and pushed it inside her still fluttering entrance.

Hermione choked on a gasp, the air getting stuck in her chest at the sudden intrusion. He didn't waste time being gentle, and she couldn't deny that his firm touch was speaking to something buried deep inside her. He was determined to make her come in a way that no man had ever attempted before, and her body responded with traitorous interest.

Chewing on her lip, she fought another whimper as he began a series of long, slow thrusts. Her core was still pulsing, and she felt every drag of the toy. Though it was smooth and warm, it was still too narrow to replace the feeling of his cock, and the distinct difference left her wanting in a different kind of way.

"Please—" She paused, gritting her teeth and shaking her head. Draco was still looking down at her as if she was a problem he needed to fix, and not his partner. Though his affection was typically limited anyway, the absence of any of it only served to drive a wedge deep inside her chest. "I'm—
I'm sorry—"

His lips tightened, though his facial expression didn't give much away besides his obvious annoyance.

"Then tell me what's got you so tangled up, Hermione. Say it and we can stop."

Again, the words were stuck, lodged in her throat. She swallowed, gasping for air, and when she didn't immediately respond, he let out a frustrated breath.

"There's nothing—" she tried to say, though his fingers moved quickly from her jaw to her lips to cut her off.

"I'd rather you not waste both our time by lying, darling. You don't *have* to tell me anything, but I don't fuck *liars*. The moment you lie to me is the moment this ends."

His burning anger had her hackles rising, and she gritted her teeth. He had some nerve, saying such things when he was out galavanting around London with some other woman, immediately after—

Her thoughts were cut off when he muttered another quick charm.

"*Incrementum.*"

She felt the vibrator between her legs shift, swelling slightly as he continued to work it inside her, and on a thrust, something began to press against the over sensitive nub at the crux of her thighs.

Oh—

Realizing too late that he'd charmed the vibrator to grow an extra extension for her clit, her head dropped back. She could feel the vibrations both inside and outside of her cunt, and with every pull he twisted his hand in a way that had the tip brushing against the sensitive spot at the top of her pelvis.

Though she was resisting with every ounce of strength she had, Hermione was practically helpless—and the knowledge only made it worse. Draco had only left enough slack in her restraints for her to do two things: pull free and end the scene, or rock against his hand.

She could practically feel her pulse fluttering in the heavy, swollen tissues between her legs, and the thin penetration of the vibrator was somehow sending her arousal spiraling tight once more and driving her mad with desire. It wasn't enough—she needed more, but she knew she wasn't going to get it.

"Go on then, use your safe word if you don't want to take what I've got to give you."

He was goading her, she knew it. Challenging her, pushing her right up until the line to force her into admitting what had her so tangled up.

"No?" he asked when she shook her head, effectively admitting that she *was* hiding something after all. "Why not?"

Call it self-preservation, or sheer stupidity, but she wouldn't allow herself to be so vulnerable in front of him. Admitting that she was angry at him for being with another woman was selfish and petty, and she couldn't face the truth that spurred her feelings of inadequacy.

"It doesn't matter," she panted instead.

Frustrated, Draco increased the speed of the vibrator between her legs again, and she couldn't stop the pained moan from escaping her throat. Her instinct was to close her legs, to tighten her thighs around his hand, but she couldn't.

"I beg to disagree. If you're unhappy, I want to know. I *deserve* to know, do I not? Wouldn't you want to know if I was unhappy with you?"

Struggling to maintain her composure, Hermione swallowed, gritting her teeth against the pleasure that was beginning to coil in her pelvis. It was tightening slowly, building to a fever that was sure to break with more intensity than the last orgasm. She wanted to argue with him, opening her mouth to do so, but she couldn't find the words.

What was he saying?

She struggled to remember his question. *Unhappy*.

"You—you're unhappy now," she groaned, pulling her head to the side when his head dipped to her neck again. He nipped at the vein beneath the delicate skin, adding a bite of pain to the pleasure he was giving her.

"I'm unhappy because you're unhappy."

He whispered it into her ear like it was the most obvious thing in the world, as if his hand wasn't currently fucking her with a charmed vibrator and about to bring her to her second orgasm of the night. As if he wasn't *punishing* her with pleasure, and keeping himself as detached as he possibly could.

She couldn't wrap her mind around it, and it only served to confuse her body even further. It felt like she was spinning, her chest straining with short bursts of breath that had her head growing lightheaded.

"I have no desire for petty games, darling, and I will not entertain them," he continued, rocking the toy even deeper into her. Instead of pulling out, he muttered the incantation again, and she felt the tip swell inside her channel.

Oh gods, oh gods, oh— Hermione cried out as it rubbed against the sensitive tissue inside her. It was too much, almost, and she could barely hear him over the sound of her own strained breathing.

"I'll admit," Draco paused to lift and twist the toy so it pressed harder against the spot that had her moaning even louder. "I can't deny the allure of pushing past your defenses and giving you what you need. The fight you put up only makes the reward that much sweeter."

Her eyes fluttered closed as her body tensed, preparing for another orgasm. She could feel it, every muscle pulling taught as her pleasure grew and grew. Since he'd stopped thrusting the toy, the nub sat right against her clit, humming with a deep tremor that had her losing sight of any resistance she once held.

"But my patience is running thin."

At his words, her reserve broke completely. Pleasure burst through her body, starting low in her pelvis and flooding out into her legs until she felt the restraints cut into her ankles from the way she was writhing on the table.

"Oh, fuck, oh gods—" Hermione cursed when he didn't move the toy, keeping it in place to push her orgasm even further. It was almost painful, wracking her body with uncontrollable spikes of pleasure that overwhelmed each of her senses until nothing else existed. She was barely aware of the way she thrashed in his hold, her body pulling and moving for more against her will.

"Draco, please!"

Her shout was lost in another wave of pleasure, pulling her under. It never stopped, only continued, building and growing until her abdomen ached from the way her muscles were clenched so tightly. She wasn't even sure what she was pleading for—less? More? She couldn't tell which way was up, let alone what she wanted.

Finally, like a slow tide pulling out from shore, it began to subside. Aftershocks settled through her body, twitching as she gasped for air. When Draco removed his hand from between her legs, taking the toy with him, she let out a sob at the sensation. Her skin was sweaty and flushed, but his immediate distance settled in her stomach like a lead weight. Everything felt *wrong*.

Her mind was at war with her body. Even through the haze of lust and arousal, she couldn't shake the guilt that settled in her subconscious. It only grew at the same rate her pleasure did, doubling over when she couldn't resist the call of his touch. She didn't *want* to orgasm—not when he was

angry with her. Not when *she* was still angry with *him*. And yet she still did... She was at his mercy, and the reminder was enough to send her emotions into a tailspin.

You did this, her thoughts acknowledged for her as she focused on breathing through her nose to settle her racing heart. Draco was simply standing next to her, giving her a moment's reprieve, with an expectant look painted across his features. *You have no one to blame except yourself.*

“Ready to go again?” His question wasn’t soft, nor was it coaxing or flirtatious. It was the same tone in which he might ask her if she knew the weather forecast for the weekend, or if she’d eaten breakfast that day. It was informational, gauging, and nothing more.

Before she could shake her head, he was pressing the toy against her clit once more. She’d only had a few short seconds without it, and the sensation made her arousal surge again.

“No—no, please—” Hermione’s body tightened against the restraints, and she bit down on her lower lip to quell the pained sound that was trying to escape her throat. Though it felt like the toy had been charmed back down to a smaller size, everything between her legs felt swollen and oversensitive—her skin was buzzing even without the low hum of the vibrations, and her thighs felt so flushed she wanted to claw at them with her nails.

“Then use your safe word,” Draco instructed, flicking his wrist to circle her clit with the vibrator. “I know you know it.”

Maybe it was the part of her that never allowed her to give up on a challenge, or to back down when she knew she’d been cornered, but she couldn’t. Not when she knew that she was strapped down to the table because she’d been purposefully difficult. And now he was upset with her, angry and cold, and she hated how much she yearned for the Draco she’d had *before* seeing that awful article in the Prophet. *Her* Draco, she’d started to think of him, as if he was a different man than the one that stood beside her. The man who’d apologized to her in her office and given her the opportunity to get the answers she needed. The man who took care of her, teaching her how he could handle her body to give her exactly what she needed.

Tell him now, tell him and maybe he'll stop this. The desperate thought pushed through the guilt to the forefront of her mind. *Tell him and maybe he won't be upset with you.*

Warmth was pooling between her legs, sticky and hot against her thighs. There had to be a wet spot on the table beneath her arse, and the realization made her cheeks flush. The vibrator moved between her folds with ease, made slick by her own come, and she twisted her wrists in the restraints. Though it was futile, she couldn’t stop the instinct.

“If I—” Hermione paused when he hit a sensitive spot, her eyes fluttering as the words caught in her throat. “If I tell you, will you stop?”

Draco was silent for long enough that she forced herself to look back at him. When she did, she was surprised at what she saw—he was *amused*.

“It’s adorable that you think you have any bargaining power right now,” he told her. “It’s much too late for that. You had your chance.”

“Please,” she begged again. It was *stupid*, so bloody stupid, and she didn’t care anymore. When he hit the same sensitive spot again, her legs tightened. Through the buzzing in her veins, she could feel her third orgasm building. She wasn’t sure how—he was being much lighter with his touch this

time than he had for the first two—but it was almost as if he just wasn’t allowing her body to fully settle.

“Say I did give you a chance. What would be in it for me?”

His words were accompanied by a light touch along the seam of her bra, his finger tracing the delicate edge of lace until her skin pebbled. It was teasing, a reminder of how affectionate he could be if he wanted to, and it only made her lean toward his touch even further.

The words left her quickly, jumbled and rushed as she tried not to moan. “What—whatever you want. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

When his hand left her breast, she could have sobbed. “What I *want* is for you to stop being so bloody difficult, just because you can. I *want* for you to take your punishment like the good little witch I know you can be, and to stop acting like you didn’t earn every bit of it.”

By the time he finished speaking, his words were gritted through his teeth. Guilt and shame suffused her chest, tamping down some of her building arousal, and she struggled to breathe through the myriad of emotions that were threatening to drown her. Everything felt oversensitive—her mind, her body, her nerves, her emotions, all of it.

“I did,” she agreed, her voice going weak. “I’m sorry, Draco. I’m so sorry—I didn’t think—”

Her apology was cut off when a spike of pleasure crackled through her abdomen, squeezing and clenching when he increased the pressure of the toy just slightly. He was building her back up, sending her toward her next orgasm with complete disregard for her words. Nothing would stop him.

Despite her resistance, she hated how much hotter it made her.

“That’s exactly your problem, darling. You insult me by assuming that I’m the same as all the men in your past—that I’ll *let* you call the shots without question. If that’s what you want, then maybe I should have said no to you in the first place.”

“No!” She strained against her binds, looking up at him with desperation. He was staring down at her, his eyes hard and his jaw tight, and she couldn’t bear the thought of him ending things. Even with her anger over the Prophet article, she couldn’t just let him walk away so easily. “You can’t.”

Was that why she couldn’t bear the thought of not coming that night? Even though she’d spent days stewing in her anger and annoyance, something kept spurring her forward. Kept pushing her *not* to give up, despite her hurt. She was weak, wanting the pleasure he gave her, and she wasn’t sure what it would do to her if he cast her aside so easily. His hand never stopped, his fingers tracing the toy in maddeningly perfect circles, and she felt herself tightening in anticipation. Her core clenched against itself, aching and swollen, and everything grew just a touch hotter.

Not when she’d *just* found what she needed with him.

Draco was unlike any other man she had ever been with, and the realization at just how close she was to losing him made the words she’d been suppressing all night come rushing to the surface. However, before they could break, *she* did. Her body flooded with warmth, spreading out from her pelvis and through her limbs like honey. It was slow and heady, stealing her breath as her inner walls tightened and her hips pressed up and into the toy. Like the others, she was powerless to stop

it—her eyes screwed shut as she whimpered, and tiny shocks of pleasure twisted and rolled through her body.

Everything grew hot, and Hermione was vaguely aware of the way her hands were fisting and releasing in the restraints above her head, her arms and shoulders beginning to ache from the constant strain. The tips of her fingers were tingling, and her toes curled when another wave of pleasure slowly pulled at her abdomen.

“You lied—” The words rushed out of her before she could fully register that she was speaking. They spilled from her lips, pained and breathless, as her head rocked to the side. “The article—you and that woman—*again*. ”

Wetness tracked down her cheeks, and she clenched her teeth as the orgasm began to subside. But like a dam had been broken, it was too late to stop the flood of emotions that it had unleashed.

“You made me promise—you said it was *just us*. That you didn’t share, but then—”

“Hermione,” Draco’s sharp tone had her choking on a sob, but her eyes were still clenched shut. She couldn’t face him, and when she shook her head against his unspoken order, his hand came to grip her jaw. “Look at me.”

“No,” she refused. The tears were burning hot against her eyes, and she knew she couldn’t open them again without making things worse. “You had sex with me and then you left to see *her*—”

She dimly recognized him pulling away, and the absence of any vibrations between her legs. His hands were no longer holding her in place, forcing her to try to look at him, and she just felt *cold*. Shivering, she pulled her arms down, her numb fingers gripping tight at her forearms. Something loosened around her feet, and between shuddered, broken breaths, she realized that there was a warm weight wrapping around her body.

A press of hands on her cheeks as she struggled to breathe. To stay calm as her anxiety and anger and shame poured over her. It was like the orgasms had knocked something loose inside her chest, each one chipping away at her carefully constructed walls until the entire foundation was cracked and shaking. Heavy arms, pulling her against a solid wall of muscle, a brush of fabric against the bare skin of her torso. It encased her completely, and it wasn’t until she felt the soft press of his lips on her face that she realized he was speaking.

“Darling,” he whispered, his thumb following every kiss. It tracked through the wetness streaking down her cheeks, and she realized he was chasing them away. “Look at me, *please*. I’m begging you.”

She could barely manage another shake of her head, ducking out of his embrace as she tried to pull away. Shame gnawed at her from the inside, chewing a hole in her abdomen. She needed out—she needed to leave, to Apparate back home and recover from the suffocating embarrassment that had led her to admit to being jealous and then sobbing right after he gave her an orgasm.

But instead of letting her go, he pulled his arms even tighter. She was trapped against his chest, perched on his lap, and she realized that she hadn’t even noticed him arranging her body to hold her close when she was falling apart under his touch.

“Let me go.” Another tear tracked down her cheek with the plea.

Draco's hand drifted back up to her face, cradling her cheek in his palm. "I won't let you go again—not like this. Shout at me if you need to. Scream at me if that's what will make you feel better. But don't run from me."

She didn't have a response. With every forced orgasm, her anger had burned away, and she was left with the husk of her burned-out fury. Though she knew it was silly and childish, she wished she could take it all back. She wished she could grab her time-turner from third year and wind it around her neck, just to go back three hours and send him a howler instead.

In her silence, she felt his lips press into her hair, his breath soft as he exhaled against the top of her head.

"I never lied to you, Hermione. Though I will accept some of the blame for not realizing what that might have looked like from your perspective."

His words had her startling, her eyes opening back up even as they stung from her emotional outburst. She was pulled across his legs as he sat on the table, his arms wrapped tight around her torso, and one hand stroked gently at her bare shoulder. She still couldn't bring herself to look up at him, and she held her breath as he continued.

"The woman I was with is Astoria Greengrass. Until recently, she and I were engaged to be married."

"What?!" Hermione tried again to scramble off his lap, pushing with all her might, but he held firm. *He had been engaged ?!*

"Please let me explain—" he cut off her sudden panic. "We were never involved in the way you're assuming. I would prefer to discuss this when you're not overwhelmed and coming down from the scene, but I feel like if I let you go, that would just make the situation worse."

When her lungs began to burn, Hermione forced herself to breathe. She felt trapped, like she was stuck on the emotional version of the minecarts that navigated through the bowels of Gringotts. Her emotions were swinging around wildly, up and down, curving and twisting until she didn't know what was coming next. They fused with her confusion, not just at his words but with Draco in general, and she clenched her jaw tight. She *hated* feeling like this—like she was lost, in the dark without a map.

Which way is up?

Draco's voice surfaced through the fog like a beacon. "Astoria and I began the process to dissolve our betrothal contract earlier this year, shortly before you and I saw each other for the first time. Since it was arranged when we were still teenagers, it took quite a while for our solicitors to untangle all the agreements that our parents made."

She didn't speak again, rolling her lips between her teeth. Her throat still felt tight, but tears no longer blurred the edges of her vision. Instead of answering, she stared down at her lap, focusing on the elastic of her garter. It anchored her, keeping her focused on his words instead of her blinding emotions.

Taking her silence as a cue, he continued. "What the Prophet managed to misconstrue was Astoria's insistence that we go out to celebrate our failed engagement. Our solicitors finished dissolving the agreement just a few days prior to that."

A memory surfaced in Hermione's mind, and she latched on to it. Two sisters, sitting across the Great Hall. One older, with sharp eyes sitting next to Pansy Parkinson, and one younger, quieter, reading a book in between bites of toast next to her.

"But," Hermione's voice sounded hoarse. "Astoria was blonde. And her nose was different—"

It was the only thing she could think of. The quiet girl, with blonde hair and blue eyes, reading next to her older sister. That was not the same woman from the photographs.

"She *was*, yes," Draco agreed, his hand moving from her shoulder back up to her jaw. He stroked her cheek lightly, and her eyes fluttered closed at the soft affection. "Her older sister, Daphne, married a cosmetic Healer named Rhoades. After the war, the two of them went to live with him in France to distance themselves from everything. I believe she thought that if she could change her appearance, it might make her moving back to London easier."

"That no one would recognize her." Hermione's thoughts were absent enough that she didn't realize she'd said them aloud until Draco gently pressed his fingers to her chin. She finally allowed it, and looked up at him.

"Exactly. And that's part of why it took so long for us to begin working on the dissolution. She spent quite a bit of time healing from all the procedures. If I'd had it my way, neither of us would have ever signed it in the first place, but when you don't think you'll make it to adulthood..."

Hermione grimaced, though she fought the desire to look back down at her lap. Draco's eyes were trained on her face, his brow furrowed with seriousness, and she found the courage to address the assumption that had ruined her entire week.

"So... You weren't on a date."

His chest expanded on an inhale, and his answer firmly dispelled any lingering doubts she might have had.

"She and I have never once been romantically involved in our entire lives. There has been no one else since our first night together, and there will be no one else until you decide to end things between us."

Something in her chest lept at his words, her heart fluttering beneath her ribs before she could find the sense to squash it down.

"You could end things, too. Not just me."

Was that what she was afraid of? That he could walk away as easily as he wanted, wrecking her completely before leaving her behind without a second glance? The vulnerability at the thought had her chest seizing in a different, more painful way. *Since when had she become so attached?*

"I could *try*." His lips pulled into a wry smile, and he blinked away. "Though it does seem that I'm somewhat of a glutton for punishment when it comes to you. I just can't find the self control to resist."

After a few moments of silence, Hermione forced herself to say what she should have all along. "I should have just asked."

"Yes, you should have," he agreed, looking back down at her. His eyes tightened just slightly, clouded with an emotion she couldn't identify. "But I also assumed that you wouldn't want to hear those sorts of details about my personal life after everything... *Before*. My hope was that I could put it behind me and move on without another thought. I never thought you might... Well," he cut himself off, clearing his throat. "I suppose that doesn't matter. I should have expected a bit more in the way of miscommunication. It is *us*, after all."

His dry joke had her breathing out a light laugh, though it still felt flat.

"I'm sorry."

Her apology had him smiling. "As am I. And I appreciate the apology, darling."

When his lips came down to press lightly against her forehead, Hermione's eyes fluttered shut. She wasn't entirely sure if it was the gentle kiss or his praise, but warmth built between her ribs, settling the anxiety that had been festering for days. Her body felt just as heavy and spent as her mind did, like she'd run a marathon while translating runes at the same time.

He shifted her in his arms, pulling her off his lap and back on to the surface of the table. Without thinking, she grasped at his arms, her hands wrapping around his wrists before he could get too far.

"What are you doing?" she asked, startled by the sudden departure. Despite her original resistance, she wanted to stay on his lap, wrapped up in the safety of his arms.

His fingers squeezed her gently in return, but he didn't hesitate to begin pushing her back.
"Finishing what I started."

"But I—" Hermione grasped at him, trying to stay upright, but couldn't quite fight it. "I thought—"

Draco disentangled his arm from her grip and moved it to the back of her neck, cushioning her as he pressed her the rest of the way.

"I promised you a punishment, and I intend to see it all the way through. I never said I would let you out, did I?"

"No, but—" Her argument fell flat when he pressed another light kiss to her forehead. Another followed on her right cheek, then her left, and her eyes were drifting closed by the time he pulled away. His sudden affection had her speechless. Could he really make her come again?

"Why don't we try something new instead?" His question was obviously rhetorical, but she felt the table shifting underneath her legs, and she lifted her head enough to see that he had tapped his wand to the end. The table was shortening, coming to stop just underneath her knees, and her legs hung down, her ankles still wrapped in the restraints. Though the ends were still loose, it served as an unspoken reminder of what he *could* do and she eyed her wrists, tucked against her stomach. The cuffs were still in place there as well, but he didn't seem to be concerned with tying her back up. "Scoot down to the end of the table, please."

His gentle request had her following through without any more resistance. Between his soft kisses to her face and the way his hand was tracking down her shin with warm, sweeping strokes, she sensed that this round wouldn't be nearly so forceful as the first few.

"Good girl," Draco praised once she'd situated herself at the edge of the table. Her legs felt awkward, holding them up in the air since the table was no longer there to keep her laying completely flat. Hooking his thumbs beneath the elastic of her knickers, he pulled them down until they came free from her legs. But instead of dropping them to the floor, he tucked them into his trouser pocket. "Hold on just a moment."

With his wand, he summoned the leather chair closer, stopping it once it came to rest right behind where he was standing between her legs. He wasted no time sitting down before grabbing each of her calves and resting her thighs on his shoulders, and understanding dawned on her at once.

"You're going to go down on me now?"

Saying it out loud had her blushing, and she shifted uncomfortably on the table. The movement served as a reminder of how slick and sticky she was from his earlier attentions. *Surely he wouldn't*

"Would you rather I tie you back up and use the toy again?" He pressed a kiss to the inside of her thigh and she shivered. His mouth was soft and warm, his lips dragging a path up to her core as he asked her what she wanted. "I thought you might prefer something a little more personal after a talk like that. I know I do."

His admission snuffed out any hesitation she might have had.

"Okay," she agreed. At her go ahead, he smiled, his face cracking into a sharp grin.

"Don't think I haven't forgotten about your little fantasy, either. Maybe one day I'll make it come true," he mused, shifting his focus back to her center. He inhaled deeply, and her entire body flushed hot.

"You have no idea how much I love to see you like this," he told her, kissing the soft skin of her inner thighs again. "Knowing I did this to you. Made you this wet. Tell me, darling, do you ache?"

Her answer was a whimper. Yes. She did. The short strokes with the toy earlier hadn't done much to assuage her need, and her cunt was beginning to swell once more with arousal now that he'd started to tease her again. His fingers spread her folds gently, but he held back. He kissed each side with a reverence that had her gasping, her legs tightening on his shoulders, and she felt him chuckle against her.

"Sensitive, I see."

She nodded, even though he couldn't see her head. "Yes, Draco. For you."

Something called to her to open herself up to him, to say what she was thinking now that he'd ripped his way past her defenses. To show him that she *could*, even if it only meant an honest attempt at trying to be the best submissive she could for him.

Humming, he shifted his hold until one hand had her spread apart, and the other drifted down to her opening. He caressed her with gentle, teasing strokes, so different from his earlier touches, and she felt the lightest brush of his tongue against her clit at the same time his finger dipped into her opening.

“My good girl,” he praised, his breath sending shivers across her skin. Her fists balled at her sides, desperate to clutch at him but terrified that he might tie her back up if she moved too much. He gave her another gentle lap, his tongue swirling, and she gasped at the feel of it. Once she settled, he did it again. His pace was slow, agonizing as he slowly worked at her core, and she basked in the sensations. “You taste even better than I thought you would.”

It was so different than the way the scene had started, with his cold, distant demeanor. Now he was nothing but warmth, his breath hot and his words even hotter against her core as he praised her with his mouth. He didn’t censor any of it, telling her exactly what he thought while he tasted her.

“One day I’d like to wake you up with my mouth on your sweet little cunt.” He punctuated his words by pressing an open-mouthed kiss right on her clit. His lips wrapped around it and his tongue flicked upward, sending a spike of heat through her. Pleasure was coming in building waves, her thighs beginning to shake around his ears, but he seemed solely focused on his goal.

The one she hadn’t thought he would be able to finish, but was obviously going to achieve without question.

“Would you like that?” Draco asked, his finger pressing deeper inside her channel. His strokes were still slow, recognizing how oversensitive she was, but it felt *divine*. “Answer me.”

“Yes!” The word rushed out quickly, and she couldn’t fight the way her hips wanted to rock against his mouth. When he hummed in approval, she moaned. “Yes, gods, yes please.”

Glancing down, she realized he was watching her. His eyes had gone dark as he kissed her, licking and suckling and lapping at her clit. The sight of it had her legs tightening, pleasure spiking at the base of her spine, and she groaned.

Would there be a day when they were together overnight? That she could wake up to this? The thought was enough to make her eyes flutter closed.

“You could wake up, coming on my tongue,” he promised her. “Moaning my name before you even realized it wasn’t a dream.”

His gentle tongue had her writhing. He kept his tongue flat and the pressure even, with swirling licks that set a delicious pace. Pressure was beginning to build, tightening in the same telltale way that he had promised her from the beginning, and she let out a shaky breath.

Realizing she was close, Draco didn’t stop. He added one more finger, stretching her just enough so she *finally* felt full, and grinned when she cried out.

“Please,” she whined. “Can I touch you?”

She itched to touch him, to run her fingers through the soft strands of his hair while he licked at her center. To clutch him closer as her body tightened, unable to let him go.

His answer was a nod, and she wasted no time burying her hands in his hair. It pressed her breasts together, the nipples pebbled and sensitive, straining against the lace, but it felt right. She *needed* the touch, more than she ever realized. Holding him with her hands, her legs wrapped around his shoulders and her calves draped down his back, was enough to make her want more.

“Fuck me,” she begged him, her voice gone needy. She wanted to feel him pressing between her thighs, fisting his cock into her as he looked her in the eye. Chest to chest, they could breathe and fuck and pant together until they *both* found release. “Please, Draco, I need you.”

He paused just long enough to send her a sharp look. “I know you do, darling. Next time. But this one is for me, remember?”

She keened, realizing that he was still holding off, seeing her punishment through even if he had granted her a slight reprieve.

“Come for me, darling. You already taste so good, but I want to feel it on my tongue.”

Resuming his ministrations, Hermione let her head drop back down to the table. He’d worked her up into a fever pitch, and she could hear how wet she was with every push and pull of his fingers between her legs. It was practically obscene, and when he hummed against her clit, it only added to her mindless desire. She writhed under his mouth, her hips beginning to rock a steady tempo against his tongue, and he let her lead. He matched her pace, licking and swirling his tongue in time with his fingers, and soon she could feel herself growing tight.

“There it is,” he murmured. “Don’t fight it, darling. One more.”

“Uh huh,” she groaned her agreement, nodding her head while she took what she needed from him. The orgasm was looming just out of reach, but it was inching closer with every push of his fingers and brush of his tongue.

“I know you can do it. You’re my perfect girl, aren’t you? Giving me what I asked for.”

His praise worked her even higher, and she pressed her hips harder against his mouth, her fingers twisting tighter in between the soft strands of his hair.

“Please, please, please—” She wasn’t sure what she was begging for, but she knew she couldn’t stop. She was so close, it was *right* there, mounting her higher and higher with every one of his touches. She wanted it, *needed* it, even, and couldn’t have stopped if she wanted to. Everything in the room reduced down to where he was touching her, building her up into something that would inevitably break into a million pieces.

“Take what you need, darling. Take it like the good girl I know you are.”

Her body tightened in anticipation, her hips beginning to falter. The steady pace that she had been rocking against his mouth began to stutter, growing erratic. She moved faster, his tongue licking, pressing just the slightest bit harder in her desperation, but his fingers never changed their pace.

“Fuck my tongue like you want it,” he demanded, sucking at her clit.

Finally, she shattered with a scream. Everything went black, her back bowing and her thighs tightening around his head. She couldn’t stop it, her entire body seizing as her nerves were lit on fire, one by one. The orgasm flooded every inch of her consciousness, blanking her mind and forcing her to endure it. It sent her flying to a point close to pain, and her breath stuck in her lungs. She couldn’t breathe, and could only endure.

For him.

Because of him.

On and on it went, the crest breaking off into smaller bursts of pleasure, until finally she felt him pry her legs from his neck. He gathered her still-twitching body into his arms, murmuring more praise directly into her ear.

“You’re so perfect, Hermione. You did so well.”

Trying to catch her breath, she recognized that he was slowly working his fingers through the two plaits in her hair, loosening them from their ties and shaking her curls out. Feeling his fingers run across her scalp felt like heaven, and she relaxed into his hold.

He simply held her, his fingers stroking her hair with a softness that she didn’t know she needed, and she felt her breathing finally slow. When she opened her eyes, she realized that they were now in the chair he had been sitting in, her body curled up on his lap like a kitten.

“That was...” She couldn’t find the words. She felt slightly dazed, her body completely sated and exhausted. “A lot.”

Glancing up, she recognized his satisfied grin. “And you thought you couldn’t do it.”

Part of her wanted to acknowledge that *she* couldn’t—it was entirely his doing, but even in her post-orgasm haze, she recognized that he didn’t need the ego boost.

A few minutes passed while he soothed her, his hands coming to rest on the cuff around her wrist once he’d worked the tangles from her hair, and he began unbuckling it. Once it was loose he tossed it to the floor and followed up with the other. “I’d like to make a few requests moving forward, if you don’t mind.”

His voice was soft, rumbling deep in his chest, and she couldn’t resist resting her head against his shoulder. Her eyes felt heavy and his soothing touch was doing nothing to deter the sluggish relaxation that settled into her bones. His hands settled around her ankles, working the cuffs off her legs, and she was dimly aware of his hands gently stroking the newly exposed skin once they were gone. And though this wasn’t the first time she’d felt surprisingly affectionate during aftercare, she was determined not to fall asleep on him again.

“Okay,” she yawned.

“If there’s something bothering you, you need to tell me *before* we start a scene. I don’t enjoy having to punish you, you know. Your attitude deterred my plans for the evening, and I was rather excited to see how you’d respond to something new.”

“I’m sorry for ruining tonight.” Sorrow laced around her chest, pulling tight.

His hand squeezed her side of her thigh, spanning it easily. “You didn’t *ruin* anything, darling. You just postponed it.”

Apprehension bloomed in her chest, dissolving any of her lingering sorrow for ruining things. “You’re not angry with me?”

“No, not at all. Would I have liked for you to have told me sooner? Yes. But you still did, and I appreciate it. I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

She didn't know what to say, so she simply nodded.

"And as a payment for my trouble, I'll be keeping the knickers."

That had her sitting up, looking at him in shock. "You—No—I can't just Apparate home without ___"

"I bought them, did I not?" He cut her off, but she could see the amusement in his eyes. "And I'd like to keep them as a souvenir for my troubles. I'd say I've earned them, actually."

Hermione let out a shocked laugh, slapping at his shoulder, but he grabbed her hand and kissed her palm. She watched him, her eyes heating, as he lowered his mouth and kissed her wrist, lingering even longer on the sensitive, delicate skin there. Her lips tingled, reminding her of all the places he *hadn't* kissed.

"Going to hang them from your chandelier like a trophy, then?"

"Please," he grinned again, rolling his eyes as if he was actually affronted, "I'm a man of *taste*, Granger. They'll go on my sconces where I can properly admire them."

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

At this point I feel like I'm passing out kinks like party favors. I promise there's more plot on the way and it's not just a 24/7 smut fest around here.

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

"I'm just saying, I don't think that Falmouth has that good of a roster this season. With Benning flying for Montrose, they're going to be hard pressed—"

"Say what you want, but Livorn is a better Chaser than Trentt ever was. That counts for something."

Hermione let the voices around her blur into the background as she dragged her fingernail across a gouge in the surface of the table. The pub was packed for a Friday night, and the Auror team had been talking about quidditch for long enough that her temples were starting to throb.

"What do you think, Hermione?"

The sound of her name had her head snapping up, blinking her eyes around the table. Several of her coworkers were staring at her with expectant, waiting expressions. She had no idea who posed the question, nor did she really care.

You date Viktor Krum once and suddenly you're a Broom Bunny.

"I haven't really been keeping up with any of the teams this season," she said instead, forcing an apologetic smile. It was the same excuse she used every year, but none of them seemed to notice.

Realizing they weren't going to get any insight from her residual friendship from Krum, the Aurors turned back to their conversation.

Harry's muffled snort drew her attention to her left, where he was sitting with his own drink. "Understatement of the century, I think," he murmured just low enough for her to hear.

"I could paint 'I hate quidditch' on my forehead and they still wouldn't care."

Harry grinned, draining the last of his glass. "Maybe you should stop dating quidditch players, then."

Even though he was only teasing, she leaned over to elbow him. "It was one time!"

"Was it, though?" Harry dodged her elbow again.

Technically, she had dated Viktor twice. There was their brief attempt at long distance right before fifth year, and again a few years previously when she was still trying to figure out what was missing in the bedroom. Ron could have been considered a professional quidditch player

considering his season-long stint with the Chudley Cannons before “retiring early” to help take over the Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes franchise, and that didn’t even count all the times the Prophet had accused her of sleeping with both Harry *and* Ginny before they got married.

Warren, an older Auror sitting on her opposite side, tapped his empty glass on the table loudly as he looked around, straining to see above the heads in the pub. “Where’s our waitress? It’s been ages since she came ‘round.”

Sliding off her stool, Hermione took the opportunity to get away from the quidditch talk. With any luck, she’d be gone long enough that the subject might move on. “I’ll get it. Who needs more?”

One of the new recruits stood to assist, waving his wand to collect the empty glasses. “Might as well help,” he said with an easy smile.

“It’s Sam, right?” she asked as they navigated through the crowd toward the bar. He was tall, with dark hair tied back at the nape of his neck and looked more like a dragon keeper than an Auror.

“Yep.” Sam nodded. “Sorry to jump in like that—I was getting a bit bored back there. Thought I might fall asleep at the table if I had to listen to any more of it.”

Hermione’s laugh faded into the noise around them, and she shrugged. “Same here. Didn’t realize I had company in my misery.”

“Unfortunately,” he said, nodding with mock seriousness as he leaned against the bar. When the bartender noticed them waiting, the glasses vanished. “Just think of the possibilities, though. Together we’ll ruin so many conversations.”

“Only if we’re lucky.” She smiled in return. The conversation lapsed while they ordered, and she waited a few beats before filling the silence. “So how are you liking the department? You started a few weeks ago?”

“About a month now,” he confirmed. “And it’s really great. Robards is a bit hard to please but it’s not anything I didn’t expect.”

Hermione gave him a knowing look, stepping back when the bartender floated over their drinks. “He’s got a specific way he likes things to be done. I don’t blame him, but...”

“It’s a lot?” Sam filled in the gaps with an innocent smile.

She hadn’t had any more time or opportunities to look into Robards’ involvement with the Wizengamot, but her suspicion hadn’t faded in the slightest.

Gathering up the drinks with a flick of his own wand, Sam continued, oblivious to her hesitation. “He’s a good man though. I can’t imagine he doesn’t have his reasons.”

Hermione hummed her agreement, nodding as she fell into step beside him. Thinking it wise to change the subject before he caught notice of her skepticism, she switched gears. “So if you’re not into quidditch, how do you like to spend your time?”

His face lit up, and he leaned down to speak closer to her as they made their way back through the crowded room. “I’ve actually got two little girls at home. Twins. They keep me pretty busy.”

“Oh, that’s lovely! How old?”

“Two.”

Though Sam’s pride was obvious, Hermione couldn’t imagine juggling her job with two small children at home. With the half a dozen full glasses in the air, they made sure to keep slow, steady steps.

“I’m sure they’re just as hard to please,” she joked.

“You can say that again. I’m not sure which is worse.” Sam laughed as he set down the glasses in the middle of the table, and she climbed back up on her stool when he slid a new glass of butterbeer in front of her spot. “I get it coming *and* going.”

“For what it’s worth, you look more than capable.” She wouldn’t have guessed that he had twin toddlers on top of a demanding job at the Ministry, but the lack of shadows under his eyes or premature wrinkles must mean he was doing something right.

“All the credit goes—”

A voice beside her cut off Sam’s response.

“So is the entire department here, or have you decided that there’s no crime to be had during off hours?”

Hermione froze, her shoulders going back as her head snapped to the side. *Dra*— Malfoy. Malfoy was standing beside Harry, an amused look etched across his features as he looked back at her. Her eyes dropped, taking him in as the rest of her coworkers laughed at his joke, but the shock of seeing him had her mind going blank.

His white shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, exposing his throat, and for once he wore no tie or jacket. Though his clothes were just as finely tailored and pressed as they typically were when they would meet on Saturday nights, he looked so much more casual without the additional layer.

“Peterson’s covering the night desk, but honestly… The department might as well be empty with him at the helm.”

She wasn’t sure who made the jab, but it was Harry’s statement that finally broke her attention.

“Hey now, don’t be giving out private Ministry business like that. Malfoy might be under contract but I can’t speak for the other two.”

Other two?

Two figures came into focus beside Malfoy, standing equally as tall and regal in the dimly lit bar.

“Aw, come on now, Potter.” Malfoy smirked. “I thought you’d gotten over your old rivalries.”

Harry leveled the three of them with a flat stare. “Theo, Blaise. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Theo quipped, winking.

Much like her experience with Malfoy, she hadn’t seen either of them since school. While she remembered Theo as being a bit more thin and gangly as a boy, he’d grown into his limbs as a man. Blaise, on the other hand, looked almost identical to the last time she’d seen him. The only thing

that had changed were the robes he wore, obviously more expensive and tailored than a 17 year old might have had.

She froze when his dark eyes traveled over her, stopping on her face just briefly before flitting away. Though there was no malice in his gaze, his greeting did nothing but to increase the anxiety that was snaking its way around her ribcage.

“This place is... interesting. Remind me again why we’re here, Draco?”

“Publicity.”

Malfoy’s answer had blood roaring in her ears, and she blinked down to the table. Panic was quickly overtaking her—she wasn’t ready for this. She wasn’t ready to see him outside The Scarlet Order, nor did she think it would have been a possibility. In all the Friday evenings she’d spent at the pub with Harry and their coworkers, and occasionally Ron and Ginny as well, never once had they run into the men standing at the outskirts of their group.

Had he come for her? To see her? *No, no.* There was no way, it couldn’t be possible. If he wanted to speak with her, he would’ve sent an owl, but she hadn’t heard from him at all that week. *Then why?*

Publicity. Publicity. Something itched at the back of her mind. When she looked back up toward Malfoy, his own eyes were just flicking back to Harry.

“Can’t have the Prophet thinking every public appearance is an engagement announcement, can we?” Malfoy asked in a sardonic tone.

Something that felt like relief washed through her, loosening the knot in her chest. So far, apart from his brief look, he hadn’t focused on her at all. Her eyes sought his out, searching for answers, but they steadily avoided her.

“God forbid they assume every companion is a romantic interest,” Harry agreed, lifting his drink in cheers.

“So I guess that means you aren’t planning the ‘wedding of the century’ after all?” Sam asked, making air quotes with his fingers as the other Aurors around the table snickered into their drinks. Hermione couldn’t breathe. Memories of his hands plagued her. His mouth. His lips. His words.

“I’m fairly certain Draco would flee the country before committing himself to someone so publicly,” Theo joked, clapping Malfoy on the shoulder before he could respond. Malfoy’s mouth dropped open just slightly, as though something was at the tip of his tongue, but he shut it instead.

Any tentative hope that fluttered in her chest was immediately extinguished, sliced into bits with a few words. She knew she needed to look away, to pretend that she didn’t know him and that none of it interested her. But she couldn’t. It didn’t matter—she *knew* it didn’t—the way he was acting, the things he was saying. Like he was some kind of bachelor, unchained to anyone or anything. She had known, since the very beginning, that if anyone found out about their—relationship? Arrangement?—her career would be dead before it even started.

The thought left her mouth sour, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it.

Warren shook his finger at Malfoy. “Yeah, you don’t look much like the commitment type.”

"Not when the press makes it their job to make your life into a spectacle." Malfoy's statement was as stiff and unaffected as his stance.

Harry mumbled something that sounded like more agreement, but it was lost in the sudden roar of blood in her ears.

"Bet it doesn't help when you've got that massive fortune to protect, eh?" Cambrielle, another Auror, joked from her seat. She had chocolate brown hair that was the same shade of her eyes, and she toyed with the end of a strand as she looked at Malfoy. "I'm sure you've got witches clamoring at you left and right. A little press goes a long way, I'd think."

Her gaze held a certain kind of hunger that had Hermione's fists balling beneath the table, wrapping around the handle of her wand until she felt her knuckles pull taut. She was half a step away from jumping up and leaving, from running out the pub door as quickly as she could. Disappearing into the night, just so she could find a place to breathe again.

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Would have been easier to let the papers think what they wanted, but—"

"—But," Malfoy cut in, silencing his friend with a sharp look. "I don't have the luxury of flying under the radar, unlike some of us, Zabini. I will not go along with some sensationalized *lie* because it's easier."

Hermione's stomach felt like it was twisted into a pretzel, emotions wrapping and pulling through her organs with a visceral tug that had her stretching her fingers out just to stop the tingling in her choked grip. Though he still wasn't looking in her direction, it felt like his words were directed right at her, and she couldn't even begin to decipher his meaning. Her palms were damp against her trousers, and it took every ounce of strength to look away from him.

"Cheers to that," someone said from across the table.

Blaise, having been sufficiently chastised, adjusted the collar of his shirt and said nothing else.

"Well, we wouldn't want to spoil what appears to be a rousing night of fun with the Ministry's finest, so we'll leave you to it." Theo ducked his head at them as if he was bowing and stepped away, moving toward the bar. Blaise followed without a word, but Malfoy lingered.

Even from the side of her vision, she noticed it. *Him*. Every movement he made. How he straightened his shoulders back before reaching up to smooth his perfectly done hair, nodding in goodbye to the Aurors sitting around the table.

"Granger—"

Her name had her attention jumping back to Malfoy so quickly she almost fell off her chair.

"—wonderful, as always, to see you again." His eyes were dark as they roamed over her face, lingering on the ends of her hair. His lips pulled to the side in an amused smirk before his attention moved towards Harry at her side. "You should check her for a tongue-tied charm. I can't remember ever seeing her this quiet when we were in school."

It wasn't until her mouth snapped closed that she realized it'd been hanging open. Her eye twitched as her gaze narrowed into a glare, but he paid her no mind, still looking at Harry. *How was it so easy for him?* He spoke about her like they were merely acquaintances, like they—

"I'd tell you not to do anything I wouldn't, but I feel like we all know you're worse than I am any day."

"Depends on how you look at it." Harry returned the smirk.

"Semantics." Malfoy turned, shooting an unaffected look back at the table. "Have a good evening."

In his absence, she dropped her shoulders, releasing all the tension in her body. She took long draws of air in through her nose, struggling to keep her outward appearance somewhat calm in the presence of her coworkers.

"Still a bit prickly, isn't he?"

"He's an *arse*," Hermione spoke up, feeling the words like sandpaper in her throat. It felt wrong, for the first time in her life, but she knew she had to. She had to keep the ruse going. She couldn't let them know. She could admit that logically, through reason and research, going public with Malfoy was a bad idea. And though they'd committed themselves to each other in the privacy of their suite at The Scarlet Order, they could not do so outside those doors.

Not in any formal kind of way. Not in that moment, at least. Briefly, she wondered what it might look like, sharing a bottle of wine with him like he had with Astoria. Letting him open doors for her and debating about books over dinner. Conversations over candle light and sharp looks and the kind of challenges he knew she couldn't, and wouldn't, back down from.

But that was an emotional response, and the wrong one at that.

"He's gotten better," Harry reasoned.

Warren agreed, his ruddy face gone serious. "He must have, if Robards trusts him."

Forcing herself to focus on the conversation at hand, Hermione tracked her gaze across the faces at the table, checking their reactions. *This* was exactly what she needed. Not an emotional crisis in the middle of the pub on a Friday night.

"Do you think he should?" Hermione traced the condensation on her glass, trying hard to keep her voice even. As much as she wanted to know, it was beginning to get harder to question Malfoy and what he might be hiding. "Just seems a little strange, that's all."

"I think at the end of the day we all just want to protect our families," Sam said, leaning forward on his elbows. "Can't disparage him for that."

Cambrielle shrugged. "I heard him in Robards office a year or so ago, whispering about something. Robards was upset, going on about his daughter and Malfoy looked right pissed about the whole thing. They saw me grabbing the kettle and immediately shut the door."

"You mean to tell me that Robards brought *Malfoy* in to protect his daughter? From what? A stray Legilimens on the street?" Warren chuckled. "That boy might be good at teaching you how to close your thoughts off but that's about it. Everything else he's got is because he bought it."

Hermione furrowed her brows, running her tongue along the inside of her teeth as she thought through the new information. Robards' daughter had been several years older, graduating from

Hogwarts when she, Harry, and Ron were first years. She hadn't heard about her recently, though, and couldn't quite remember her name.

Amelia? Amy?

"Maybe Malfoy's not the only one protecting his family, then." Sam shrugged and took a swig of his drink.

Or maybe, Hermione paused, Robards isn't using Malfoy to protect his daughter. Maybe he's trying to protect her from Malfoy.

The thought made her heart drop.

The next morning, Malfoy's eagle owl arrived while she was still in bed.

Seeing you last night left me wanting. If you promise to behave, I've got something special planned.

Don't disappoint me, darling.

D.M.

Her breath stuttered in her chest, her heart ramping up to a steady tempo. She had twelve hours before she met with him, and she knew, she *knew*, she would be a mess until she was standing toe to toe with him again.

If you promise to behave...

She could hear it in his voice as her eyes tracked over the parchment, reading it over and over again. It crumpled in her tight grip, and she only had one thought. *He could never know about her research.* And not just because she didn't want to get caught.

For the first time in her life, she didn't want to disappoint him.

The thought of it made her chest ache, stretching through her sternum and down to her stomach like a wound. It was foreign and uncomfortable, and she hated it as much as she wanted to lean in even further.

But Hermione Granger didn't give up, just because her feelings were getting conflicted. She would have to be even more careful, figuring out what Robards was hiding, and how Malfoy played into all of it. To figure out what Robards daughter, Amelia, had to do with the entire thing and how she got wrapped up between an Auror and a Death Eater, and to do so without anyone finding out. Hermione could only hope that whatever it was, it wasn't as bad as it seemed.

Malfoy was waiting for her in their suite, leaning against the bookshelf and running a black scrap of fabric between his fingers.

"Tell me, Hermione..." His voice was so much warmer, deeper, *richer*, than it had been the night before at the pub, and she shivered as she came to stand in front of him. "Do you trust me?"

The answer was on her lips before she could think twice. "Yes."

She could only hope that she wasn't wrong in doing so.

How had she gotten here? All twisted up in him? Her body began to tremble as he circled her, bringing the silk up to her eyes.

"I thought about going easy on you tonight," he told her, leaning down to speak softly in her ear while he knotted the blindfold around her head with quick, light fingers. "But then I began to wonder... Perhaps that's where I've gone wrong. Giving you too much leeway, hoping that a slow warmup might be what you needed."

Hermione swallowed, her vision gone black but still feeling the heat of his body right behind hers.

He continued. "But I forgot—you're Hermione Granger. There's never been anything in your life that you haven't jumped wholeheartedly into, whether or not you've actually stopped to think about if you *should*. Would you say that's correct?"

Slowly, she nodded, fear beginning to curl in her abdomen with something tighter, heavier, sinking down between her legs. A deep inhale had his cologne warming her senses. "Yes."

"Yes, that's right. My brave girl," he praised her, and she felt his knuckle run down the length of her jaw. "You've taken everything else I've given you so well, even if you did fight it. But tonight I'm going to overwhelm you so much that you *can't*."

A whimper threatened to escape her throat, but Hermione forced her breathing steady. She wasn't afraid of him, no matter how much her body trembled with anticipation. Whatever he had planned, *he* wanted it too. And she wanted to give it to him.

"Yes, please."

She heard his exhale, strong and steady as it brushed against her hair, and his hand fell to her side, wrapping around her ribs. His palm settled just below her breast, and he stepped forward until his chest was aligned with her back.

"Hold on," he instructed, waiting until her hand was over his to wrap the opposite one around her waist. It was like he was hugging her from behind, the embrace entirely too intimate considering their distance the night before. "I'm Apparating us to a room upstairs."

Before she could stiffen in alarm, she felt the pressure of Apparation. It squeezed at her, harder than the arms around her waist, but when she landed, there was no tilting or twisting sensation. No loud pop, or pressure in her ears. Just smooth, controlled magic.

Draco.

She released a breath she didn't know she was holding. "Where are we?" She could hear the alarm seeping into her tone, but she was clutching him tight enough that there was no way he could let her go without her following. *Please don't leave me.*

Hermione startled at the thought. It was sudden and needy, and nothing like she'd ever thought before. *If he leaves*, she reminded herself, *she could take off the blindfold*. Her wand was tucked into the waistband of her skirt. She was more than capable of taking care of herself, even if he wasn't there to prop her up.

The reminder had her standing straighter. Taller. Her hands fell from his arms.

"We're still at the club," Draco assured her. With a light squeeze, he began to release his hold on her, though he kept one hand intertwined with hers. "Just in another room."

She felt a slight tug, following in the direction he began to lead her with slow, careful steps.
"What's wrong with our room?"

Their safe, wonderful room. With its bookshelves and perfect chairs. Sniffing, she couldn't tell any difference, wherever they were. No strange scents in the air, or even a change in temperature. It felt the same.

Draco stopped her, his hand going to her waist to turn her, then pulling backwards with two light taps. To sit, she realized, lowering herself slowly until she felt the strength of his thighs beneath her backside. Once settled, his voice vibrated against her neck as he pressed a light kiss to the skin.

"Our room doesn't have this."

The fabric slipped from her eyes, and she blinked, her vision clearing. In front of them was not just any normal, regular wall.

But a window.

"Welcome to the viewing room, darling."

Hermione stiffened, but his arms held her tight. He didn't give her the chance to form any questions. He spoke against her neck, his hands drifting down to her hips and squeezing lightly.

"And that is the exhibition room. Consider it our entertainment for tonight."

Hermione's eyes were locked on the pane of glass in front of them, and the woman who stood in the middle of the room near a padded table that looked a lot like the one Draco had charmed to use the weekend before. She wore her own blindfold, a scrap of white fabric that matched the lace of her lingerie, but none of that was what made Hermione's heart seize in her chest.

The woman was bound, completely. Stark against the white of her knickers, small black ropes were woven around her body, looping over her torso and down her arms and legs, knotted together in an intricate pattern that weaved around her body. The ropes bracketed her breasts, framing them and pushing them forward over her bra, and pulled at her hips where the delicate lace sat. Though none of the ropes covered the parts of her that the lingerie did, it almost seemed to outline her most sensitive areas. The woman's wrists were bound in front of her hips, her knuckles so white that Hermione could see the tension in her hands as she stood, completely alone.

Waiting, Hermione recognized. Her heart pounded harder. Nerves began to jump in her veins, building into an easy frenzy.

"What are—" She had to swallow, willing herself not to grab at his hands. *To push him away? To pull him tighter?* "What are we doing here?"

Draco's hands left her hips, following the fabric of her skirt down to her thighs. "Surely the Brightest Witch of Her Age doesn't need me to explain what happens in something called the *viewing room*."

Breaking her attention away from the woman in the other room, Hermione cast a quick glance around them. It was a simple room, smaller than their own, and it held no bookshelves or additional chairs. Just the couch and a small table to the side, but the floor was covered in plush, thick carpeting.

Draco's hand swept to the inside of her thigh, rubbing light circles with the tip of his middle finger.

"We're going to watch," she said, breathless. Her fingers felt cold, and she shifted on his lap so she could look back at him.

His features were so full of satisfaction that something twisted in her chest, pulling taut. He didn't answer, however, and when his eyes dipped down to her lips she couldn't stop the instinct to wet them, her tongue sweeping out in anticipation.

"Indeed," he finally replied. They were inches away, the satisfaction on his face bleeding into pure hunger. His grey eyes darkened, his nostrils flaring just slightly, and she felt trapped by the power of his gaze alone.

Hermione wasn't sure how long they stared at each other, breathing in unison, before movement from the corner of her eye broke his hold.

A stocky looking man, with thick forearms and broad shoulders, stepped into the room. His wand was clutched at his side, and he didn't bother looking at the window before waving his wand and muttering a spell that Hermione couldn't quite make out. The glass shimmered gold before settling, the same as it originally was.

Hermione stiffened, realization setting in.

"Wait—" She pulled against his hands, which were pressing against her thighs to keep her in place.
"I don't—"

"Steady, Hermione. They can't see us, and they can't hear us," Draco assured her in a low voice.
"It's charmed glass."

She let out a breath, though her chest still felt too tight. "But we can see them."

Draco waited to answer until she relaxed back into his body. When her chest was back against his, he gave her thigh a quick, appreciative squeeze. "The exhibition room shows you whatever you choose to see. For them, there could be a dozen witches or wizards sitting here, watching them with anticipation. Or it could look like a penthouse window, looking down at a busy street. Part of the appeal is that they don't know who, or what, might really be on the other side."

"They could see anyone?" Hermione asked, her eyes falling back to the scene in front of them. The man was taking off his shirt as he circled the woman in the middle of the room, who had begun to visibly tremble now that she knew she wasn't alone.

"Anyone," Draco confirmed. "Maybe it's a complete stranger, watching them together. Or their friends. An old partner of hers, perhaps, that he wants to make jealous."

She could feel the way his body stiffened underneath hers, and it sent a spike of heat through her veins.

“Or his,” she countered in a whisper. There was something about the fantasy that called to some deep part of her, buried beneath years of putting others first. She could see it, clear as day, the way Draco would want to claim her as his own, to show everyone how she belonged to him in the most base, carnal way. That she was his submissive, just as much as he was her Dom. It thrilled her, even when she knew it shouldn’t.

“Or his.” His touch grew heavier, settling beneath her skirt. His palms were warm against her skin, and she shivered once more.

“What are they going to do?” Hermione asked in a shaky voice. The man was getting closer, his arm outstretched to trace the ropes that bound his partner with a single finger. On her own leg, Draco mimicked the movement.

“Just watch.”

With shallow breaths and her pulse pounding a steady tempo in her veins, Hermione did as he told her. The man was muscular, with the build of a Beater or a fighter, and the physical opposite of the man who held her. Even the man’s arms and chest were smattered with the same dark brown hair on his head, and he swept his hands across the woman’s body with a warm expression on his face.

He didn’t once look at the window.

“He’s checking the tension on the knots.” Draco’s voice dropped low, and he lifted one hand to her blouse. She didn’t fight him as he pulled it loose from the waistband of her skirt, or as his fingers pressed against each pearl button. He didn’t speak again until he was pulling it from her shoulders and dropping it on the floor into a careless pile. “Making sure she’s comfortable. That nothing is pulling or pinching.”

It was the first time Hermione had ever seen Shibari in person. She’d seen photos, but they held no comparison to the real thing.

“But her breasts—isn’t that uncomfortable?” Hermione could see the way the woman’s nipples were hard, the peaks pressing against the nearly-transparent white lace. When the man brushed his knuckles over one, Hermione’s own tightened.

“Not at all,” Draco answered, bringing his own hand to cup the bottom of her breast. His fingers stroked the sensitive skin against her ribs, right below the underwire, teasing before dipping beneath. “If anything, it makes her more sensitive.”

She exhaled hard at the feeling of his fingers toying with her nipple. Arching back, she sank further into his embrace. Feeling one of his hands traveling a slow journey up her thighs and the other wrapped around her chest, caressing her breast, she felt safe. Protected, despite the fear that fluttered beneath her building arousal.

Though she’d agreed to it, written the word *voyeurism* on her list with her own quill, something about it still felt a little bit wrong.

Forbidden, she corrected herself, feeling the arousal flush through her thighs when Draco’s fingers reached her knickers. He toyed with the edge, running the tip of his finger back and forth at the same maddeningly slow pace that he used on her breasts. Her hips began to rock on their own, seeking more, trying to tilt further into his touch so his fingers could slip beneath the fabric and caress her where she felt herself growing slick.

"So..." She swallowed heavily. The man had stopped behind the woman, apparently finished with his appraisal of her ropes, and pulled down the cups of her bra to expose her breasts to the window. He was whispering something into the woman's ear, his eyes dark as he whispered to her. Whatever his words were, whether they were loving or filthy, made her chest flush red. She strained forward, up onto her toes, and the man rewarded her with a rough squeeze of each breast. Hermione almost forgot she had been speaking. "This is it? Just watching?"

The need in her voice betrayed any attempt at trying to hide the effect of his hands and the scene in front of them. It had been two weeks since they'd had sex. With her disobedience ruining things the previous Saturday, she felt like she was having withdrawals. He'd only had sex with her once, and she craved it again. Even then, she ached for it. With every flush of arousal, the ache between her legs grew. His light touches and soft caresses only made it worse, and it was beginning to tighten into a dull throb.

Draco moved, faster than she was expecting, his hand sliding from her knickers and up to her hair. His fingers burrowed into her curls, pulling taut until she was looking back at him.

"Are you trying to goad me into giving you more, Hermione?"

The hard edge to his tone and the sharp look on his face had her chest tightening. "No, I—"

"No," he cut her off. "That's exactly what you were trying to do. And again, I thought I would do the *nice* thing and give you a few minutes to adjust. To warm up slowly, since this is all so new. But you're an impatient little witch. You want my cock, don't you? You want me to give it to you while she gets fucked."

Hermione's response was stuck in her throat. She opened her mouth, but no noise came out. When his fingers tightened in her hair, twisting just enough to make her nerves tingle, she nodded.

"Yes, yes. Please, Draco."

Her needy begging had a smile stretching across his face. Pleased with her obedience, he let her go. "Stand up."

Stumbling to her feet, Hermione did as she was told and faced him. Draco didn't speak as he stripped her, unzipping the side of her skirt and pulling it over her hips. When it was pooled at her feet, he dropped her knickers to the pile as well. Without waiting for his instruction she turned, giving him her back, and he unclasped her bra.

There was a light pinch on her backside, and she distantly recognized his praise. "Look at you, moving so I can undress you like a good girl. Like you're desperate to be naked and writhing on my lap again."

His words filled her with more heat, but her eyes were stuck on the window, where the man was ripping the lace knickers off the woman's body. A thatch of blonde curls matched the hair on her head, and the woman's mouth dropped open in a pleasured cry. The man's thick fingers wasted no time delving between her legs, but the woman was struggling to hold still.

Hermione shifted on her feet, rubbing her own thighs together.

There was a light laugh from behind her, but she couldn't look. She could only watch as the man thrust his fingers between the woman's legs, pulling out to circle her clit before diving back in.

Over and over again until the woman was rocking on his hand.

“Hermione, look at me.”

Draco’s order had her turning her head, fighting to keep the scene in her peripheral vision, but when she saw him, she sucked in a harsh breath.

Draco was still sitting, clad in a black suit, but had adjusted himself during her distraction. His tie was loosened and his collar had been unbuttoned, but that wasn’t what caught her attention. With one leg stretched out between them, Hermione followed the lines of his body to his hips, where he’d pulled his cock free and was slowly stroking it while he took her in.

“Is this what you wanted?” he teased, but she couldn’t look away from the way he touched himself. His fingers worked the tip, swirling around the head and pressing the underside and tracing the vein down. *Is that how he likes it?* She could do that with her mouth, she was sure of it.

“Yes.” She exhaled the word, glancing down at her feet. She could sink to her knees and crawl between his—

“Don’t even consider it,” Draco warned her. “You’re going to sit right back on my lap where I want you. Where you can *watch*.”

The reality of what they were about to do set in at once, and Hermione rocked back on her heels. They were going to have sex while watching another couple.

Oh, Merlin.

“Come on then. Don’t keep me waiting.”

His impatient attitude, combined with the fact that he was still fully clothed while she stood totally nude, made her abdomen clench. He knew how bad she wanted it, but he did too.

Turning back around, she made sure to keep her eyes down as she stepped between his legs and slowly lowered herself over his lap. Gasping on an inhale, she felt the tip of his erection press against her center, held in place by his hand, and his other came down on her hip to steady the descent.

“Slowly now.” The tension in his voice made her shiver, but the stretching sensation between her legs blanked out any other thoughts. “There you go. Good girl.”

Once she was fully seated, his cock sitting deep in her channel, she let her gaze travel back up to the window. The couple, fully unaware of what was happening between her and Draco, were kissing while the man continued to fuck his partner with two fingers.

Hermione’s hips began to rock, matching the man’s pace, and moaned lightly. At the sound, Draco’s hand stilled her hips, and he held her tight as he shifted his position underneath her. It jostled his cock, and she squeaked as the tip hit deep.

But he didn’t let go. He held her in place, his fingers digging into her bare hips, refusing to let her move.

“Since you couldn’t wait, you’re going to sit here and do nothing until I think you’ve earned it.”

“What?!” *But—She was already*— Her thighs tightened as she twisted around to look at him, her chest expanding as she panted. The heat between her legs was building, and the stretch of his erection filled her with a single desire… To rock and grind and writhe on top of him until they both came. She was desperate for it. The last time he’d taken her, he was in control. She wanted to give him this—she wanted to show him how much she desired him, how much she appreciated everything he did for her. She wanted to bring *him* to orgasm for once.

“You heard me.” Draco smirked, but he didn’t let go. “You’re going to sit here like a good little witch and watch the show I arranged for us, and when I think you’re ready, I’ll give you what you want so badly. You can have enough to take the edge off and nothing more.”

He had the effortless ability to switch between soft, gentle commands and hard, demanding orders.

Hermione’s voice shook when she finally found the words to respond. “Yes, Draco.”

Even though she was on top, he was still in control. *He’ll always be in control.*

She moved slowly, turning back around and sitting up at attention. She tried to focus, not letting her mind wander to the heat and pressure between her legs. In front of them, the couple had moved to the table, with the woman bent over at the waist against the padded surface while the man teased her from behind. He used one hand to tease her clit, and the other slowly unzipped his trousers, undressing himself.

“The way they reserve this room is actually very interesting,” Draco said once she stilled. One hand released her hip, and he moved it forward to cup the front of her cunt. It spanned her lips, his fingers sliding across the wetness that was leaking out, but only gave her the slightest pressure. She could barely process what he was saying. “If a couple wants to use the exhibition room, they sign up for a specific date, and The Scarlet Order puts their anonymous profiles up for others to look at. If your interests align, then you can book the viewing room to watch. Their list gives you a decent amount of insight into what kinds of things you might get to experience, but they aren’t told how many people might sign up to watch.”

The man pulled out his cock, his head dropping back as he sighed in relief. From her vantage point it was thick, but looking at it for too long had her squirming. Draco’s hand tightened against her, and she froze. “Yes, that’s… interesting.”

She had no idea what he was talking about, or why.

“Do you know what this couple had at the top of their interest lists?”

Draco’s voice held a note of amusement, and it was enough to have unease blooming in her chest.

“What?”

“These two—” Draco paused, his fingers between her legs sliding up to her clit, “—prefer to edge themselves.”

Sweet Circe.

“Have you ever been edged, Hermione?” The question was deceptively casual, and he began a slow circle over the bundle of nerves. Never quite touching it, only teasing, but it had Hermione straining, struggling not to move.

“N—no.” Her throat had gone dry, and she couldn’t seem to keep her lips wet.

The man, having removed his trousers, now stood naked behind his bound partner. He didn’t touch her, only stroking himself as he fingered her. She was still blindfolded, but Hermione could see the way the woman was panting heavily, her fair skin flushed red with exertion and anticipation.

“You’re awfully wet, darling,” Draco observed. It felt like she was growing slicker with every pass of his fingers. His slow circles turned to steady strokes. His index and middle fingers toyed with her, strumming on the sides of her clit and giving her just enough friction that it took every ounce of strength she had not to move. “I might think you like this.”

The man stepped forward, running the head of his erection along the woman’s folds. He teased her, never quite dipping into her entrance, even while she writhed on the table, pushing her hips back for more. Hermione felt herself clench, tightening and fluttering around Draco’s cock.

“Please...” The plea was barely a whisper, but Draco only chuckled. With one hand between her legs, he used the other to hold the back of her neck, keeping her in place to watch.

“Please what? I’ve already given you my cock. I don’t know what else it is that you think you need.”

Her hips tilted just slightly, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Please let me move.”

The need building low in her belly was burning hot, and the longer she watched the couple, the worse it became. When the man began pressing himself between his partner’s legs, Hermione cried out.

Draco’s fingers increased their speed, and her legs tightened again.

“You can move when I say you can move. You can *come* when I say you can come.”

Hermione gripped at his thighs beneath her legs, digging her nails into his trousers. She didn’t care if she tore the expensive material or scratched so hard he had marks—he deserved it. He was driving her crazy, and the night had only just begun.

The man in front of them began to move behind the woman with long, slow strokes. He took his time, working himself in and out of her center with a lazy pace. The woman’s hands stretched and fisted, looking for purchase against something but finding nothing. Seeing her so helpless, wanting and desperate, had Hermione’s own need spiraling tighter.

“Steady,” Draco warned her when her hips began to shift, rocking just slightly as her body sought the friction she so desperately needed. His fingers still rubbed at the sides of her clit, giving her just enough to have her falling towards the edge but not nearly enough to send her over completely.

“Please,” she tried begging again. “Just a little.”

Instead of giving in, he removed his hands from between her legs entirely, and she cried out.

“No!”

She turned, shifting on his lap before she could stop herself. Draco's features were tight, sharp with tension, and he leveled her with a hard stare.

"If I wanted to hear you beg, I'd ask for it."

The edge in his voice had her turning back around and settling in again. Leaning back against him, she let her thighs open wider. *Maybe with less friction, it'll be easier.*

Draped across his lap, totally naked and stuffed full, Hermione couldn't help but look down at her own body. Her nipples were pebbled and flushed a dark pink, and her breasts were beginning to swell. Her naked legs, open wide over his lap, were a sharp contrast to the dark fabric of his suit beneath her, and she chewed on her lip.

She really shouldn't have told him about that particular fantasy. So far, he'd yet to disrobe when they were together.

"I'm sorry, Draco," she said, resting her head against his neck. It was the closest she could get to cuddling with him while still facing forward. "I'll be good."

He let out a sharp exhale, but his hands came back to her waist.

"You're such a little tease."

Hermione smiled, but it fell from her lips as soon as she looked back at the window. The woman was rocking back against the man, her hips chasing every thrust, her face twisted in pleasure. Before she could break, the man fisted his erection and pulled out completely, panting heavily. With his free hand, he spanked her bare arse, chastising her for getting too close to orgasm. The woman cried out in a silent plea, but the man only grinned. He said something, his mouth moving silently, and the woman nodded.

"He's reminding her of their audience," Draco narrated as his hand crept back toward her spread legs. Hermione struggled to keep her breathing in check, holding completely still as he began to caress her once more. "He wants her to know that there's someone on the other side of the glass, watching her."

Hermione felt herself tighten at his words, and Draco hummed at the feeling. When his cock twitched between her legs, she gasped.

"Maybe one day that will be you," Draco told her. In front of them, the man pressed back between his partner's legs, squeezing her hips tightly as he returned to his original languid pace. In their room, Draco's fingers began to slide on either side of her clit, applying light pressure as he teased it.

Hermione could only moan, biting down on her lip.

"Maybe," he continued. "I'll spread you wide and play with your pretty little clit, just like this. Show everyone how wet you get for me with my hand between your legs. Show them what you look like, full of my cock and still begging for more."

The sudden rush of arousal had her toes curling, and she panted. It was taking every bit of her self control not to fall apart, to beg and writhe and plead for more. She was so close to breaking, so close to falling apart and crying out for him—she would give him whatever he wanted, if he just let

her have a bit more. Not too much, just enough to finally crest the hill that she was rapidly climbing. *Maybe if she...* Hermione stopped the thought before it could develop any further. She could be good. She *could*.

The man's pace began to falter, his hips pumping faster. His face was relaxed in pleasure, breathing heavily as he reveled in the feel of his partner's body. *Was that what Draco looked like when he fucked her? What it felt like to be inside of her, falling apart?*

Not for the first time, Hermione craved more intimacy. She wanted his kiss. His body. His forehead, pressed against hers as they both fell apart so she could look into his grey eyes and find the truth she so desperately wanted. Needed.

Draco's fingers grew more insistent, speeding up and pressing harder, giving her a bit more friction. It was the perfect tempo to match the show in front of them, and she could almost feel what it would feel like to have Draco pushing into her from behind. Her body began to tighten, her thighs tensing so hard they began to shake. But she wouldn't move.

She almost cried out when the man in the other room pulled back again, his neck flushed red as he worked himself off the edge. Draco eased back at the same time, releasing his hold on her clit until only a light pressure remained. A whine escaped her instead, muffled by her closed lips, and she screwed her eyes closed as tight as she could. She thought of anything she could that might help—work memos, her list of errands for the next day, the stew she ate for dinner—none of it worked anymore. None of it relieved any of the mounting pressure in her pelvis, still coiled and ready to break.

Draco still teased her, with little flicks of his middle finger until she groaned. “How—” She had to force herself to focus long enough to think clearly, “—how is this not killing you too?”

“Who said it wasn’t?” Draco replied. When his hand came up to trace her nipple with his opposite hand, her eyes snapped back open. “You, darling, have never been one to be able to hide how you’re feeling. You’re not used to someone with self control.”

In front of them, the man pulled the woman’s hips back and slid inside of her once more.

“You’re cruel,” Hermione whined.

“You’re desperate. And wild. And beautiful.”

Each descriptor was articulated with a light pinch to her nipple. She gasped when his fingers began to stroke at her clit, and the pressure began to build again. It was throbbing, a deep ache that was only getting worse with every passing minute.

It took her no time at all to reach the edge again, her desire making it nearly impossible not to rock her hips. But she knew if she did, Draco would stop touching her. It was a maddening task, wanting more but knowing if she even so much as tried, it would be ripped from her hands before her fingers could even brush it.

“Draco,” she moaned. “I’m not sure... I can’t...”

“You can,” he promised her. “Keep holding on. It will be worth it.”

The woman on the table was pushing back again, her hips shaking as she fucked herself on the man's cock. He stood and let her do all the work, but Hermione could see the tension on his face. His eyes were glued to her arse, tracking the way she worked her hips back and down, chasing pleasure with a single minded intent.

It was exactly what Hermione wanted, too.

She was so wet that she knew Draco's trousers would be stained when they were done. There was no way she hadn't leaked out all over his lap, even without him moving. Between her legs, he was still hard as stone, the tip of his cock pressing against the front of her channel where the sensitive spot was that made her whole body tingle.

If he realized the same thing, he must not have minded, as his fingers began circling her clit. It allowed for the pad of his fingers to pass right over the top, and her body jolted with each touch. It felt like a shock of magic every time he made contact, making her whimper as her legs twitched helplessly.

Hermione was lost. She could no longer focus on the couple in the other room, or anything around her. All she knew was the pressure between her legs and the heat of Draco—his hand, his cock, his body—all at once. She didn't need to open her eyes again when his fingers paused, not pulling back, but freezing in place.

The other couple must have stopped.

"No," she keened. "Please, no more."

It really was beginning to grow painful. Her entire lower body was throbbing. Her legs were tight, her muscles so tense she knew she would be sore in the morning. Her toes were curled, her feet arched and twisting, scrambling for purchase even though she knew she wasn't allowed any leverage. If she couldn't hold out, if she couldn't do what he asked—

"Fuck me, Hermione. Now."

Her body moved before her mind fully processed the command. But instead of sitting up and working her hips on top of him, she stood, stumbling to her feet and turning so fast she almost fell over. She tipped on to one knee, pulling herself up and over his lap until she straddled him, and fed his cock back into her before he could grip it himself.

The only sound he made was a harsh exhale as she sunk down in one fell swoop, reseating herself on him with one thing in mind. His jaw clenched hard, the muscle in his temple throbbing, but he let her take the lead. She began to move in earnest, pulling her hips back, circling them as she chased the friction she had been so desperate for.

She was going to see his face when he came inside her. She had to.

Hermione forgot about the couple in the other room. She couldn't bring herself to care what they were doing, or if the whole bloody thing was on fire. There was only Draco, and the feel of him beneath her.

Snapping her hips forward, she cried out at the feel of him. It was delicious, sliding between her legs with a smooth glide. Hitting deep with every push of her pelvis, pulling back before tilting

forward again. She bounced, rubbing her breasts against his dress shirt, and dropped her forehead to his, just as she'd wanted to.

"Draco," she begged. She wasn't sure what she was asking him for—she was mindless with want, only focusing on the sensation between their bodies, but she knew she needed more. She was so worked up it felt like she was on fire, sweat beading between her breasts and at the small of her back, but she couldn't care. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. Only him. Only the man who knew exactly how to make her fall apart, and how to put her back together again.

His hand came to thread through her curls, holding her head in place against his. His eyes were dark, practically black from the irises blown wide, and she felt him begin to shake beneath her as she moved.

"Don't you dare stop, darling. Don't you dare fucking stop."

Moaning, Hermione increased her pace, pressing her hips down on every pull so she could feel her clit drag across his pubic bone. She fought her eyes from closing, wanting to *finally* revel in the sensations, but she couldn't let herself.

"Touch me—please, Draco, please—"

She needed all of him again. She needed to come apart under his touch, because *he* gave it to her, not because she took it for herself. It was building, pulling tight in her core, and her hips began to stutter. Her thighs shook, squeezing his hips, and she felt her center begin to flutter when his thumb reached between their bodies to find her clit.

His mouth dropped open at the same time she felt it, that moment when she knew it was happening. The moment she'd been chasing all night. It only took a few careful presses of his thumb, her hips doing all the work on top of him. It snapped, pulling every muscle in her body tight, but she didn't stop moving. For all the friction he'd denied her, she took it as her due.

"There it is," he groaned, tensing beneath her. When her legs gave out, he took over, thrusting up and into her so it didn't stop. Pleasure broke over her body in waves, washing across her nerves and flooding her veins with warmth. It seized her, over and over again, driven higher and further by Draco's punishing thrusts up into her. Her lips were just a mere breath away from his, and she panted against his mouth. Wanting to kiss him, to feel his lips as she came, but she couldn't. Not until he gave her permission.

"Fuck, darling, I'll never get enough—never get enough of this—of—"

Whatever he was about to say was lost on another groan, the moan choking off in his chest before it could fully form. His eyes drifted closed as his thrusts grew erratic, pushing into her several more times before he broke completely. His face was slack with pleasure as he came, reveling in the feel of it, of *her*, and it was one of the most beautiful expressions she'd ever seen. It set off another wave of her own orgasm, the warm heat flooding her center making her body clench again. Though not as strong as the first, she still felt her nerves spark, tensing and twisting up her spine until she fell limp against him, completely spent.

With her head buried in his neck, she wasn't sure how long she laid on top of him, her mind and body slowly coming back into clarity. At some point, his hand came up to stroke down her spine, reaching down to lightly massage her backside before repeating the motion. Like he was petting her, soothing her after he'd worked her into a frenzy.

"I really should get you cleaned up," he spoke finally, and she felt a faint brush against her hair as he pressed his cheek against her. The gentle affection had her smiling to herself.

"I think I'd rather stay here, actually." In his arms, all wrapped up in him, where she didn't have to think about her life or her work or any of the thoughts that plagued her outside of their meetings together.

Draco laughed, his stomach jostling her just slightly, and she winced at the twinge between her legs. It was enough of a reminder that the scene was over and she sat up, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the light. His hand came to her chin, holding her steady as he studied her face.

"Funny, isn't it? How every time we begin a scene I have to fight to keep you close. But by the end I have to all but pry you off of me. It's... quite the difference."

She blushed. "You—" She paused, but knew that she needed to finish what she'd started. "You have to win."

He stilled, his thumb pulling up just slightly to brush over her bottom lip. He traced it, his touch so light and delicate that she leaned farther into him, chasing it. If she closed her eyes, she might be able to imagine it was his mouth instead. Draco grinned, satisfied at her response.

"Indeed I do."

Hermione forced herself to look away before she blushed again. She wasn't an innocent schoolgirl anymore, but there was something about Draco's certainty, how he seemed to know her better than she knew herself, that had her helpless against him. He was observant, not only sure of her needs but also in the capability of his own skills, that there was no way she'd ever find another man like him.

The thought terrified her.

"That was... not what I expected for tonight. In a good way, though," she said, focusing on the buttons on his shirt instead of looking back at his face. She traced one with her thumb, feeling the cool, smooth surface of it, before moving to the next. Imagining the way they would slide through the holes of the fabric, opening up to reveal his chest. Undressing him. Pulling it over her own naked body, wrapping herself in his clothes.

"Good." He let her play with the buttons on his shirt, his hands coming back down to trace her bared breasts in return. When she shivered, he did it again. "What did you think I had planned?"

Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek, considering her options. Truthfully, she'd stopped trying to anticipate his moves. Nothing he did was as predictable as she'd hoped, and trying to stay one step ahead of him was quickly becoming exhausting.

"I wasn't sure, honestly. You always seem to surprise me. Every time I think I have you figured out, you prove me wrong. I might as well give up."

"Hermione Granger, give up?" He laughed, surprise filling his tone. "Darling, I don't think you're capable of such a thing. And if I can speak candidly, I'd say that your determination is one of your best qualities."

Guilt flashed through her body, dousing any remaining embers of arousal and reminding her of everything she was hiding.

“Just one?” she teased instead, pulling off of him slowly. Though he’d softened, the sensation of his cock sliding free of her core had her muscles twitching.

He wasted no time pulling her into his side with a strong arm. Once she was settled, he used his other hand to tuck himself back into his trousers, re-buttoning them and pulling his shirt down so he was covered.

“Someone’s coming to terms with their praise kink, I see.”

Hermione poked him in the side, but he didn’t seem to mind.

After a few moments of blissful silence, Draco spoke again. “We should talk about last night.”

Holding her breath, Hermione tried to remain calm. There were a thousand different ways the conversation could go, but she needed to let him lead. “What about it?”

When he glanced down at her, she noticed his features were blank. Completely neutral, and almost perfectly relaxed, but it was betrayed by the tension in his body. His muscles were tight and his breathing was controlled, and if she hadn’t been cuddled up next to him, she might not have noticed.

“I understand why we need to keep our arrangement private, and I have no issues in doing so.” Draco squeezed her lightly, but his other hand came up to smooth back his hair. He was already disheveled, so she wasn’t sure why it mattered. “But I do regret blindsiding you like that. It’s likely that we’ll continue to run into each other in the future, given your position and my schedule at the Ministry. We should discuss a more concrete plan, just in case.”

Hermione understood why they needed to maintain their distance outside of The Scarlet Order. It was her entire reasoning for signing up with the club in the first place—they were the best at discretion. They were the best at private arrangements, for people like her and Draco. People whose livelihood might hinge on making sure that they weren’t seen doing anything that could be misinterpreted by the wrong people.

But in the afterglow of sex, with her body still flooded with hormones and his hands keeping her tucked safely into his side, she realized just how much she wanted to forget about the stupid, pointless rules keeping them in place. With every meeting with Draco, the lines became more blurred—she wanted more than one night a week with him. She wanted him in her bed, holding her down while he fucked her in the morning before work. She wanted him to slip into her office with takeaway in his hands for lunch and a gleam in his eye. She wanted weekends and weekdays, without waiting for Saturday to come around.

Cold, sharp fear kept her mouth shut. It kept those thoughts locked away, deep in the caverns of her chest where she couldn’t let them see the light of day.

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” she agreed after a moment.

She had no right to feel that way about him, and especially not after just a month and a half. They hadn’t even kissed—they weren’t in a real relationship, even if they were committed to only sleeping with each other. She was still suspicious of his motives with the Ministry, and he had an

entire life outside of their meetings that she wasn't privy to. She didn't know him. He didn't know her. Not really. Bedroom chemistry might be one thing, but what they had wasn't enough to want the things she did.

"Don't sound so pleased," Draco joked, mistaking her melancholy. "I was going to suggest that we might try something new where I don't actively insult you in public anymore, but if you'd rather keep up the foreplay..."

His threat had her laughing, despite the downturn in her mood. "No, no, that would be fine. It makes sense, I think, considering how everyone else in the department seems to like you. I might as well get on board at some point, too."

Draco scoffed, pulling back to peer down at her with narrowed eyes. "I will have you know that they don't just *seem* to like me, they actually do. I'm a deeply likable person."

"Did you dominate them as well? Is that how you're winning over the DMLE, one Auror at a time?"

Draco rolled his eyes at her. "Luckily for you, I prefer swotty little witches who like to torture me. It's my burden to bear, but someone has to do it."

"And you're so brave about it." When she patted his chest, patronizing, he caught it with his hand and intertwined their fingers.

"I am, actually, and I'm flattered that you've noticed."

Hermione snorted. "You know what else I've noticed? The way that Cambrielle looks at you. I swore she was about to climb over the table last night just to see if someone might take a photo of you together so *she* could be the one featured in the papers as your latest bride-to-be."

"You have nothing to worry about, darling. She doesn't even register." He pressed a kiss to her forehead before his voice dropped low. "But you should know that I find your jealousy to be a massive turn-on."

Ignoring him, she continued. "It's disgusting, really. She should have more self control. Lurking about in the office, watching you."

"Is she, then?"

Hermione snapped her mouth shut, realizing what she'd said. Draco looked down at her, his pewter gaze knowing.

"Did she tell you that herself, or did you notice her on your own?" he prodded.

"We... might've been discussing you after you left with Theo and Blaise," she finally answered. Tension pulled tight in her abdomen, toeing the line between risk and reward. It was a dangerous thing to be discussing, given what she was searching for, but something pushed her onward. His arm around her waist, maybe, or the residual feelings from her post-sex comedown. "She said she overheard you and Robards discussing his daughter last year. That you were upset about something, but he shut the door before she could make anything out. She thought that he might have brought you into the department because he was trying to protect her from something."

Please be it, she pleaded silently. *Please be that simple*. For once, she wished for an easy solution. That Draco wasn't blackmailing Robards, and that it really was about protection. That there was a simple explanation behind everything, and the only reason Draco wouldn't tell her was because it wasn't his secret in the first place. That maybe he was innocent after all, and that the only thing holding her back from really letting go would be gone for good.

When Draco tensed, his breathing slowed into something so much more measured and controlled than just a few minutes before, it had Hermione's heart sinking like a stone through water. When he spoke, his voice was tight.

"Those reasons are between Robards and I, end of story. Whatever Cambrielle thought she heard, she was mistaken."

"But—" Hermione tried to pull away, but he held her tight. She couldn't move.

"Leave it alone, Hermione. I know that that big brain of yours needs answers, but trust me when I say that this is nothing you need to be involved in."

"Draco, please..." She tried again. "Let me help you. Whatever it is, I'm sure I can do something."

"Enough!" He released her, moving to stand up before she had time to stop him. Though she had just tried to do the same, his sudden distance had her chest aching. He paced, turning around, then tracked back to her, sitting alone on the couch. His shoulders were tight, and his hands flexed at his sides in agitation. "You can't help—there's nothing you, or anyone in the Ministry can do about any of it. I will not speak of this any more. I *can't*."

The look in his eyes spoke volumes.

He *couldn't*. Perhaps part of it was because he didn't want to, but also because he was bound not to.

Hermione had heard of binding magical contracts that facilitated a vow of silence. Almost like an Unbreakable Vow, but specifically designed to keep a witch or wizard from speaking about a certain topic. Mostly used in the Department of Mysteries, the Unspeakables were required to take the oath as a part of their job, but it was also how Voldemort ensured that outside of his inner circle, no one would ever know the process of how to imprint a Dark Mark.

Hermione's skin turned cold, and she reached down to snatch her blouse from the floor to cover her torso.

"You took an Oath?"

"I had to." He looked away, his jaw tight. "It was the only way. That alone should tell you how serious this is, Hermione."

"I'm sorry," she tried to apologize, standing to slip on her skirt next. "I didn't mean to pry—"

"You did," he snapped. "I told you everything that I could, and I trusted that that was enough. It has to be enough."

"I—" The response died in her throat, and she looked at the ground. Guilty tears began to prickle at the backs of her eyes, and she swallowed past the growing tightness in her throat.

When she didn't continue, she heard Draco step closer. His hand lifted her chin, bringing her eyes back up to his.

"I need you to promise me that you'll leave this alone. You have to."

She heard the silent qualifier, whispered between his words. The unspoken threat, that if she didn't, everything they'd been building together would be ruined. Hermione knew her answer meant choosing between Draco or the mystery that called to her from that very first article in the Prophet. She couldn't have them both. If she agreed, if she spoke the word *yes* out loud the way he was asking her to, she would be going against every instinct in her body.

She'd won a war with those instincts, and the thought of voluntarily giving up her quest for truth and knowledge made her feel physically sick. It wasn't who she was. But she knew, deep down, that she wouldn't be able to trust Draco without those answers. Even if she did choose him, it could never become more. Not until she had the whole picture, as ugly as it might be.

Not knowing what lurked in the dark was worse than the monsters she might have to face.

There had to be another way. Another way where she could keep both. Where she could figure out what was going on, and how it all led back to the man standing in front of her. She couldn't promise him that she would leave it alone, but she could promise herself that she wouldn't stop searching until she found a solution that would give her the answers she needed to trust Draco, and to give them a chance—a real, fighting chance—to build something together outside of The Scarlet Order.

So instead of agreeing, instead of forcing the word out and condemning their relationship before it could even start, she nodded. It would have to be good enough.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

It was Wednesday evening, nearly sunset, when a familiar eagle owl arrived at Hermione's window.

Darling,

I've been called to our estate in France to handle some business affairs that will likely span the weekend. If you are free, I may be able to break away on Friday evening for a short period. I would still love to see you, even if only for a few minutes.

D.M.

Hermione felt her heart unexpectedly drop into her stomach. With the parchment clutched between her fingers, she stared at his title for her until the word began to blur. *Darling*. It was the first time he'd referred to her as such outside of their scenes, and it made the letter that much harder to accept. She knew she shouldn't be so upset—it was natural for their schedules to conflict. It was bound to happen at some point, but the depth of her disappointment was more than she'd anticipated. It would be the first week that she wouldn't see him in nearly two months.

With regret burning at the back of her throat, she summoned her own parchment.

Draco,

I'm so sorry, but I've got other plans on Friday evening that can't be rescheduled.

Ginny was returning from her six-week intensive training camp in Wales with the Harpies, and there was no way she could even consider ditching the "Welcome Home!" party that Harry had been planning for his wife. Continuing the letter, Hermione frowned at the thought of her work schedule the following week.

We've got a trial coming up next week as well, which will likely lead to some late nights. I'm not sure I'll be free again until the following weekend.

She hesitated, her quill poised over the parchment before quickly scribbling her name. Instinct warred within her—would it be too much to sign off with a "Yours," or would that be too presumptuous? She shook her head to herself. These weren't love letters.

His owl didn't return until the following morning, hooting angrily for snacks when she removed the letter. It was shorter, just one line of perfectly scripted letters, and it made her chest begin to ache once more.

I understand; good luck next week. Know I'll be thinking of you.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Hermione folded the letter and tucked it into the pocket of her robes, grabbing a handful of treats for Draco's owl before shooing it from her windowsill.

Though she knew she likely wouldn't have any quiet moments to reread his words, just knowing it was close by kept her feeling more settled as she readied for her day. She felt the weight of it in her

pocket, running her fingers over the sharp edges as she took the lifts to her office, knowing that the next week would be heavy with stress.

It's fine, she reminded herself. *You don't need this*. She'd survived for years without having weekly sex with Draco Malfoy. It was downright *silly* for her to feel so attached to him so soon. It was an emotional release, yes, and he made sure to create an environment where she didn't have to be in charge for once. Where she could trust someone else for once, knowing she was safe.

That's all. She could handle an extra week apart.

The department was a flurry of activity when the lift doors opened, with almost every Auror and support staff member pulling files and documents for the upcoming trial. Additional secretaries and research assistants were being pulled from nearby departments on Robards' order to ensure that no witness testimony or memory was missed for the Wizengamot's prosecution.

Vance Grabsworth, a known Voldemort sympathizer, had finally been caught after years on the run. Though he hadn't directly participated in the war, they'd traced back thousands of galleons to Grabsworth's vaults, proving that the wizard had been helping to covertly fund Death Eater activities.

"Morning, Hermione," Harry greeted her in the open area of cubicles where the junior Aurors worked, holding a muffin. "You'll be at the four o'clock meeting, yeah?"

Pausing, Hermione tried to remember the details of her schedule that afternoon. She had several on her calendar, but wasn't sure which one Harry might've been referring to. "Which one is that again?"

"Oh, it's that one with, erm..." Harry stopped to take a large bite of his muffin, crumbs gathering at the edges of his mouth. Hermione lifted a brow as she waited, but he seemed in no hurry. Finally, he swallowed. "...that one bloke from Magical Games and Sports."

"Ahh, I'm not sure." She grimaced. It didn't sound familiar, but if he'd sent the invite at the last minute, as he typically did, the memo was likely still sitting on her desk unprocessed. "If you've sent it over I'm sure it's on my calendar. I'll see you then."

She ignored the urge to argue that this was not the week to be wasting time with meetings on Quidditch. Not when they were days away from a massive trial, and whatever they needed from the DMLE was likely a low-grade priority at best.

"Sounds good!" he called after her as she continued on her way to her office. "See you then!"

With a sigh, Hermione made a mental note to check her interoffice memos as soon as she got to her desk. If there was a missing meeting invite buried in the pile, there was no telling what else she was unknowingly behind on.

Hermione was elbows deep in legal forms when a knock sounded from her door. She was staring down at the papers in her hands, trying her damndest to sort through the mess that was a result of an improperly filed magical warrant and a sloppy Auror who didn't double check their investigative codes.

"Busy! Just a moment!"

If she took her eyes off the forms she knew she would lose her place. Two documents. Two separate, but mixed up codes. One listed a code 879425, and the other a code 879245. *Orders to Submit to Bodily Search* and *Orders to Reveal or Remove any Magical Trace or Elements on a Person or Space*, respectively.

Hermione groaned, dropping her head. They were *both* incorrect. Warren had needed to file the warrant under a code 879524—*Requirement to Surrender Any Magical Items or Oddities*.

The paperwork to fix the documents would be at least three rolls of parchment long, and she would need to rush them through the Minister’s office for approval before the trial. *Gods, what a mess.* If she didn’t finish—

“Excuse me, Miss.” A deep, stiff voice sounded from her office door, the hinges creaking open as her visitor obviously refused to wait any longer. “I’m looking for one of my best friends? Might you have seen her around? Curly hair? Ink smudges on her nose? Frustrated eyebrows—”

“Ginny!” Hermione gasped, dropping the parchment and leaping to her feet. “What are you doing here? You weren’t supposed to be back until tomorrow!”

The redhead grinned, opening her arms wide for a hug. “I got in early!”

Wrapped in Ginny’s embrace, Hermione relaxed just slightly. “Oh, it’s so good to finally see you.”

It had been a long six weeks without one of her best friends. Ginny’s schedule barely left her time to do anything except practice, and their contact had been limited to a handful of floo calls while Hermione was at Grimmauld with Harry.

Six weeks where Hermione had somehow developed a secret relationship with Draco Malfoy. Six weeks of feelings and sex and all sorts of things she’d usually talk to Ginny about, but couldn’t. Not this time.

She felt the weight of the letter in her pocket. She’d only taken it out a few times so far that day, making sure her office door was firmly closed and locked, to stare at Draco’s words.

Darling. It was the first time he’d written it for her, inking the word into physical proof that she could feel and hold in her own hands, and she wanted it to be burned into the backs of her eyelids. Even thinking about it had a strange, pixie-like feeling fluttering behind her ribs. It felt so much more real, being able to read it.

“Guess what?” Ginny asked, stepping back. Her freckled face was scrunched with excitement, and Hermione could see the faint remnants of wind burn on her cheeks. “I got promoted to captain!”

Hermione’s mouth dropped. She knew Ginny had been pulling for the position for the last two seasons, but she hadn’t let on that she was even remotely close to getting it. “That’s fantastic! Congratulations!”

“I’m sorry I didn’t write—I wanted to tell you in person. The team managers just told me earlier this week, once training was winding down.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Hermione said, pulling her in for another hug. “And don’t be sorry, I know they keep you busy.”

Ginny groaned. “You’ve got no idea. The new manager this year had us on a different regiment and it was brutal. I had bruises on my arse from my broom for the first three weeks of camp. Not even the best cushioning charms could help.”

“Ouch.” Hermione winced sympathetically, moving to sit back against the edge of her desk. “I bet you were happy to see Harry again.”

“And you,” Ginny added. “Ron came by camp a few times, and my mum was constantly floo calling, but I missed you two the most.”

Hermione’s smile melted when she glanced at the clock. “Ah, I’m so sorry, Gin, but I’ve got to get to my next meeting.”

With Magical Games and Sports. Her mood soured instantly—just another thing they were interrupting with their intrusion into her day.

Holding her arms out, Ginny posed. “You’re looking at it, babe.”

“What are you on about?” Hermione laughed. “Really, I do have to go—”

“Yeah,” Ginny interrupted. “With Games and Sports, right?”

She stared at Hermione, an expectant expression written across her features. The seconds crept by as Hermione thought back to her brief discussion with Harry that morning, and the way he’d stuffed his mouth full of food to avoid answering her question about who they’d be meeting with.

Some bloke. Hermione breathed out a slight laugh at the realization, feeling the edges of her lips pulling up into a thankful smile. “Harry padded my schedule so I could see you?”

“Of course he did,” Ginny answered with a grin. “And we’re getting out of this place to spend some proper time together.”

The idea sounded amazing, and Hermione briefly basked in gratitude toward Harry for thinking ahead before she deflated, remembering all the forms she’d been struggling to get through.

“I’d love to, but...” The rest of her excuse got stuck in her throat. How could she turn Ginny down? Her ingrained sense of responsibility warred with her desire to let go.

Luckily, Ginny didn’t allow her to pull back any farther. “Oh no you don’t—I haven’t seen you in nearly two months and I need time with someone who isn’t going to grill me about quidditch. I need some quality girl time.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer Lavender?” Hermione deadpanned. Last she’d heard, Lavender was hounding Ron for an engagement ring.

“I’d prefer splinters in my arse, I think. Now grab your bag, I’ve got some errands to run in Diagon and I want to hear *everything* that I’ve missed with you lately.” Ginny turned, striding to the door with a determination that Hermione had only ever seen in Molly Weasley. With her hand on the doorknob, Ginny urged Hermione with a nod. “Come on then, the sooner we get there the sooner I can gorge on ice cream from Fortescue’s. I’ve been on a training diet for weeks and if I don’t get some sugar soon, I might commit murder.”

Shrugging her purse over her shoulder, Hermione forced a laugh to cover the guilt that sank deep in her stomach. It dimmed her excitement at seeing Ginny again, when typically she would have been over the moon to spend an afternoon shopping and catching up. But instead, all she could think about was how much she *couldn't* tell her best female friend.

She couldn't tell her about all the fantastic sex she'd been having, or that she'd finally stopped getting frustrated at all the inept men she'd been dating. She couldn't tell her about her strange, intense feelings she was feeling for Draco, and how they twisted in her chest until everything felt muddled and murky. She couldn't bring up the mystery behind his presence at the Ministry, or what he might be hiding from her, and why it was so important that he'd bound himself with a magical oath not to discuss it.

"Fine, but I'm buying," Hermione promised Ginny, quickly setting an Out of Office charm on her door. Perhaps an afternoon out was exactly what she needed in order to feel like her old self.

Ginny was a whirlwind of energy, dragging Hermione from shop to shop, grilling her on what she might've missed while stuck at training camp in Wales.

"I swear, Harry gets more and more boring with every year that goes by," Ginny said with a frown, licking at one of the ice cream cones she held. There were two, one in each fist, as she hadn't been able to decide which flavor she'd wanted most. "Surely I missed *something* good while I was gone."

There is that bit where I've started meeting Draco Malfoy for weekly sex, where he makes me come harder than I have with any other partner before.

"I think Harry's had enough excitement in his life to last us all for a while," Hermione said instead, lightly elbowing Ginny as a casual reminder.

Stopping outside the Apothecary, Ginny nodded towards the door. "I do need to stop in here for some Pepperup Potion." Once inside, she continued. "Even my mum had gossip! Granted, it was boring, but it was still *something*."

"Oh?" Hermione grinned at her frustration, grabbing a basket. While they were there, she figured she could use a few potions of her own.

"Apparently, Bill and Fleur are trying for a baby." Ginny waggled her eyebrows. "I'm going to be an aunt! Oh, that reminds me, would you grab me some of the monthly contraceptive potions? Six vials should do."

Hermione laughed and plucked the bottles from the shelf, discreetly adding a few for herself into the pile. The glass clinked lightly as they continued down the aisle, but Ginny kept on.

"What about you? Anything interesting you've been up to?"

I've found that I really rather enjoy getting spanked, actually.

"Oh nothing, really."

Ginny frowned again, lines forming between her eyebrows. Ice cream was beginning to melt down the side of one of her cones, and she licked at the trail. "Fine. Any good dates recently?"

There was the one where Draco arranged for us to watch another couple having sex and edged me for so long I thought I might go mad.

“Can’t say that I have, actually,” Hermione mumbled, turning to peer closer at a vial of Memory Enhancing Potion. Perhaps she’d buy a few bottles to get through the weekend.

Technically she wasn’t lying. What she and Draco did couldn’t really be considered dating. There were no dinners or nights out together. No holding hands, no kissing in front of her doorstep after accompanying her home from the Apparition point. It was just sex, once a week, arranged through a contract with The Scarlet Order and stumbled into by accident. Ginny had only just left town for training when they’d started, but now... There was no way to explain any of it in a way that didn’t make Hermione sound like she hadn’t been polyjuiced and replaced with an impostor.

“That’s a shame. Want me to see if Marguerite’s brother is still single? I saw him at the last team Family Day. Bloke’s pretty fit, if you don’t mind all the tattoos.”

How’s his tongue? Does he enjoy going down on women with a single minded focus and intensity that will have them dreaming about it weeks later?

Hermione blushed at the sudden and extreme direction of her thoughts, and despite being in public, her thighs clenched at the mere memory. No, she was certain that no other man would be able to make her feel so riled up and ridiculous. “I think I’m good, though I appreciate the offer. I’m pretty happy with how things are right now.”

“You sure?” Ginny asked, licking her second cone. “Hey, are you okay? You’re looking a little flushed.”

Shifting the basket to her other arm, Hermione reached up to rub at the back of her neck. Her throat felt dry, and anxiety was winding its way around her chest. *Was it that obvious?* “It’s just a touch warm in here, is all.”

Ginny’s unconvinced stare was broken by a small child, creeping up between them with a bashful look on her face. She had little brown pigtails, and a copy of *Quidditch Through The Ages* clutched in her hands. “H-H-Hi... A-Are you Ginny Potter?”

Ginny’s face lit up at the sight of her small fan. “I am! And who might you be?”

“M-My n-name’s Matilda. I was w-w-wondering if you would sign m-my book?”

The little girl, Matilda, was an obvious bundle of nerves. Her whole body shook with excitement as she stepped closer to Ginny, and Hermione spied a little Holyhead Harpies pin on the front of her robes. A woman with the same shade of hair stood a few steps away at the end of the aisle, looking on with a fond expression. *Must be her mum.*

With a quick glance at Hermione, Ginny offered up her ice cream cones. “Could you...?”

“Of course!” Hermione moved quickly, shifting the basket handles to her elbow and taking the melting ice creams from Ginny’s hands. Once Ginny was free, Hermione stepped back in the opposite direction to give them some space. Matilda seemed to calm once Ginny kneeled down at her level, asking the little girl questions about her favorite parts of the book. Their voices faded, and Hermione let out a sigh of relief at the perfectly timed distraction.

Her relief was short lived when she turned, coming face to face with Theodore Nott, watching her with a curious expression.

“Fancy seeing you so soon, Granger,” he greeted.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open, but no sound came out.

Theo laughed. “Funny, you made that same face when you saw Draco last week at the pub. Is that how you look every time you see an old schoolmate, or do you find me as handsome as you do him?”

That had her mouth snapping closed. Latching on to the sudden burst of annoyance in her chest, she let her eyes narrow. *If he’s looking for someone to bully, he’s found the wrong target.* They weren’t children anymore, and she wouldn’t hesitate to hex him. Even if she would have to explain herself to Draco later. The fact that they were in public was an afterthought. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rocking back on his heels, Theo pressed his lips together and nodded as if he agreed. “Sure, sure. You know, after all that ridiculousness with the war and all the stories I heard about the things you got up to helping Potter, I wondered why the sorting hat didn’t make you a Slytherin. But now I know...” He paused for dramatic effect, leaning closer and dropping his voice. “It’s because you’re a terrible liar.”

Her heart began to thump wildly in her chest. The dryness in her throat redoubled, tightening with her growing nerves. She wasn’t familiar with Theo, but he was obviously more observant than she was comfortable with.

“Can I help you?” she asked, stepping back to put space between them once more.

He shrugged, taking her cue to lean away, setting his shoulder against the nearby shelf and hooking his thumbs into his pockets. It seemed casual, but Hermione recognized it as a signal. A signal that he was relaxed, and not a threat. She snorted. A snake in a dress shirt and grey wool trousers was still a snake.

A spark of guilt followed the thought immediately. She’d thought the same about Draco, hadn’t she? But he seemed more genuine than she ever thought he’d be capable of. Even if he was still harboring secrets.

“Saw you from the front of the shop and thought I’d come over to say hello. You work with Draco at the Ministry?”

Subtle, Theo. Hermione only barely resisted rolling her eyes. “Not really, no. I’m not an Auror so I don’t need Occlumency lessons.”

“Interesting,” he mused. “So you do find him attractive, then.”

“What?” Hermione snapped. “I don’t have the slightest idea of what you might mean.”

Theo only grinned at her ire. “It’s just... odd, you see. Draco hates to be seen in public. He’s been a real pain about it for years, but suddenly he’s making plans for us to go to the pub on a Friday night. But not just any pub, you know. *Very specific* about the one he wants to go to. And when we get there, we just happen to run into Potter and the Golden Girl herself. The same Golden Girl who

stares at him like a Gulping Plimpy the entire time he's joking about. I knew he was on decent terms with Potter, given how often they work together, but you just said that you don't interact with him. So that only leaves one other option."

She swallowed, fighting to keep her expression unaffected.

"I was surprised, that's all," she said after a moment, looking between his eyebrows so she didn't have to make direct eye contact. She could be a decent liar, if she wanted to. "And I'll have you know that I do *not* gape like a fish."

"I might believe you," he agreed. "If it weren't for the fact that Draco couldn't ignore you either."

"He didn't even speak to me!" Hermione argued. *And wasn't that the most upsetting part?* she remembered with a frown. He didn't even speak to her, and yet she was still getting the third degree.

"As if that's important." Theo waved her off with a sigh. *What?* A conversation with Theo was almost as difficult to follow as one with Luna Lovegood. "Here's the thing, Granger—Draco keeps his cards close to his chest. He doesn't like to let anyone know his business. He's a control freak, which shouldn't surprise you. But sometimes he forgets that a few of us have been around long enough to recognize his tells."

Hermione let out a slow breath, unable to figure out where this was going. "And those are?"

"Oh, no," Theo said with a laugh, shaking his head. "I might be reckless but I don't have a death wish."

"Then what do you want?" she ground out.

His body language stilled, and he tilted his head to force her to meet his gaze. He'd gone from lighthearted to serious in an instant, transforming into something so carefully controlled that it had her stepping back again.

"To tell you to be careful. Draco... when he cares about something, he cares deeply. He doesn't do anything without thinking it through. Without weighing every option and possibility. And after what his father put him through, I'm not surprised. It's how he learned to control what he could to keep himself safe. I don't know what's going on between the two of you or if it's just a matter of time, and I know that on some level, it's none of my business. But *he* is my business, and I know that you're a risk."

Her mouth dropped open again. Was he threatening her? Before she could respond, he continued.

"I'm only extending this as a... friendly warning, if you'd be so inclined. That you can't get involved with a man like him unless you're absolutely certain. You have no idea the things he's seen, Granger. The things he was put through under that roof, living side by side with the Dark Lord. It's a miracle he made it out alive, and I don't want to see him nearly destroyed again. He doesn't trust easily, but for some reason he's paying attention to *you* now, whether he thinks we've noticed or not."

Fear skittered through her veins, but she focused every bit of strength she had on keeping her chin up and her face calm. There were a thousand things she wanted to say in response—that she knew by Draco's own admission that he had gone through his fair share of awful things during the war,

and that it required just as much, if not more, trust for her to stand in front of him and to let him do the things she allowed. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't sure what was going on between them either, but the intensity of it scared her more than she ever dreamed possible. That it was more than glances between them at a pub, or a silly, fleeting interest. But before she could find an answer that wouldn't give away the depth of her confused feelings, a high pitched giggle sounded from the end of the aisle behind her.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Ginny was still busy with Matilda. Her mother had come to join them, and Ginny was gesturing wildly with her hands, telling some kind of story about one of her matches as she mimicked two brooms colliding in the air. *Shite.*

A cold, dripping sensation drew her attention back in front of her, and Hermione glanced down. One of Ginny's ice cream cones was melting, a trail of cold chocolate goop tracking across her knuckles. Her horror only grew when she realized that not only was she double fisting ice creams in front of Theo, but the basket of contraceptive potions hanging from her elbow was also on full display.

"Well." Theo coughed into his fist, barely disguising the laugh. During her distraction he'd transformed back into the easygoing, joking man he'd been at the start of their conversation. The laidback flirt, grinning at her with an ease that was so convincing she began to wonder if he was the same man who had just questioned her interest in his friend like an overprotective parent might. "As much as I've enjoyed our conversation, it looks like you've got quite the weekend planned. Why don't I leave you to it?"

Turning on his heel, he strode away before Hermione could summon a reply.

Hermione hadn't realized how much she'd come to rely on seeing Malfoy every Saturday until he was gone. It should have felt like a reprieve, a day off after a chaotic week, but instead she felt restless and unmoored. Instead of sleeping in and enjoying the knowledge that she had nowhere to be and no one to see, she awoke shortly after dawn. Instead of curling up in her favorite chair and catching up on her recreational reading, she wandered through her flat all day, half-finishing chores and feeling disinterested in everything she thought to do.

It felt wrong. Everything felt off. By early afternoon, she couldn't take it any longer. With a handful of floo powder, she stepped into her fireplace.

"The Ministry of Magic."

The atrium was nearly empty when she exited, save for a few custodial staff milling about. Visitors on the weekend were few and far between, with most every department keeping limited hours. The one that stayed open, save for major holidays?

The archives.

Maybe it was her growing feelings, haunting her as she drifted through her flat. Following her everywhere she went, making her think of the one man who'd managed to find his way into the recesses of her mind, well outside the boundaries of their weekly visits together. Or maybe it was Theo's warning, trailing each thought she'd had since he left her in the middle of the apothecary. She couldn't help but latch on to it, trying to decipher meaning from everything he'd said.

Draco doesn't do anything without thinking it through. It's how he's learned to control what he could to keep himself safe. When he cares about something, he cares deeply.

You're a risk.

Theo had no idea how much *she* was risking. He came at her as if she was secretly seducing Malfoy on the side, teasing him and batting her eyelashes like some kind of temptress. Whatever Theo thought, it couldn't have been farther from the truth. Malfoy was the risk. Not her.

Hermione's fingernails dug into her palms as she rode the lift down to the archives, thankful for once that she didn't have to share the cramped space with a dozen other bodies crammed in. It would be easier to conduct her research with fewer people in the building, and she knew from experience that the weekend Archivist was an old man named Jerry who liked to nap at his desk. It was the perfect time—not only could she claim extra hours for the trial the following week, but unlike the first time she'd come looking for files, this visit wouldn't be focused on Malfoy specifically. It would be *Robards*.

When the lift doors opened, Hermione made her way down the hall, but froze as she rounded the corner. Instead of Jerry, the bald, portly man with an obvious case of sleep apnea, she found Beatrice.

The woman lit up at the sight of her. "Oh, hello, dear—I wasn't expecting any visitors today!"

"Hi, Beatrice," Hermione greeted, tucking a curl behind her ear as she tried to hide her disappointment. "I didn't know you worked weekends."

Beatrice grinned, setting down a pair of knitting needles that Hermione had only just noticed. The yarn was gnarled and knotted. "Only sometimes. Jerry had a birthday party for his granddaughter and I didn't mind the extra hours."

"Ahh, right," Hermione replied. "Well, it's lovely to see you. I just stopped by to do a bit of extra research for next week's trial. I promise I won't be too much of a bother."

Hitching her bag strap higher on her shoulder, she edged closer to the shelves, but Beatrice stopped her with a hopeful look.

"Anything I can help you with today?"

Hermione considered the woman and weighed her options. Her plan had been easier when she assumed that no one would be around or awake to question the files she planned on pulling. *Although...* This round of research would be easier to chalk up to her actual work upstairs, given that it wasn't directly tied to Malfoy. Insisting on total privacy might be more suspicious than allowing the archivist on duty to do their job. Deciding on the safe bet, Hermione nodded.

"Actually, we've got a trial coming up next week and I noticed a few filing errors on some of the case documents? I wanted to double check and make sure that the same hadn't happened on the last few boxes that Robards sent down."

Beatrice stood from her chair and grabbed her wand. "Of course! Wouldn't want that sort of thing to go unnoticed. When do you want to start?"

Breathing out a sigh of relief that Beatrice didn't question her any further, Hermione fell into step behind her. "Let's start with the last five years, just to be safe. I understand if you've got better things to do, though?"

Beatrice laughed, a high pitched, almost uncomfortable sound. "Of course not! I'd love to help. That's what I'm here for, dear."

Of course, Hermione grimaced to herself. She'd hoped, on some small level, that the sheer number of files would put Beatrice off from helping or sticking around too long. *At least it'll be easy to cover...* Beatrice didn't have to know that she wasn't looking for filing code inconsistencies, and she'd just have to make sure that she was double checking each one to cover all her bases.

Two hours later, Hermione was tucked into a long table in the back corner of the archives, surrounded by stacks and stacks of boxes so tall she couldn't see the shelves around her. Beatrice sat at the opposite end of the table, running the edge of her wand across each line of the document in her hands. She had her own pile of blue folders, specific to the Auror's filing processes, and was peering closely at the files Hermione hadn't gotten to yet.

So far, Hermione hadn't found anything of interest or importance, save for a handful of spelling errors and mixed up dates.

"Oh!" Beatrice's exclamation interrupted Hermione's reading. "I think I've got something here."

Hermione glanced up. "What is it?"

She stretched as she stood, loosening the muscles that had stiffened while they worked. When she approached, Beatrice held the file out and pointed at the signature.

"Just right here. It looks like Robards signed off on this warrant, but I can't find the corresponding evidence collection form."

Humming to herself, Hermione took the file and flipped through the additional papers underneath. It appeared to be related to a closed case with an ex-employee from a separate department, but it hadn't gone to trial.

"It doesn't look like they collected anything," she said. "They might've executed the warrant, but if they didn't find what they were looking for..."

The files were dated from four years ago, and contained a second signature she wasn't familiar with. If a case was closed due to insufficient evidence, there wouldn't be any additional paperwork.

"I don't think I know this Auror," she mused, squinting to make out the name. "Renwing? Ronwin?"

Hermione glanced up just in time to see Beatrice's features briefly twist into a scowl before she could hide it. "Bernard Ronwing. He used to be Robards's partner in the DMLE. He retired several years ago."

Beatrice's tone was stiff, betraying the professionalism in her posture.

"Was there a problem with him?" Hermione hedged, dragging her seat closer to sit back down. She kept her eye trained on Beatrice, noticing the way the edges of her lips turned down at the question. It piqued Hermione's curiosity even further—if Beatrice had been around long enough, she might be just the person Hermione needed to assist with her research.

Beatrice looked down at the file between them before blinking away. The wrinkles around her eyes grew more prominent with strain. "Nothing that would be appropriate for me to say."

Hermione's breath caught in her chest, her pulse picking up. "If it's something serious..." she trailed off, leaving the option open. She didn't want to come across too eager—she needed to maintain a detached sort of curiosity that let Beatrice explain on her own.

"It's just..." Beatrice pursed her lips. "No, I shouldn't. It's nothing."

Hermione conceded with a nod, as much as it pained her. "I don't want to pry, but please know that you can trust me with the utmost confidentiality."

She didn't wait for Beatrice's response, choosing instead to go back to her pile of documents. They worked in silence for a few more minutes until Beatrice spoke. Her voice was hesitant, carefully restrained, as if she'd been mulling over her choice of words while Hermione had been focused on her work.

"I don't have any proof, and I would expect that this will stay between us. I only bring it up considering that you're the most *thorough* employee the DMLE has ever employed..."

"Of course," Hermione said quickly, leaning forward in her seat.

Beatrice paused, rubbing her fingers over her knuckles. She scratched at them absentmindedly as she thought through what she wanted to say, but there was a noticeable lack of redness as compared to the last time Hermione had seen her. She made a mental note to ask about the salve she'd recommended the last time she had been in the archives, but not until after Beatrice told her whatever was on her mind.

"I'm sure you're familiar with the way Robards prefers to handle the cases that come through the DMLE. He's a very particular man who likes things to be done in a very specific way," Beatrice started, sending Hermione a knowing look. "But he's been around the Ministry for a very long time. One doesn't come to be the head of one of the largest and most influential departments in Wizarding Britain without having a few allies at your side."

Allies? Hermione wondered. "What do you mean?"

Beatrice cleared her throat, dropping her voice even though they were alone in the archive. "You might not be aware of this, considering your shorter tenure in the department, but at one point after the war, Gawain wasn't shy about rooting out those he felt were... against him in some way. Some feel—*felt*—that he used those allies to his advantage."

"I'm not sure I follow," Hermione admitted.

Was Beatrice insinuating that Robards worked to stack the Ministry departments with his own allies? And for what purpose?

"His timing was very interesting, you see. He'd always had issues with a few employees in other departments. Officials in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, the Department of Mysteries—certain witches and wizards that held some amount of influence, if you don't mind me saying. It was common knowledge, even back then, that he was tough to work with whether you were in his department or outside of it. But when everything was in transition after the war, many of those officials that he had specific issues with managed to leave the Ministry entirely. All within a matter of a year or so, give or take."

"Are you..." Hermione started, shaking her head. "Do you mean to say that Robards used the Wizengamot trials as a distraction to get rid of other department officials and employees?"

Sitting back in her seat, Beatrice dropped her hands to her lap and shrugged. "I have no proof, obviously. But if my memory serves me correctly, there were at least five or six officials that either quit very suddenly or were terminated with no notice. Oddly enough, they were all known rivals to Robards himself. If there was anyone within the Ministry that would have both the power *and* the cause to do so..."

"It would be him," Hermione finished with a light sigh. Everything Beatrice had laid out made sense—Robards was the one departmental seat on the Wizengamot, and with the flurry of ongoing trials after the war, departments were in constant disarray as they tried to rebuild. He was notoriously gruff and unbending about the way he wanted things done, and he made no secret about not liking something or some *one* if that were the case. Given her experience and the knowledge that Robards had somehow assisted Malfoy after his trial, she had to wonder again... Was Malfoy blackmailing him? Did he know about Robards' apparent quest to rid the Ministry of anyone he deemed his rival?

Or was Malfoy one of those allies?

"Bernard Ronwing was Robards' right hand while Robards was busy with the trials. If you find strange inconsistencies with his filings, know that it would have been very easy for him to get Robards' signature on it," Beatrice explained.

Hermione looked up towards the high ceiling, blinking a few times as she processed the information. Though it still didn't fit together quite right, things were slowly getting clearer.

"Thank you for telling me all of this. It's very helpful to know."

With a quick nod, Beatrice gave her a hesitant look. "Please... just be careful. There's no telling what Robards might do if he finds out that someone is looking into his past like this. It's why I didn't want to say anything in the first place—I prefer to do my job quietly, you understand. No sense in drumming up enemies when it can be avoided."

Hermione definitely understood. "Absolutely. If anyone understands the need for discretion, it's me."

In more ways than one, she thought ironically, but another idea surfaced. If there were a number of people that Robards had ousted, that might lead her to her next set of clues.

"Beatrice—would you mind giving me the names of the employees that you remember leaving the Ministry? I'd like to be aware, just in case I find any more filing errors with all this. I'm sure it's bound to happen, and I wouldn't want to flag something that might attract the wrong kind of attention." Hermione gestured to the towers of boxes stacked around them.

Beatrice's expression turned knowing. "Sure, dear. Not a problem. Though I'll need a little while to make sure I'm not misremembering, if you don't mind. I would hate to give you the wrong names and get you all mixed up. Back then there were so many false allegations flying around, all because of the power of a few. I'd hate to be a part of the problem."

"Of course not—please take your time."

"Well now that that's settled, if you'll excuse me, I need to go check on a few things," Beatrice said as she stood, gently pushing her chair back.

At the same time, Hermione felt her stomach growl. Grabbing her bag, she pulled out a bag of sweets and offered one to Beatrice before she could leave.

"I really appreciate your help today. Thank you."

Beatrice struggled to suppress the look of disgust she gave the taffy in Hermione's hand. "Ahh, no thank you. I'll be back in a little while to make sure you don't need anything else pulled."

Hermione shrugged and set the bag on the table instead. Several minutes later, Hermione had chewed through several candies before she realized why Beatrice had looked so put off by the idea of the taffy—her fingertips were covered in a sheen of sticky residue, and if she dared pick up any of the files now, she'd leave a trail of fingerprints on every document. Balancing her wand between her fingers, she tried a cleansing charm.

"*Scourgify.*"

The majority of the residue vanished, leaving behind a slightly gritty sensation against her skin. Hermione sighed and stood, resolving herself to take a full break to use the loo and to find some tea before continuing her file sorting. With Beatrice's information, her path had become clearer, and it would likely be a late night.

One late night turned into several, with Hermione finding more filing errors in her inbox that needed to be submitted for correction before the trial. She spent Sunday working on the corrections in her home office, ignoring the wall of information she'd compiled on Malfoy. There were still gaps in the articles and timelines she'd gleaned, but with Beatrice's insight, she knew she might need to start a secondary timeline for Robards directly below Malfoy's.

She awoke before dawn on Monday morning and didn't return to her flat until well after midnight. Her feet were numb from running from office to office, gathering signatures and signing off on testimonies and memory donations, and Tuesday called for an all-hands meeting at the start of the day.

Standing in the open area within the department, Robards surveyed the Auror team and the support staff that he'd gathered. Everyone around the circle was already looking tired and worn, and Hermione knew that she wasn't the only one to have added some Pepperup to her morning coffee.

"I appreciate the hard work you've all contributed this last week," Robards said. "But it's not over. We've got several long days ahead of us, and I'll need to know that everyone is maintaining the highest standards while I'm out for the trial."

Hermione suppressed the suspicion at his directive. Not only was it an insinuation that they couldn't be trusted to do their jobs without his direct supervision, but it ignored his apparently checkered past.

Robards continued. "Potter, Benting, and Hardison will be assisting me directly this week, but there is a good chance that others might be called in for testimony, depending on the solicitor's requests. I'll need everyone to be ready, just in case."

It was the same general speech he gave before every trial, always treating it as if it was the most important one they might ever participate in. The department staff all nodded in silence, understanding the severity of his tone.

Hermione sighed, but it drew Robards attention to her. "Granger, do you have updates on the evidence transfer?"

"Ah, yes," she said, stepping forward and clasping her hands behind her back. "The request forms were submitted yesterday morning and I'm expecting the boxes to be delivered directly to the chambers."

"Good, good." With a nod, he dismissed her.

She held back the urge to roll her eyes. *Not so much as a thank you.* She wasn't the only staff member who had been putting in countless hours to make sure everything was ready, but it was beginning to grate on her nerves. She hadn't had time for a proper shower that morning, and the lack of sleep and constant stimulation was starting to cause the muscle in her eye to twitch just slightly. She was agitated, and she knew it was only going to get worse.

By Wednesday night, Hermione was nearly in tears. Half her requests to duplicate the trial transcripts had been denied, which meant hand copying the rapid-fire questioning into the margins of her own parchment. She'd been called down to the audience gallery to stand in as a testimony witness, but her job was double duty—make sure that the Grabsworth's solicitor wasn't claiming anything that the department couldn't refute.

With a dwindling sleep schedule and very little in the way of time for luxuries like proper showers or full, hot meals, she felt like she was running on fumes. Not even the strongest Pepperup Potion could help her.

She wanted a hug. She wanted to be held and stroked and to feel Draco pressing his nose into the crown of her hair. She needed the steady strength of his body beneath hers, holding her tight as she curled into his lap and fell asleep. She needed Draco.

The thought made her want to sob. Thinking about it made her chest feel like an empty cavern, and she gripped her quill so hard that it began to shake as she scribbled the hurried testimony notes. But as much as she tried to ignore it, once she realized it—that she truly, genuinely missed Draco—she couldn't think of anything else.

It stuck in the back of her mind through the remainder of the evening, all the way until the governing Wizengamot member cracked his gavel on the ledge of the theater seating.

"Dismissed for the evening. The trial will resume tomorrow morning at 8 AM."

Vance Grabsworth, shackled in the middle of the accused cage, was shuffled off and out through a side door, most likely back to his cell in Azkaban for the evening. Usually it would catch Hermione's notice and she would watch, gauging the prisoner's facial expressions and trying to figure out if they felt any specific way about the trial. She loved to analyze the way the solicitors interacted with their clients, trying to guess if they had something else up their sleeves for the following day. If they were planning something that the Wizengamot might not know about, or if they were biding their time for the inevitable answer they all knew would come.

However, in that moment, she couldn't bring herself to care about the things she usually busied herself with. She didn't care about anything except the deep yearning to see the one man she knew she had no right to miss as much as she did. Her hands trembled as she quickly gathered her notes and shoved her way through the crowded hall, jumping to the front of the line for the lifts. She didn't bother going back to her office—she would take her notes home—because she needed to leave. She needed to be in her flat, in the quiet, away from everything and everyone, so she could do one thing.

She needed to write to Draco.

Not seeing him the previous week had sent her spinning in a way she hadn't anticipated. She felt like running to the floo to get home, needing to dispel some of the anxious energy that filled her to the brim. She could feel it in her bones, driving her back toward him like a moth to a flame. The constant stress, and the lack of sleep or food or hygiene had only tipped her over the edge. It forced her to deal with her more raw instincts, the ones that craved intimacy and affection and someone else to take care of her. To keep her safe. She needed it—she needed him.

Once home, she dropped her notes and bag into a pile on the floor, ripping off her heavy trial robes in an attempt to breathe a little easier. It did nothing to rid her of her sense of urgency, nor did it lift the weight from her shoulders that slowly pressed down on her like an invisible force.

Draco.

Before she could talk herself into the need to stay logical and detached, Hermione grabbed a sheet of parchment and called for her owl.

Draco,

I miss you. Not seeing you for nearly two weeks, when things at work are so horribly consuming, has me spinning. Please

Her quill paused, shaking again just slightly in her fingers. *Please, what?* Her mind was running purely on emotion—what was she trying to beg him for? He couldn't give her any kind of relief without flooing directly to her flat. The thought made her inhale sharply—would he? *No, no.* She shook her head to herself. She couldn't ask that, not when she wasn't in her right mind. That wasn't a step she was quite ready to take, was it?

Was it?

Swallowing, she redirected her desperation and continued her letter.

Please know that I'm thinking of you too. I can't wait for this trial to be over and to see you again on Saturday.

Yours,

Hermione

Before she could second guess herself or her hurried admission, she folded the letter and affixed it to her owl's leg. It flew off into the inky sky, disappearing between the stars in the distance, and Hermione felt her heart begin to settle. It didn't soothe any of the want that thrummed in her bones, but it made the ache a little less obvious.

As she climbed into the shower, savoring the heat of the spray on her skin, she tried not to let herself think about what she'd just done. The step she'd just taken. The admission she'd just inked onto paper, proof for anyone to see.

Anxiety fluttered in her veins.

Had she made a mistake? What if it was too forward? What if she'd overstepped her bounds? His letter to her had only said he'd be thinking of her—not that he'd miss her in any way, or that he was ready for a deeper level of emotional intimacy. Doubt began to swirl in her stomach, turning her anxiety into nausea.

With her towel wrapped around her chest, Hermione made her way into her bedroom. She focused on dressing for bed, on picking up the hardcover that sat bookmarked on the nightstand. To focus on a sense of normalcy—to remember all the things that made her who she was, outside of work and her non-relationship with Draco Malfoy.

Her books. Her curiosity. Her magic, and her abilities. Her knowledge. The reminder of each one settled her just slightly. Those things would never change, never leave her or hurt her in any way. She knew she would be fine, even if Draco wasn't ready.

The sound of a familiar owl scratching against the glass of her window had Hermione bolting out of bed. Tearing open the letter, her heart jumped into her throat at the sight of his penmanship.

Darling,

As soon as the trial ends, come to me. I don't care if it's the middle of the afternoon or midnight. My floo is open.

I'll be waiting.

Yours,

Draco

Chapter End Notes

What? A whole chapter without any smut? Unheard of.

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

“The Wizengamot Committee, on behalf of the Ministry of Magic, finds Vance Grabsworth guilty of all charges.”

Hermione couldn’t focus on the noise of the courtroom over the pounding beat in her ears. Her blood thumped heavy in her veins, pulsing, driving her up and out of her seat as she clutched her notes tighter to her chest. The wool of her trial robes were rough against her skin as she shuffled out of the witness seating and into the hall, jostled by the crowd as they eagerly made their way to the lifts. There was a hum in the air that she dimly registered as the excited chatter of her coworkers, most likely satisfied with another win, but she couldn’t bring herself to pay close enough attention to participate.

Her feet guided her, step after step, down the hall and to the lifts. She kept her eyes on the floor, her gaze focused between her shoes as she tried to keep her breathing steady with the beat of her heart beneath her ribs.

The lift stopped with a jolt and a *ding*, and Hermione filed out into the Ministry atrium. She had options. Several, in fact, that she should weigh and consider before making a decision. The problem, however, was that she’d been considering the same decision for nearly forty-eight hours.

It was Friday night. The trial was over. She had a hot shower at home and a package of takeaway in her fridge. There was a new book she’d been meaning to start, still sitting on her bookshelf with the receipt tucked into the cover.

Come to me.

Heat rushed through her body, washing over her skin like a caress at the thought of Draco’s words. She hadn’t responded to his letter, choosing instead to tuck it into her nightstand with shaking fingers. It hadn’t lasted there long before she dug it back out again, eyes raking over the words to make sure she wasn’t imagining things.

His directive had followed her for the last two days, echoing through her mind every time she closed her eyes. Every time the courtroom grew quiet. Every time she found herself thinking of him, which seemed to be occurring more and more every hour.

The crowd in front of her moved slowly, tapering off into queues for the employee floo entrances, and Hermione absently stepped forward. The proverbial clock was ticking. She had to decide.

I’ll be waiting.

Draco had written his address in post script at the end of the letter, directing her to a flat in the heart of London. Not The Scarlet Order. Not Malfoy Manor. Somewhere else, somewhere *his*. Hermione took a step closer to the floo as the queue dwindled, her chest growing tight. She was running out of time.

A man impatiently cleared his throat behind her, and Hermione shuffled the parchment in her arms to clutch a fistful of floo powder between her fingers as the fireplace cleared. The gritty ash stuck to the sweat on her palms, and her pulse roared in her ears. It drowned out the words as she pushed them past her lips, shaky and uncertain on her tongue. It blended into the sound of the flames that surrounded her, blurring everything in a haze of green. When the ash cleared, everything around Hermione came to a standstill.

The living room was a wide open space with a wall of windows to the left that spanned from floor to ceiling, showcasing the glittering London skyline. Lights dotted as far as she could see, illuminating the city against the night sky, and she took an unsteady step onto the plush carpet and into the room. To the right was a pristine kitchen, with appliances and cabinetry that gleamed like new, all of which were positioned to look out across the living room and through the windows.

It wasn't just any flat—it was a penthouse, and an obviously expensive one at that. The recognition came as no surprise, but everything else in the space did. She'd expected the wealth that came with a home owned by Draco Malfoy. What she hadn't expected was how different it was from her memories of Malfoy Manor. No ornate wall hangings or crystal chandeliers. No oil paintings or busts, no heirloom furniture passed down through generations and hand carved just for the Malfoy heir.

Instead it was clean and modern with touches of leather and metal... And completely devoid of life.

"Hello?" Hermione called out, wincing at the sound of her voice in the quiet space.

Had she said the wrong address? Panic spiked in her chest, and she dug her hand into the inner pocket of her robes to search for the crumpled, wrinkled note he'd written her. Her eyes tracked over his handwriting for the thousandth time, belatedly realizing there was no way to tell without climbing back into the floo.

Just leave, she thought to herself. It was the right choice—the safer choice, and no one would have to know. Malfoy wouldn't have any idea that the trial was even over. She could go home and hide in her shower instead. It would be fine. Everything would be fine.

Before she could turn back toward the fireplace, she was stopped by the sound of a door opening from across the room.

"Granger?"

If Hermione had thought she was anxious before, it was nothing in comparison to the moment when she registered the sight before her.

Malfoy stood, one hand braced on the door frame, wearing nothing but a pair of low slung joggers. His hair was wet, and even from a distance Hermione could see a few rogue droplets of water tracking down the flat, scarred plane of his chest. Surprise was written across his features, and when he reached up to push his hair back from his forehead, his lower abs flexed.

Sweet Circe. Her breath left her in a rush.

"I'm sorry," she apologized quickly, backing up and blindly reaching behind her for the floo powder. *Surely there's a container somewhere.* "I didn't mean to intrude—I shouldn't be here—I'll just—"

She hadn't meant to interrupt his evening, or to show up unannounced in his home—

"Hermione." He commanded her to stop with a single word, and her body listened before her mind could catch up.

She couldn't look at him as he crossed the room to meet her, instead choosing to keep her eyes trained on the carpet. When his bare feet edged into her vision, she tensed.

"Please don't run from me," he asked of her, his voice dipping low. His hand came to rest on her chin, gently tilting her face up until she met his gaze. "Not again."

His features held nothing except pure calm. He didn't look at her with anger, or impatience, or even curiosity. It settled the rapid beating of her heart only slightly.

"I'm sorry," she apologized again. "The trial ended and I didn't think—it's late and—"

"Stop." He gently cut her off. "You did just as I asked. You don't have anything to apologize for."

When his thumb moved to stroke her cheek, her eyes lowered. It was soft and affectionate, and it took everything in her not to lean further into his touch.

"Do you want to be here? Or would you really prefer to leave?"

Hermione hesitated, swallowing past the dryness in her throat. Her mind warred with her heart. She'd let her emotions guide her, following his instructions straight through the floo and into his living room. But now, in the harsh light of such an emotional decision, she found herself wanting to shrink back into the safety of the dark.

When she didn't answer, his grip tightened until she opened her eyes once more. He stared at her with an unblinking intensity, simply waiting.

"How about this, then—do you remember how I told you that in order to properly learn to submit, you would need to learn to trust your body as much as you do with your mind?"

She barely managed a nod.

"And you have. You've done so beautifully, darling. Witnessing it has been an honor. But right now, it's clear that you're back to fighting against that instinct. And I know it's not easy, feeling like everything is completely out of your control. Like you don't know which step to take next. But you don't have to be afraid, not with me," he said, his words softening. "Just tell me what you need. Whatever it is, I'll give it to you. Anything, Hermione—it's yours."

She felt her lower lip beginning to tremble. Her palms grew damp, and the notes that she'd been halfheartedly clutching fluttered to the floor between their feet. She couldn't. It was ridiculous—a little stress and distance shouldn't have driven her so close to the edge of a breakdown. But as it stood, she felt brittle and seconds away from breaking completely.

"I—I want to be here." It came out as a whisper, but it was a start at the very least. When he inhaled, his chest expanding and his body relaxing, she realized that he wasn't completely calm after all. Her consent settled him, and gave her the strength to keep going. "I'm..."

Pausing, she licked her lips. His grey eyes flickered down before coming back up again.

The words were sitting at the back of her throat, stuck.

"I think I'm..." She tried again. She wished she could duck her head from his grip, to look away or turn around, wanting to hide. It was something she hadn't voiced since she first noticed the initial inklings of the feelings as they tinted the edges of her life, illuminating the possibility that she might not be as satisfied as she once believed. "I—I want more. I think I need more."

Hermione glanced away, embarrassment burning at the back of her neck at the words she'd settled on. It was a ridiculous thought—she had a life that she loved and friends that loved her in return. But no matter what, no matter how tirelessly she worked at the Ministry, or how much time she spent with her friends, something was missing. There was no reason for her to feel lonely, or to have such an intense desire for more. She should have been fine—she had friends, a job that paid well, and was getting her sexual desires fulfilled regularly and better than she'd ever had.

The fact that it wasn't enough made her want to scream.

Everything went still between them as Draco took her in, processing her admission. Everything was wrong. The feelings, cracking her chest open and laying her insecurities bare. The strange, modern penthouse that wasn't at all what she expected. Draco, shirtless and wet from his shower. The light, faded scars on his chest, exposed and no longer concealed by the safety of his clothing. But when his lips came down against hers, everything clicked into right.

It wasn't a light kiss, or a kiss born out of gentle curiosity. It was burning, searing with heat as Draco stepped closer to mold their bodies together. He kissed her like a man starved, tilting her head back and running his tongue along the seam of her lips. When she whimpered he took full advantage, dipping inside to taste her, and Hermione struggled to keep up. Her hands clawed at him, his wrists, his arms, pulling closer and anchoring herself to him.

She couldn't breathe. Her chest burned as everything else was forgotten—her insecurities, her fear, her anxiety, everything ceased to exist besides Draco and the feel of his mouth against her own. Warmth burst through her veins as he held her close, nipping her lower lip and groaning at the way she instinctively responded, shuddering out a breath and running her hands up his arms to his shoulders. She let her fingers trail across his skin as he kissed her, her mind tripping over itself to process the sensations—the feel of his tongue against hers, the easy slide of his lips, the soft, smooth lines of his skin beneath her fingertips.

Draco's body shuddered as she stroked across his collarbone, and it cleared her head just enough to pull away. Panting, she opened her eyes to see his pupils blown black. Her heart raced in her chest, her lips tingling with the desire for more, but she hadn't forgotten his promise.

"Does this mean I finally earned it?"

His lips pulled up into an amused smirk and his tongue dipped out to wet his lower lip—it was the same predatory look she'd grown to love on him, knowing that she was set in his sights and the only object of his desire. The one he coveted more than anything else in that moment. *Her*.

"Was there ever any doubt?" he asked with a knowing look.

When his gaze darkened, she felt a thrill pulse through her veins. Emboldened, she raised her shaking fingers to the button at the neck of her trial robes. As soon as it was unfastened it slid to the floor, pooling around her feet and exposing her bare arms to the chill of the room. She'd worn a

simple sheath dress to work that morning, solid grey and nothing particularly fancy, but she didn't bother with the zipper. She would leave it for him.

Draco's hand snapped out to grip her neck, hauling her back into his body for another kiss. If possible, it was even more intense—punishing, even, the way he breathed against her. He kissed her like he owned her, setting her on fire with every pass of his lips. Their teeth clashed when she tried to keep up, opening her mouth wider as he pulled her into his body. His hold on her was an iron grip; she couldn't have gone anywhere even if she'd wanted to.

Even when his hand released her neck, she didn't try to step back or replace the distance between their bodies. She tried to lick and suck his bottom lip, desperate to keep up with his fevered pace, but he nipped at her in return. A reminder.

A squeak erupted in her throat the moment she felt his hands grip the backs of her thighs, but he didn't break their kiss as he leaned down to pick her up. Instinct guided her legs around his waist, and she exhaled at the feel of his hardness when she settled against his body. Her dress bunched around her thighs, sliding up to her hips, but it didn't matter. Distantly, she recognized the shifting of his legs and the feel of movement, but she couldn't bring herself to care where he might be taking her. It didn't matter, as long as he didn't stop kissing her.

She could die satisfied, just from his kiss.

His tongue slowed, languid as he explored her mouth, and she whined again.

“Draco,” she begged, breaking away just long enough to plead his name. She shifted her legs around his waist, tilting her hips to grind into him. She needed more—warmth was bleeding into a burning heat between her thighs, tightening her abdomen with an urgency she hadn't known for years. Not even the night where he'd edged her for nearly an hour had been as maddening. His bare skin felt like silk beneath her hands, and he would have to bind her with his belt if he wanted her to stop touching him.

It felt like a once in a lifetime opportunity, feeling him like this. So open and exposed, beneath the lines of his tailored suits and carefully crafted exterior. He felt messy and wild with his bare chest and wet hair, and Hermione took the opportunity to dig her hands into the strands, holding him just as tight as he held her.

He breathed heavily against her lips, pausing just long enough to get them through the doorway that he'd appeared from. “I've got you,” he assured her. “I'll always have you.”

Desperation sparked in her chest, flaring to life alongside her urgent arousal. Blinking, she registered that they were in a room—a bedroom. A large, black four poster bed stood in the middle, looming in its size and presence. It was flanked by matching furniture of the same quality, and a large mirror on the opposite wall.

Draco's room.

He didn't stop on the way to the bed, or waste time trying to assuage any lingering hesitation she might have had. He simply took them toward the mattress, bending carefully to set her down on the plush surface. There was no question in either of their intentions—the only variable was how he wanted to take her.

He worked at the zipper behind her neck with one hand while the opposite began to pull up the hem of her dress. As soon as it was free from her body, leaving her bared in her plain bra and knickers, his lips came back to hers. He pushed her onto her back and climbed between her legs, wasting no time in realigning their bodies together. Like he couldn't get enough. Like he needed to touch and feel and taste her just as much as she did.

"You're everything," he whispered against her lips, so gentle that Hermione wondered if he knew he'd said it out loud. She bracketed his hips with her knees, pulling him closer as she reveled in the feel of his weight on top of her. He settled easily, holding her thighs in place, and pressed their bodies together. It was the most skin she'd ever felt from him... Stomach to stomach, chest to chest, his mouth working against hers as he poured every ounce of energy and attention he had into capturing the intensity between them.

He didn't slow down or pull back, and she couldn't get enough. With their hips pressed together, she began rocking against him, seeking friction. She could feel the defined line of his cock through the soft fabric of his joggers, dragging against her center with every roll of his hips. Hermione could feel the way she was growing slick against her knickers, the fabric sliding against her swollen folds, brushing against her clit.

Draco's hands roamed her body, sweeping long strokes over her bare skin. He squeezed her waist, caressed her ribs, dipped his fingers back around the band of her bra until it snapped free so she could toss it to the side. Once exposed, his thumbs pinched and rolled her nipples, pressing tight as she arched into his touch, and she keened when attention drifted south. His knuckles, pressed tight between their bodies, stroked against the outside of her knickers. She arched further into his touch, openly seeking more.

"My needy girl." The words were a smile against her lips.

With a rip, her knickers were gone. Hermione gasped, sucking in air between her teeth. She didn't care about the fabric—they could be easily replaced, but his urgency only sent her arousal spiraling higher. When his hand delved back between her legs, stroking her cunt with sure fingers, her entire body tightened. She ached for him—it burned in her abdomen, it pulsed between her legs, and she could feel it seeping through her veins with every kiss, touch, and whisper.

Hermione only had a moment to think before his lips captured hers once more, and she tried her hardest to focus on the feel of his mouth while pushing her own hand between their bodies. Shaking fingers found the waistband of his joggers, slipping below to find hot, hard skin. He hadn't worn anything beneath, and she moaned at the way his cock felt in her hand. She hadn't been permitted to touch him so intimately since the first night they came together at the club with the knowledge of each other's identities. When he'd had her admit her fantasies while she sat naked on his lap. When he showed her just how he liked to be stroked, with her slick around his cock and his hand wrapped around her own. Just like any of his lessons so far, she hadn't forgotten.

She felt the way his abdomen tightened at her touch, tensing just slightly, but he recovered quickly. Fingers dipped into her entrance, teasing as he gathered up her wetness before dragging it up toward her clit. His thumb pressed against the spot, rubbing gentle circles, while his middle and ring fingers slid down to thrust inside. She could feel the metal of his rings between her legs, one on his thumb and the other on his ring finger, and she couldn't stop herself from grinding down into his touch even harder. If it was possible for him to leave his signet imprinted anywhere, that's where she wanted to feel it.

Her hand tightened against his cock, her strokes stuttering when the pads of his fingers curled up and rubbed, making pleasure spike through her core. When his hips began to rock into her touch, arching his back and spurring her to go faster, tighter, his hand matched the actions. He was growing breathless quickly, his kisses becoming more erratic as they moved together.

“More,” she pleaded, releasing him just long enough to shove his joggers down his hips. She clawed at the fabric, opening her legs wider to make room, and breathed out a sigh of relief when he complied. Once bared, Draco fisted his cock, running the head along her entrance, holding himself back.

“I’m going to take you,” he warned her. His eyes were dark as he stared down at her, determination set into the line of his jaw. “For as long as I please, *however* I please. You’re mine, Hermione. And after, you’re going to fall asleep in my bed, and then in the morning? I’m going to do it again.”

Hermione wasn’t sure if it was a promise or a threat, but she wanted it either way.

“Yes—” The agreement was cut off by a choked moan when he pushed into her, seating himself in one long thrust.

“Fuck,” Draco cursed, his eyes closing briefly. He paused, gathering himself, before rocking back and pushing in again.

She tightened around him, her inner muscles clenching at the sudden intrusion, but it sent a shock of pleasure through her veins. Her hands roamed his body, tracing the outline of his scars, feeling the weight of his lean muscles. She clawed at his back, pressing kisses to his neck, his collarbone, his ear, reveling in the way he took her.

This was what she needed. This was the intimacy she’d been craving for so long. No clothes, no club, just the two of them. Together.

If she’d stopped to consider what “normal” sex with him might’ve felt like, she would have worried herself into a spiral. She would have stressed over the potential future where she might not be capable of having sex without being dominated. If sex like this would be too messy with him, too fraught with history and emotions to be pleasurable. If she would be able to put her thoughts aside for long enough to stay focused. But what she wouldn’t have realized was that it might not have been about the sex at all, but rather the man himself. That perhaps it wasn’t so much about the domination as it was about finding a connection with someone, something deep and profound that made her question everything and want for nothing. That it was about Draco, and only Draco.

He captured her gaze with his own, holding it as he thrust inside with slow, languid strokes. Her body began to shake, trembling under the weight of his stare and the feel of his cock dragging against her inner walls. With every push he ground himself into her, just hard enough to rub against her clit, before pulling back and doing it all over again.

Her legs trembled, the muscles tensing as she worked her hips against his, chasing the friction on her clit with every pass. It was tightening deep in her pelvis, creeping up her spine, and she knew her orgasm would hit hard and fast.

“Kiss me?” she begged. She needed his mouth on hers when she came. She needed to be consumed by him.

Draco’s lips pulled into a satisfied smile, but he didn’t slow down. “I love it when you’re greedy.”

Leaning down, he captured her lips. It lowered his weight even further, changing the angle of his thrusts and increasing the drag on her clit. Her eyes fluttered closed, and his tongue swept into her mouth with the same pace and assurance that he stroked her with his cock, timing each push and pull so she couldn't think about anything but him.

Her knees came up higher around his hips, hitching near his waist, opening herself up even further so he could press deeper. She moaned into the kiss, her hips shuddering. Everything was burning hot, whether it was the feel of him between her legs or the way he kissed her, but it only took her a few more thrusts for everything to break.

She came with a muffled shout, the moan cracking in her chest as her body clenched around him. He fucked her through it, never stopping or slowing, and she could only lay beneath him as pleasure seeped through her limbs like a slow crawl. It wasn't a quick peak like she expected, but one that dragged out from her center and through the rest of her body like magic sparking through her veins. It had her arching up and into him, powerless to do anything except chase the desire for more, the desire for everything he gave her, and she took it all gladly.

It had barely begun to subside when Draco ripped himself away, pulling back to kneel above her. Confused, she opened her eyes, twitching with the aftershocks of her orgasm only to find him fisting his cock and breathing heavily. His eyes were screwed shut and his knuckles were white, and his lips formed around silent words. She couldn't quite make out what he was saying, but realization struck her anew.

He was holding back. He was keeping himself from coming.

His chest was flushed, the fair skin tinted pink, making his scars stand out even more. But even with the messy, damp hair from his shower and the way his arm was shaking as he talked himself off the edge, Draco was a picture of self control.

Another aftershock seized her muscles, and she clenched around nothing with a weak moan. The sound caught his attention, and he lifted his lashes to give her a long, hard look. Under his gaze, she couldn't help but stretch out her body, lifting her breasts higher in the air as she shifted her hips. Her nipples were hard and pointed, and she could feel her own wetness sticking to the inside of her thighs.

His eyes tracked down her body, taking her in, and she let out a sigh of relief when his hand began to move. He stroked himself slowly, testing almost, before squeezing the head and repeating the motion. He worked his cock as he looked down at her, reaching up with his free hand to brush his knuckles over her breast. Once satisfied that he had himself under control, he dropped his hands and grabbed her by the waist, pulling her up and flipping her body over until she was on her knees.

"Show me what's mine, Hermione," he instructed, pushing her shoulders down until her arms were above her head and her hips were angled high. She could feel the cool air from the room between her legs, and she shivered. Draco's groan was low, almost silent, but she heard it nonetheless.

Shifting her knees wider, she pushed herself back, presenting. Her chest and neck flushed warm at the action, but she resisted the embarrassment. Instead, she focused on the feel of the bed as Draco shifted behind her, lining himself up to her body. He spent a moment running his hands over her waist and ribs, trailing his touch down to her thighs before giving them each a squeeze. *Praising her:* The sensation tightened her abdomen, and she rocked back just slightly.

“Patience,” he chastised her with a quick smack to her arse. It was light, a warning, but it had her moaning into the sheets. She wasn’t a patient woman. She was wild and wanton in comparison to him, but that’s what made them work. He tamed her urges, he controlled her instincts, guiding her to something better than she could ever find on her own. He tempered her, but she knew from his responses that he wasn’t as unaffected as he might appear on the surface.

It showed in the way his fingers gripped her hip as he pushed back inside, the metal of his ring biting at the thin skin above the bone. It showed in the relieved exhale from his chest once he was seated again, holding still to savor the feel of her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw it in his expression—pure, uninhibited pleasure written across his relieved features.

He wanted this just as much as she did. It was as open as she’d ever seen him, and the knowledge that she held the power to unwind him so easily had her body tightening again. She felt it building between her legs as she rocked back on him, working his cock by herself, chasing the pleasure that she knew she could, and would, find. Gone was the question of whether or not she could get off—it was now a matter of how many she could have.

It was hers for the taking, and take she did. She shifted back, tilting her pelvis with every pass, reveling in the feel of Draco’s fingers around her hips. He held her tight, not guiding, not pushing or pulling, but letting her lead. When she snapped her hips and pushed back with more force, he moaned. So she did it again.

He let her set the pace for several long minutes, the only sounds between them the smacking of skin and their labored breathing. The muscles in her legs were starting to burn, shaking as she gripped the sheets beneath her hands and pushed back against him. Even without any stimulation on her clit, she chased her pleasure—the drag of his cock at a new angle, the depth he was able to hit, and the feel of him pressing against her swollen cunt was enough.

Eventually, her steady pace wasn’t enough for him. He began to rock into her, meeting every thrust with more force and power than she could leverage on her own. It started slow but built, their bodies sliding easily together until he took over. He held her in place, his body straining behind hers as he thrust forward. It was demanding, almost, the way he fucked her. Like he was making a point, reminding her who she belonged to and what he was able to do to her.

She moaned his name over and over, dragging her cheek against the sheets, uncaring that her makeup would be smeared or that her curls would be mussed into a tangled mess. “Draco, please... Please, please, please...”

Nearly incoherent with want, she felt her body begin to climb the familiar ascent towards another orgasm. She chased it, tightening her inner muscles around him to increase the friction. But she needed more, she needed—

“Fuck, darling, don’t—” Draco’s thrusts began to stutter, growing harder and more persistent. But she had to, she had to get that final touch she needed—summoning the strength, she pulled one of her arms down, trailing her hand down her stomach to where their bodies met. She was a mess, but she found friction easily. As soon as her middle finger circled her clit, she felt her thighs tighten. His hips pounded against her, hitting deeper, and she moaned as she sped up the motion of her finger to match his intensity. One or two more swipes and she would be there.

Before she could do it again, Draco was pulling back. Again. He nearly pushed her forward in his haste to pull out, cursing to himself from behind her. Rolling over onto her side, she didn’t stop touching herself. The majority of the force behind the impending orgasm had faded with the loss of

his cock, but it didn't matter—seeing him struggling to keep himself together for a second time was enough to keep her sustained. Her pace slowed, tracing lazy patterns between her legs as she took him in.

This time he looked more frustrated, his lips thinned into a tight line as he gripped himself. His eyes were clenched shut, his white-blond hair falling in messy locks over his forehead as he kept his head down. There were no more silent words on his lips, only pure focus and concentration. She knew from the way his thrusts had started to fall apart meant that he'd gotten even closer to breaking than he had during their first round, and it was enough to light a fire in her. She wanted him to come, and she wanted to be the one that ruined his resolve. She wanted to make him fall apart as easily as she did for him.

Moving slowly, she crawled forward until she was on her hands and knees again, facing him. He hadn't noticed her, but once her hand reached around his to grasp his cock, his eyes snapped open. He watched her, enrapt, as she leaned forward to lick at the head, teasing the slit and circling. His body began to shake, his breathing growing shallow, but he didn't stop her. Not until she sucked him between her lips, swirling her tongue around the bottom of his shaft around the spot that she noticed he liked best.

No one could ever say that Hermione Granger didn't put her all into studying, no matter the subject.

Although he tasted slightly musky, she didn't mind. She suckled him gently, working her hand up and down to meet her lips. When his hand fell away to bury his fingers in her curls, holding her mouth in place, she looked up.

He was staring at her with the most intense, unbridled want she'd ever seen. Any restraint he might've had when she'd arrived was gone, and as their eyes met, she felt something inside her click into place.

She wasn't just lonely. She wasn't just craving affection. She was craving him, like this, and it scared the wits out of her.

Draco's lashes fluttered as he shifted his hips, slowly rocking against her mouth. It wasn't urgent or forceful, but gentle, almost as if he couldn't control his reaction. Loosening her grip, Hermione let him move. The head of his cock bumped the back of her throat but pushed no further, and she breathed carefully through her nose. She focused on keeping her lips tight and her tongue in place, delicately tracing the vein on the underside of his erection every time he pulled and pushed back in.

When his light gasps turned to breathy moans, she couldn't help but smile around him in satisfaction. He tried holding each one back, but she still heard them reverberate through his chest. When she moaned in response, letting her throat vibrate around the head of his cock, he pulled back once more.

"You—" He cut himself off, shaking his head as he guided her up. Once close enough, he kissed her, his tongue dipping and sweeping into her mouth, mingling their tastes together. His fist was still tight on her curls, but when he pulled back, she noticed the near-wild look in his eyes.

"Do you want to know why I held back?" he asked, pushing her back down to her back. He climbed over her body, pressing himself between her legs once more. The head of his cock bumped at her entrance, but he waited for her nod.

She wasn't completely sure what he meant, whether he was referring to the kissing, or the completely unclothed sex, or even the simple action of inviting her into his home, but she wanted to know all of it. She'd take whatever morsels of truth he was willing to give.

"Because—" Pausing, he grabbed her thigh and pulled her knee higher, sliding in easily with a sigh. "—I knew that once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop."

He cut off her surprise with another kiss, and her eyes rolled back at the feel of him thrusting deep. Everything between her legs felt swollen and tight, even with the wetness of her arousal, and she wasted no time in meeting his hips with her own. They worked their bodies against each other with fervor, quickly ramping back up to the immediate intensity of his kiss in the living room.

"Then don't," she pleaded against his mouth. "Don't stop."

They were both sweating, their bodies sticking and sliding as they writhed, but Draco held her tight. He used his hand to lift her lower back, tilting her pelvis up so she could press into him as he rolled into her. They continued for several long moments, enjoying the feel of each other before he broke the kiss once more. Leaning back and up away from her, he used one hand to hold her hips in place and the other to rub tight circles around her clit.

He was nearly breathless, yet he still grinned in satisfaction at the sounds she made when he kept thrusting at the new angle. "This one's mine."

They're all yours, she wanted to sob at the feel of his fingers against the sensitive bundle of nerves. But she couldn't. Something held it back, keeping the words locked into her chest. They felt too much like a promise of something she couldn't quite give. Not yet, at least.

"Yes," she agreed with a frantic nod instead. Shifting once more, he kneeled between her legs, resting back on his heels. The position propped her up on his folded knees, draping her body back with her shoulders on the bed. It gave her no leverage, no way to push against him, but it didn't matter. He pushed and pulled her hips, thrusting up into her with ease.

Hermione cried out at the depth, his cock feeling harder and more swollen than she'd ever felt. It pulsed between her legs, in tempo with her own steady heart beat, and she writhed against him helplessly. With her legs draped wide and his fingers tracing a determined path across her clit, she could feel her orgasm building once more.

"That's it," Draco panted when she tightened around him. Her inner walls were beginning to flutter and clench as she scaled the peak, nearing the crest. It was tightening deep in her abdomen, twisting and pulling with his steady strokes.

He didn't let up, keeping his speed steady for her. With every pass she spasmed, crying out and grasping at the sheets for hold. She wanted to feel him, to touch him, to kiss him when it happened, to never again know what it felt like to come around his cock without his mouth to accompany her pleasure.

"Kiss me again?" she pleaded once more. It was needy and weak, but she was so far out of her mind with want that she couldn't bother with caring. Now that she'd had a taste of him, she would never be able to get enough.

"You want me to fuck your mouth with my tongue while you come all over my cock?"

Hermione nodded eagerly.

Her answer was exactly what he was looking for. "Good girl."

She met him in the middle, straining up on her elbows as he leaned forward with another kiss, and his tongue dipped into her mouth as soon as she opened for him. Then, with a single, hard thrust, she came. She shrieked, her back arching hard as her body twisted against the pleasure and she fell back against the bed. His own edging and insistence to draw out her pleasure made it even more intense, pulling through her entire body with white hot sensations. It bled into the cracks of her mind, turning everything blank until she wasn't aware of anything except the feel of him between her legs and the shocks of pleasure coursing through her muscles.

She distantly registered Draco speaking again, something in a praising tone that she couldn't quite catch, but it still spread warmth through her chest. It was a blur, feeling him between her legs, and she reveled in the aftershocks that made her limbs jump and twitch as he continued to fuck her. Every pass of his cock sent another small zap of sensation through her veins, prolonging the pleasure until she was crying out and clawing at his thighs beneath her arse.

His weight shifted, moving his legs out from underneath her hips and then leaning forward to press the rest of his body down against hers. They were back to their first position, skin to skin, and she gladly gripped at the wide expanse of his shoulders. She didn't open her eyes as he pressed kisses against her eyelids, her cheeks, her forehead, and finally, her lips.

"You're so perfect," he praised, slowing his thrusts. "My good girl."

An incoherent moan was the only response she could muster. Her limbs felt heavy and loose, and she couldn't find the strength to push back against him, or to meet his hips with the same frantic intensity that she had been. He didn't seem to mind, though, and as she came back to clarity she registered the slight shake in his lower body.

He was still holding back. Breathing heavily through his nose, he nuzzled her neck, taking in the scent of her sweat and shampoo. When his lips pressed a light kiss to the shell of her ear, she shivered. She lifted a sluggish hand to the nape of his neck, burying her hands in his hair, and his hand on her thigh tightened in response. They held each other for a long moment, simply enjoying the feel of one another, until Hermione swallowed past her hesitation.

"Draco—" Her voice hitched when his hips pushed a little deeper. "Please—come for me—"

Like always, she wanted it. She was desperate for it—for him, in that moment, falling apart because of her. *How long was he planning on holding off?*

"Not yet." He shook his head, lifting up just enough to look into her eyes. Her breath hitched at what she saw.

Fear.

Guarded, and somewhat hidden behind the burning lust in his expression, but she still recognized it in spite of his attempts to keep it at bay.

"Why not?" she asked, bringing her hand to his cheek. He leaned into her touch, eyes drifting closed.

His mouth parted on an answer, but nothing came. He tried again, growing distracted by his slowing thrusts, but she simply waited.

“I can’t,” he finally replied in a whisper. He kissed her lightly, his lips lingering against hers. “I have to make this last.”

Hermione’s heart swelled. She ignored the way it stuttered in her chest, and tightened her legs around him instead.

“Why?”

Draco breathed out a laugh, but it was halfhearted.

“Because,” he started, “if this ends, I want to remember it.”

“But you said—”

He cut off her argument with another kiss, trying desperately to hide his vulnerability in the way he coaxed her lips with his. But with every passing moment, her mind cleared of the fog. Pulling away, she forced him to look her in the eye again.

“What are you afraid of, Draco?”

His hips stuttered, his mouth dropping open before he forced it closed, rethinking his response. She saw it written across his features, the way he calculated every step, carefully selecting his words.

“You.” The word struck her like a bolt of lightning. “Of all the things you can do to me, and you don’t even know it.”

Even through the haze of emotions and lust, she could recall his words to her from weeks before. His description of the power they each held, and the way he only did the things she allowed him to.

She hadn’t realized the vulnerability of his position until that moment. The weight of the responsibility that must have pressed against his shoulders, not knowing how she would act or respond after their initial meeting. And how, even after she’d acted like a petulant child so many times, he continued to trust her. He continued to lead her, providing more care and patience than she’d deserved.

He could claim to keep her in his bed and take her as many times as he wanted. But only if she allowed it. And to a certain degree, it appeared that he was just as uncertain of her as she was of him. Hand in hand, they were leading each other through the dark without the assurance that the floor wouldn’t fall out from beneath their feet.

The truth of his earlier statement hit her like a bludger. *“And I know it’s not easy, feeling like everything is completely out of your control. Like you don’t know which step to take next.”*

Perhaps it was her turn to do the leading. To be brave, if he couldn’t.

“I’m not going anywhere, and I’m not going to run,” she promised him with a kiss. “Take me, Draco. Make me yours.”

His relief was instant in the way that his muscles loosened above her, his weight pressing her down even further. The pace of his thrusts picked back up again, pressing into her body with a renewed sense of urgency. She spurred him on, pulling her legs wider and higher, digging her heels into his lower back.

“Yes, yes,” she chanted. “That’s it—Please—”

Draco bit out another curse, dropping his head into the crook of her neck. His teeth found the spot just below her ear, nipping and sucking as he gave her his all. It didn’t take long, bringing himself back to the edge, but Hermione was prepared. She wrapped her legs around him, locking him into place, and tightened her core as much as she could.

“Come for me, Draco,” she begged. “Don’t hold back.”

His grip on her hip turned bruising before he released his hold, bringing both of his hands up to hers. He interlaced their fingers, reaching over her head until her arms were strained up, pushing her breasts into his chest. He lengthened his thrusts as he rested his forehead against hers, and gave her everything she was asking for.

“Hermione—” Her name fell from his lips as he approached his breaking point. His entire body was straining, pulling taut. “Fuck, Granger—”

The sound of her surname had her core fluttering around him, but he didn’t stop. He was completely lost to his pleasure, chasing after it. Although she knew she wouldn’t come again, not without his mouth or a toy, she let herself enjoy the sensations of it. The deep slide of his cock, the way her cunt gripped him, tightening and fluttering with every pass, and the feel of their bare bodies slotted together.

His tempo staggered, growing shorter and more urgent. When his thrusts grew shallow, she knew. He couldn’t pull back any further, and she gripped his hands tight with her own. So tight her fingers started to go numb, but there was no way she was about to let go. She would never let go.

Finally, he broke. His mouth went slack on a silent moan, his features softening as he came apart above her. She felt the warmth of it flood her core, pulsing deep and hard. But through it all, his eyes never left hers. Steel grey bled into the black of his pupils, but it was the most beautiful color she’d ever seen.

It wasn’t cold, like she’d once thought. Or hard, or closed off. No, it was hot, like molten pewter, and just as potent. It was intense, and strong. It was everything he was, and everything she wanted. And as much as it scared her, she embraced it.

He thrust through his orgasm, his hips slowing but not stopping. He pushed through to the very end until he groaned, his eyes finally drifting closed. After a few moments to recover, he pulled out and dropped his head low against her chest. His voice was breathless when he spoke, kissing her between her breasts.

“I always thought you might be the one to kill me but I didn’t think it’d be this way.”

Hermione couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “I’ll aim to try harder next time.”

Draco glanced up, giving her a loose grin that had her stomach fluttering. He stole a quick kiss from her lips before rolling onto his back, grasping her ribcage and hauling her body over his. She

was still boneless from the sex, and it didn't take much to drape her limbs across his torso and legs. When his arm wrapped firmly around her waist, settling her into his side, she pressed her cheek into his chest.

"I need a cleaning charm." Her request was muffled and slurred, her eyes growing heavy instantly, but her wand was laying somewhere in his living room in the pocket of her trial robes. "Please?"

"So needy," he teased, but she felt the stretch of his body beneath hers as he reached for his own wand. She felt sticky and warm, but couldn't bring herself to get up.

The slight tingle of his *scourgify* was the only indication that he'd performed the magic, with no words necessary. The realization made her grin, drunk on pleasure and the after effects of sex.

"That was the first thing that caught my attention, you know," she said, sighing in relief. When a blanket settled over her shoulders, she didn't fight it. *Gods, his bed is comfortable.*

"Hmm?"

Hermione sighed, snuggling in further. She was used to this, climbing over his body after sex and being held by him until she fell asleep. It felt nice. *Right*, her mind filled in.

"Your magic. You're good at it."

Draco's laugh was a warm sound beneath her cheek. "I was second in our class, you know. Right behind you."

He nudged her gently beneath the chin, giving her a sardonic look when she finally gave him her attention. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you have a competence kink. I should've led with that—I could have had your knickers wet from a few basic charms and my job would have been infinitely easier."

She couldn't help but grin. Wordless magic wasn't easy even if they were some "basic" charms, but she didn't bother correcting him when the rest of his statement rang true. As the conversation died off and they laid together in silence for several minutes, doubt began to creep back into the forefront of her mind. It was obvious that they were both developing feelings for one another, but there was a glaring gap—what did they have, outside of the sex? Outside of their weekly meetings?

"Tell me something," she prompted, the words falling from her lips before she had a chance to really consider her request. When in doubt, she would research.

He cast her a curious look, his features drawing together in thought. "Like what?"

"Anything," she answered quickly. "Just... Something about yourself."

Turning his gaze toward the ceiling, the hand that was wrapped around her began to trace lines across her ribs. It tickled just slightly, and she tried not to squirm against him. Chewing on her lip, she waited. It took him several moments to find his answer, his brows pulling tight with an emotion she couldn't quite identify.

"I bought this place to spite my father."

Though his words were casual, she felt the weight behind the statement. Instinctively, she pulled him closer.

"Is that why it..." Trailing off, she searched for the right word.

"It's so empty? Modern? Ugly?" He laughed. "It's everything he would've hated, and it's the first thing I purchased as soon as the family vaults were transferred to my name."

"It's not ugly," she tried to argue. "It's just new, that's all."

She vaguely remembered a grand piano in the corner of the vast living room, almost lost against the black of the night sky behind the windows. The same with the furniture—it was an empty shell of a home.

"My mother left the Manor almost as soon as we were released from Azkaban, and took to one of our estates in France. Staying there alone felt like I was living in a tomb."

A thousand questions sprung to her lips, but she held them back. Now wasn't the time.

"I think you could fit at least two of my flats in this place. It's massive," she said instead with a laugh, trying to lighten the heavy mood that had settled over him. Casting a quick look around the room, it might've been a slight exaggeration, but it was close. There were two doors on the wall opposite them, far from the door that he'd carried her through, which she assumed was his closet and en suite. It was slightly cold, with abstract paintings on the walls and simple, elegant furniture. It reflected the same man that Hermione remembered seeing in the Ministry the Monday after their failed first meeting.

A facade.

"I should have offered you a tour before I ravaged you," he said after a pause. "A true gentleman would have waited until we at least reached the library."

"You have a *library*!?"

It was no secret that Malfoy Manor had one of the largest private libraries in the world, but that would have meant that he'd taken at least some of the books with him when he'd moved. There could be so many rare and first edition books, just beyond one of those doors...

"There's an entire second floor, Granger. And it's yours tomorrow if you'd like to stay for breakfast."

She bit her lip, trying not to grin. "Yes... I think—I think I'd like that. But for the books—you don't have to feel obligated to feed me or anything. Thank you."

It felt so strange, thanking him for an offer to tour his library after the things they'd just done together, but he didn't seem concerned by her blush. He only rolled his eyes at her predictability and looked back toward the ceiling.

"I have an incredible sweet tooth," he ignored her qualification regarding breakfast and continued their game without pause. "My mother hates it, and I still can't go into Honeydukes unsupervised to this day."

"You *don't*," she laughed, pushing herself back to gauge his seriousness. He simply shrugged. "What else?"

Now that he was opening up, she wanted to dig as deep as he would allow. She wanted to bury her hands in him, to feel the fabric of who he was between her fingers like the pages of an old book.

“I’m a light sleeper. I prefer tea over coffee, because the caffeine makes my hands shake. Theo once Apparated me into the middle of muggle Rome, shoved me into a crowd of tourists and then left me there because I’d been snippy with him one morning.”

Hermione choked out a laugh, imagining it. “What did you do?”

“Pretended to be lost, which wasn’t hard.” He jabbed her when she snorted another laugh. “Went to the first alley I could find to try to Disapparate back, but then I found this incredible little bookshop, tucked away off the beaten path. Totally empty. I spent the entire afternoon there, browsing muggle books with the old shop owner.”

“How was it?” She grew still, waiting with bated breath for his answer.

“It was...” Draco paused. “One of the best experiences of my life, to be honest. He didn’t have any idea who I was. I wasn’t a Malfoy. Or a criminal. Or anyone. I was just a lost tourist, looking for a new book.”

Silence settled around them. Ignoring the tightness that was creeping into her chest and throat, she closed her eyes. “And did you find one?”

“A few,” he laughed lightly, his tone coming back up from the seriousness that had weighed it down. “More than a few. I went back every week for nearly a year, buying everything he was willing to sell me. Once his shelves were clear, he closed up shop and retired. Something about coming into a bit of money.”

Hermione hummed. “That sounds incredibly convenient.”

“Very,” he agreed. “What about you?”

“Have I bought out any Italian booksellers? No, I can’t say that I have.”

Draco huffed a laugh, but she didn’t need to look at him to know that he’d likely rolled his eyes at her again. Satisfied that she’d lightened the conversation, she thought over her own answers.

“I can sleep just about anywhere. I like my coffee straight black, and it’s the only thing to wake me up in the mornings. I do like sweets, though not to that extent, and I haven’t had the chance to travel much since the war aside from visiting Australia to see my parents. I love to cook, but I have to do things the muggle way because that’s the way my mum taught me.”

Much to Molly Weasley’s chagrin, who had been continuously disappointed in Hermione’s insistence on doing things by hand. It felt a lot like brewing potions, carefully chopping the ingredients and following a recipe, rather than using a spell to whip it all up at once.

“I am a ghastly cook. I’ve got a staff of elves—*paid*—that stock my fridge every week so I don’t starve to death. It’s rather pathetic, really.”

His ploy had her rolling her eyes in turn, but she patted his chest and snuggled in further. “You poor, sad man.”

The warmth of his body and the blanket drawn over them was causing her to grow sleepy, and she resisted a yawn. When Draco reached up to push the hair from his forehead, he held on to the strands, his arm propped up in the air as he looked down toward her.

“Maybe you could teach me how, sometime.”

Surprise lit her features as she considered it. “Really?”

The idea of Draco learning to cook was... strangely domestic. She almost couldn’t imagine it, even with her memories of his potions skills in school.

“I’ve taught you a few things, have I not? I figure I’m owed at least that.” He accompanied his quip with a light pinch on her bum. “I suppose I can always *request* it of you. To cook for me, naked, while I watch. Though I might get too distracted to learn anything—you might have to go a few rounds before it really sets in.”

Hermione’s mouth went dry at once, her heart picking up speed at the suggestion. It was ridiculous, really—something so base and misogynistic shouldn’t be appealing. But unfortunately, as had most of his suggestions so far during their tentative arrangement... It seemed to be less about the actions of their scenes and more the power they exchanged. Blushing, she looked away and shifted her legs discreetly. She could see the heat burning in his eyes again, darkening with promise, and she couldn’t bring herself to say no.

If he tried it, she would tease him until he was desperate for her again. Until he bent her over the low counters in his open kitchen and fucked her against the marble, with their reflections in the windows above the city skyline, too high for anyone to see.

She shot him a coy look. “Maybe... But only if you earn it.”

Draco’s features smoothed out into restrained amusement and he pulled her body up to close the distance between their faces.

“Oh, I think I’ve earned plenty, don’t you?” he asked against her lips.

Chapter End Notes

Let me tell you, writing this chapter was not easy. From multiple drafts to last minute scene or dialogue changes, all credit goes to my beta, Brit, and the trash gang for helping guide me through the emotional swamp. Shoutout to every person who commented or messaged me with some variation of "WHEN ARE THEY GOING TO KISS???" You're the real MVPs for waiting nearly 90k words for these stubborn idiots to finally give in to each other.

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

We're officially through 100k of smut! Confetti cannons for everyone.

Chapter Notes

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

It felt like she was floating, wrapped in the softest sheets on a bed made of feathers. Everything was beautiful and light and warm, right down to the hands that were caressing her body from head to toe. It was sublime.

Strong fingers tracked over her arms, tracing lines and looping around with steady pressure, yet she still kept her eyes closed. Her entire body felt heavy and sated, and there was no need to rush into awareness. Even her sleepy mind knew it. She floated in the space between asleep and awake, resisting the call of the morning to spend a few more minutes basking in the comfort of Draco's bed. Whatever was happening, it had to be the continuation of whatever dream she'd been having, and she wasn't about to willingly give it up.

The hands trailed down her stomach, squeezing, exploring the spread of her ribs and the span of her waist. A thumb rubbed at her hip, massaging a tender spot, followed by the press of something soft. Warm.

Hermione sighed.

The pressure continued, surrounding her thighs and down to her knees. It led through her calves, and she shifted against the sheets. Her legs were angled wide, spread almost, but the steady sweep of hands kept her from questioning her sleeping position.

Slowly the pressure increased, wrapping around her body like she was being held in a full embrace. She couldn't help but relax into it, her limbs still heavy and sore from the night before. It felt wonderful, releasing the tension in her muscles and letting her body go limp. It felt like sinking into a warm bath, knowing she was completely enveloped and safe.

More soft presses of something peppered her stomach, bracketed by those same strong hands. Long fingers spread around her waist and up to her breasts, tracking warmth up to her chest. *Kisses*, she dimly realized. Exhaling a breathy moan, Hermione shifted again, seeking more. Something held her back, holding her in place, and confusion began to clear through the sleepy fog in her mind.

Hands on her hips, sweeping down to massage the sore muscles on either side. But there was something else, something gripping her skin. Somehow, in the dream, he was everywhere.

Draco. The scent of him, in his bed, wrapped up his sheets, surrounded her. She knew the feel of his hands, even in her dream. His mouth, the way it kissed over her hips. His teeth, nipping at the sore spot from before. *Was she laying on something in his bed?* He maneuvered himself lower, leaving open mouthed kisses across her skin that cooled against the air. A kiss on the inside of her

thigh had her squirming. Another closer to where she ached. The same familiar warmth was building between her legs, pulsing with want, but he didn't rush. He kissed and sucked around her thighs, his lips moving on silent words that she couldn't hear.

She felt them against her skin, felt the way they moved between pressing kisses like he was worshiping her. Hermione shifted again, growing restless. Her pulse was picking up, thrumming through her veins and throbbing a steady tempo in her fingers. Tightness was growing, swirling, spiraling in her abdomen, and she felt it.

A brush of something soft against her core. Not quite where she wanted it—needed it—but she tilted her hips, searching.

A low laugh had her awareness pulling closer to the surface.

Hermione. Her name.

Hermione.

Come now, darling. I know you want to wake up.

Draco? He sounded so close. So real.

Another brush against the outer edge of her cunt, not quite dipping in. A light kiss right above it, and she strained for more. *His mouth.* His mouth. She needed his mouth. He rewarded her with a single lick, and she felt the vibrations of her moan in her throat. *Yes, more.*

“Hermione.” Another blessed stroke dipped into her entrance, and she felt her body growing wetter.

His voice was stronger then, loud enough to echo through the haze of sleep. *No,* she fought it, trying desperately to float back down to the wonderful place where everything felt so good. Something was pulling at her arms, holding them above her head. Another warm lick, running his tongue up and around her clit with a teasing stroke that had her body straining for more. She couldn't move much, limited by whatever was holding her down, and she sucked in a harsh breath as awareness came rushing back to the forefront of her mind.

“There you are.”

Draco's voice had her rousing the rest of the way, and she looked around with bleary eyes, blinking past the sleep that weighed down her eyelids. He was positioned over her, both hands gripping her, and he pressed another kiss to her stomach as she tried to register what was going on.

Wait—what was on her chest?

“Good morning,” he greeted, his voice low and rough from sleep as he pressed an open mouthed kiss right over her clit. She shivered, goosebumps fluttering across her skin at the sight and sound between her legs. His hair was still mussed from the night before, pushed back instead of carefully styled, and the sight of a handsome, disheveled Draco Malfoy first thing in the morning was almost enough to distract her from whatever was winding around her body.

Black lines on her arms, plaited across her chest around her breasts. Pulled taut down her sides and around her hips, surrounding her thighs and down to her calves, pulling her legs open for Draco to

kneel between.

Shibari. Even her sleepy mind recognized the rope work.

Panic swelled in her chest, and she glanced back down at Draco, but the only thing he gave her was another long, slow lick. He didn't break eye contact, holding her gaze as he lifted his tongue and swirled it around the sensitive bundle of nerves.

"W-What are you doing?" Her own voice was choked, whether from the haze of sleep or the sudden, burning arousal between her thighs, but she strained against the ropes. They didn't budge.

Pulling back just enough to give her an easy smirk, Draco raked his attention up her body.
"Enjoying my breakfast."

Her breath caught.

Draco shifted his hold on her just slightly, moving his thumbs to hold her open while he pressed his lips around her clit. He sucked lightly, with soft brushes of his tongue, and smiled when she couldn't contain the low whine from her chest.

"I know it's considered rude to wake your guest while they're still sleeping, but I was getting impatient," he said against her flesh, the vibrations sending another wave of sensation through her.
"So you'll have to forgive me for my indiscretion."

"Why—" She tugged at the ropes, but they didn't budge. It was near impossible to focus on getting free when his mouth was doing such delicious things to her cunt, and she struggled against the hold. "Let me free?"

He laughed at her begging. "I told you last night that I would have my way with you in the morning, did I not? Well, this is how I want you. Spread out on my bed, wet and wanting."

Hermione keened when he lowered his head back down, his middle finger dipping into her entrance in time with the strokes of his tongue. It was nearly too much, the feeling of the restraints and the way his mouth was sucking against her swollen folds. She was already wet—so wet she could feel it tracking down her arse—which meant that he'd been teasing her long before she'd woken. She moaned again, rolling her hips, but she wasn't sure if she was trying to pull away or push closer.

"Oh?" he teased her, obviously enjoying her reaction. The shock of waking up was softened by the feel of his mouth between her legs, and she couldn't fight the urge to give in. Her mind was quickly sliding from sleepy to aroused, dropping into heady acceptance before she could register anything else. "I have to say, I haven't had a breakfast this decadent in years."

"Draco," she groaned, rolling her shoulders against the restraints. Something glinted in the light, catching her eye, and she looked up to see a silver tray resting on the sheets beside them. Carefully arranged, it held an array of food—sliced fruits, fresh croissants, eggs, and more. On the bedside table sat two white carafes with steam curling slowly from the spout.

Merlin. She was fucked.

His laugh reverberated between her legs. "Did you think I was joking?"

Her agreement melted into another moan when he added a second finger. She had *hoped* he was joking, at least. No man had ever forced her to spread wide so they could devour her in place of an actual meal before. But then again, Draco had shown that he wasn't like other men. Time and time again, over and over, he seemed to revel in proving her wrong.

Turning back to him, she caught his gaze once more. He watched her, his eyes dancing up her body as he worked his mouth against her clit, using the stiffened tip of his tongue to wiggle it beneath the hood. When her eyes fluttered shut, he pulled back.

"Look at me, Hermione. I want you to watch."

Pleasure spiked through her at the command, and the restraints added to the tension that was slowly building in her pelvis. When she did, slowly forcing her attention back to the sight between her thighs, she sucked in another unsteady breath.

Gone was the Draco from the night before, who had held her and kissed her and fucked her slowly in his bed without any domination. Who hadn't wanted to come because he was afraid of what the end of the night might mean. Gone was the fear and the vulnerability behind his eyes, replaced with the confident assuredness of a man who knew exactly what he wanted and how he would get it.

Her heart dropped just slightly at the realization, cooling her arousal by a degree.

"Draco—" She tried again, holding back a whimper when he flattened his tongue and switched techniques. "Please let me go. I—I'll be good."

He cocked an eyebrow as he pulled his mouth away once more. His fingers never slowed, pushing and pulling back into her at an agonizing pace. Teasing, building her toward her orgasm even while they argued. "But you're already being so good, darling."

Hermione bit down on her lip. She didn't want to say it—it sounded too needy now, in the light of day. It was one thing to want him so desperately after time apart, but he'd pulled back into Dom mode for a reason. It was the same reason that she felt spreading through her ribcage, trickling into her veins until her heart was completely consumed.

Fear.

They were both afraid. It didn't take Hermione Granger, Brightest Witch of Her Age, to recognize that much.

"Don't you want me to show you how good I *can* be?" she challenged. "How much I've learned?"

She had always considered herself to be an excellent student, but Draco was a masterful teacher. If this is what he wanted—*needed*—she would give it to him. She would do it for them both.

When his hand slowed, fingers relaxing, she almost smiled. But instead she kept her wits about her, determined not to give away too much until she was free.

Instead of pulling out completely, Draco let his fingers rest inside her, and she felt herself clench around him. Her inner walls fluttered at the fullness, no longer dragging friction but still building heat with the way he gripped her. A faint smirk lifted the edge of his mouth at the sensation.

"Oh, I think it's plenty obvious, darling."

The call of challenge was too much for her to resist. Though her movements were fairly limited, the thin ropes held just enough slack for her to tilt her pelvis up, rolling herself over and onto his hand. She let her legs fall open the rest of the way, no longer straining against the hold, and held his eye as she fucked herself. His fingers slid in and out easily, and she breathed out a sigh at the friction.

Wanton. Wanting. His.

Any trace of amusement on his face was burned away in an instant, leaving behind stark desire in its wake. His Adam's apple bobbed on a heavy swallow, and his gaze broke just long enough to watch her motions.

"Last night—what you said." His voice was deep, quiet in the empty room, and he paused before continuing. "You want more. What does that mean?"

Hermione's hips nearly stopped. "You—you—what?"

When his eyes snapped back up to her face, she felt pinned by his attention. Her heart seized, apprehension filling the space beneath her ribs. It was easier to show him than to say it out loud. To repeat the thing that confirmed her own shortcomings. That she was lonely, and that she craved him more than she ever should. That even though things between them had started as an experiment, a continuation of her research, it was no longer just that. It was more.

"You said you would show me how *good* you can be, did you not? Then be my good girl and answer my question. Maybe then I'll think about letting you out of my ropes."

He punctuated his statement with a hard thrust of his fingers, pushing them in until she could once again feel the cool metal of his rings. His fingers were long and deep, always hitting spots that she could never reach on her own, and a breathy moan escaped her throat despite her attempt to stay collected. When she didn't immediately answer, his fingers curled up, rubbing slow, maddening circles inside her cunt.

"Oh, oh, fuck—" Her body seized, the answers nearly spilling out of her. "Please, Draco, don't—"

"I want to hear you say it."

When she didn't answer, rolling her lips between her teeth to stay silent, he pushed her even further. "You have your safe word, you know. You can use it at any time if this is too much."

The gentle reminder had her shaking her head, despite the way his fingers were working inside her. "So could you."

He had the power to use a safe word just as much as she did. But they were both too stubborn, too determined to win. The push and pull is what made it feel so good, and she knew that it wouldn't end with either of them giving up.

"And yet we both know that we won't," he said with a laugh, but didn't stop stroking her, pressing deep enough that it had her spine curling.

Fighting to keep her wits about her, she took a few deep breaths, but her voice was shaky when she spoke. "Can't you just *trust* me?"

She knew she was playing with fire, and the heat in his gaze reflected it. By tossing his words back in his face, she knew it would be a risk. But he'd barely believed her words in the beginning, and his insistence on using sex to force her to open up was getting old. Even more so when she'd finally begun to realize how closed off *he* was.

Draco stilled, one eyebrow lifting. He didn't respond as he pulled his hand from between her legs, reaching up to smear her wetness across her pebbled nipples. She gasped at the sensation, her ribcage straining up as she sucked in air to try and steady her wild heart. Reaching to her left, he pulled his wand from the sheets beside her body. He placed the tip of it at her sternum, and held her gaze as he traced a circular pattern against her skin.

Her throat grew tight. Blood raced in her veins, flushing her entire body with heat. From fear or arousal, she wasn't sure. Both, she realized, when the heady mix of adrenaline and pleasure hit the base of her spine.

Ropes appeared at the end of his wand, black and thin like the others that wound their way across her body. He didn't watch them, though—he kept his attention on her. His ropes pulled, guided by magic, winding and wrapping three times around her ribs before snaking up to the back of her neck. They pressed lightly into her skin, but didn't restrain her any further—no, they served to adorn her body instead. Like a bra, but without the cups, they pushed her breasts up and together, gathering the flesh into heavy mounds. Her nipples grew harder.

Once in place, he tossed his wand aside and chose something from the tray of food nearby instead. A small glass jar filled with a thick, amber coloured fluid.

Honey. She realized as soon as he dipped a small spoon inside, pulling some out until it dripped back into the pot.

"I guess since you don't want to talk, I'll get back to my breakfast. I'm *famished*."

It was only then that he looked away, leaning forward to drizzle a light smattering of honey right over her nipple. She sucked in a shocked breath at the sensation, light and tickling, but he repeated the motion on the other side. Like adding it to his tea or a scone, he took his time, carefully applying just the right amount before using the back of the spoon to spread it across her skin.

She nearly shrieked at the cold. She could feel her blood pulsing in her breasts, making them swell and grow against the ropes. The added sensations only made it worse. *Better.* She couldn't tell.

The warmth of his mouth had her shock bleeding into needy moans. He enveloped her entire nipple with his mouth, sucking and licking at her breast as he leaned over her body. His cock hung between them, hard and flushed pink, but he didn't touch himself. Instead he focused on her, laving his tongue across her skin with sure strokes.

"Delicious," he murmured against her skin.

"Draco," she begged. Arousal was flushing through her body, building a slow ache between her legs. Without his hand or any friction, she was helpless. "Please touch me."

"I am," he answered without looking at her. He switched his technique to light flicks of his tongue, lapping at the peak of her nipple. "Is this not good enough?"

He was an evil man.

Continuing his ministrations, he sucked every bit of honey from her breast before pulling her nipple back into his mouth. He pulled it between his teeth, lightly nipping until she was straining forward with pained moans. She could feel it throbbing against his tongue, the pulse thumping in time with the beat of her heart between her legs.

Her thoughts were spiraling and she couldn't quite remember what their game was. What was it that he wanted? The only thing she could think of was the feel of his mouth, hot against her skin, and the complete lack of friction between her legs. The ache was growing worse.

Trust him. Trust him, her subconscious reminded her. *Give him what he wants. Be good.*

"I'll—" She nearly fainted when Draco pulled back to blow cool air across her nipple. "I'll say it if you do."

That had his head snapping up, his eyes blazing as they met hers.

"Say what?" he questioned.

This is what they did. They bartered. She pushed, he pulled.

"Whatever it is you're looking for."

She knew, but she wanted him to be the one to say it. A strange emotion flashed across Draco's face, quick enough that she couldn't quite catch the full meaning before he smoothed it away. Carefully covered once more, he sat up in challenge.

Hermione had never felt so powerful. Even tied up, bound in his bed while he licked honey from her breasts.

"You know what I want," he said. "Give it to me, and I'll let you out of these ropes."

With the slight amount of distance between them, she could nearly form coherent thoughts.

"Maybe I like the ropes," she argued, trying to rid him of any leverage he might have. And truthfully, she *did*. The steady, slight pressure against her skin had endorphins rushing through her system. She felt safe, even though she was completely naked and sprawled out across his bed. "I think I've changed my mind."

"Oh?" He sat back with a surprised look. Leaning over, he grabbed a halved strawberry from the tray and placed it between his fingers. With complete nonchalance, he dragged it across her other, untouched nipple until it was glistening with the honey from her skin.

"Then I suppose—" He paused long enough to move over her again, pressing the fruit against her lips. He didn't continue until she opened, letting him place it against her tongue. "—I could keep you here all day, fucking you for as long as I please."

Chewing the fruit slowly, she savored the sweetness before swallowing. "I don't see how that's a threat, Draco."

When he flashed her a grin, his teeth biting into his lower lip as he grabbed another piece of fruit and fed it to her just as he had the strawberry. "Oh, I think you misunderstood. I didn't say I would let you come, darling."

Her confidence faltered. He wasn't lying—he'd already proved that he was a purveyor of that particular kink.

He smiled at her realization, continuing to feed her bits of food. She took each bite from his hand, letting her lips wrap around his fingers as she sucked away the juice from the fruit. Though she'd never been hand fed before, she realized the care he was taking in selecting pieces just for her. It felt caring, almost, even if he was trying to torture her.

"And you haven't seen just how long I can go, Hermione. I like to savor my treats, and right now..." He let his attention drift over the ropes that criss-crossed over her skin. "You look like a gift that I'd like to devote *all* of my attention to."

A shiver washed through her.

After taking another slice of strawberry and dragging it through the sticky honey that was dripping across her breast, he dipped his tongue back down to her skin to clean off the excess. "Look at you," he murmured. "You've made a mess of yourself, haven't you?"

Draco took a moment to position himself, lining up his cock between her legs before lowering his body over hers. He didn't push inside, but instead let the head rest on the outside of her entrance. Right where she could feel it.

"Draco..." she groaned in warning. When his lips began to press kisses across her breast, making his mouth shine with honey, she nearly lost it. One of them would need to break, but she had to hold on.

"Tell me if you meant it," he coaxed, rocking against her just slightly. The tip slipped through her wet folds, sliding up until it almost reached her clit before he pulled back.

Hermione had to blink, forcing herself to focus on the ceiling instead of the way his tongue was circling her nipple. With the added, but slight, friction of his cock, it was even worse than without. A moan was threatening to escape her throat, but she held it back in place of her question.

"Did you?"

They'd both said things the night before, charged with passion in the heat of the moment. When it was easier. Safer, hidden between kisses and caresses. But she wasn't going to let herself be the only vulnerable person in the room now that the sun had risen above the horizon and exposed their relationship for what it was, or wasn't.

He was quiet in the wake of her question, and she took a deep breath before looking down to meet his eyes.

You don't have to be afraid. Not with me. She wanted to repeat his words back to him, but rolled her lips between her teeth instead. They tasted like honey and fruit.

Grey eyes bored into hers. Something pressed against the boundaries of her mind, like the brush of a feather against her subconscious. A slight pressure, right between her eyes. But as quickly as it came, as gentle as he'd reached out for her, he pulled back with ease.

"You could show me, since you can't seem to find the words."

Hermione stiffened. Maybe she did have reason to be afraid after all. Fear curled inside her chest, creeping through the fog of arousal.

“You would do that?” She tried to disguise the tightness in her voice by shifting against the restraints, brushing her hips against his. Her heart was pounding a staccato beat in her chest. There was too much in her mind—too much that she wasn’t ready for him to see. She wasn’t skilled enough to hide the things that she needed to keep tucked away. She’d heard stories from Harry over the years of how he was supposed to pull irrelevant memories to the surface to distract from the more important ones below. But unfortunately for her, they were all too important. Her feelings for him. The desire for more. To be his, fully and completely, while still knowing that she couldn’t until she knew his whole story. The entire story, without censorship.

“Not without your permission,” he qualified, breaking her stare to resume kissing a path across her chest. Relief washed through her.

When his lips closed around her nipple, she relaxed. She had to keep their game going. “You could always let me see inside *your* mind,” Hermione bartered.

Draco’s laugh was light. “You don’t know how.”

“Then teach me. I’ve been told I’m a very, very good student.”

“You’re a pain in my arse is what you are,” he laughed, nipping the underside of her breast hard enough that she moaned. Despite his teasing, his hips began to thrust against hers in earnest. His cock was still hard, sliding up to her clit and back down to her entrance with every pass. Each time, he pushed in just deep enough for her to feel the slight pressure before pulling back. It was maddening.

“You love it.” It was her turn to laugh, but the joke was met with silence once more.

Draco looked up at her, his throat constricting as he swallowed, and his body stilled.

“Perhaps not yet, at least,” he started, his voice dropping to a whisper. He blinked down, looking away before continuing. “But something close to it.”

Shock bled through her system, stripping her mind of any logical or reasonable response.

“Is that what you wanted to hear?” Draco continued. “That I want you for more than just Saturday nights? That I know that I shouldn’t, despite the fact that this was supposed to remain strictly about sex? That for weeks I’ve been thinking about you constantly, hating myself because I have no right to want you the way that I do? That feeling this way makes me feel like I’m taking advantage every time you—”

“Draco—” Hermione cut him off. “You’re not—you’re not taking advantage of me. Not in the slightest.”

He shook his head, his jaw tight. “Just—I need you to tell me, Hermione. Tell me I’m not alone in this. That I’m not imagining this thing between us.”

Her heart swelled, despite the fear she saw reflected in his features. It was the same fear that simmered below the surface inside her own chest. The fear that they could do irreparable damage to each other without realizing how deep their connection ran. The fear that kept her coming back for

more, because everything he had to offer was worth the risk. She felt so many things toward him outside of that fear. Guilt. Admiration. Wonder. Attraction. They all swirled together into some unidentifiable emotion, growing until it was too big to ignore and pushing away the doubts that she'd once held.

This wasn't just about the sex, or the domination and submission. Not anymore.

"You're not alone." Her voice cracked. "I was wrong about you, in the beginning. And I'm so sorry. I was so, so wrong. I don't know when it happened, or how, but I want it too, Draco. I want whatever you're willing to give me. I want to try this—this thing between us. Whatever that is. Whatever it means. I want it, too."

She knew she was rambling, and her eyes were stinging with unshed emotion, but she couldn't stop. It was one of the few times in her life where she wasn't prepared. She didn't know what any of it meant, what it would mean for them to be together, but she was sure of one thing. It wasn't a fleeting interest, or a passing fancy. It wasn't about getting off or finding a solution to her rigidly structured experiment. Somehow, over the weeks they'd spent together, she'd fallen for Draco Malfoy. Despite their differences. Despite not really knowing him outside of the bedroom. Despite the lingering suspicion behind his motives at the Ministry and the mounting guilt that threatened to break loose at the thought of everything *she* was now hiding. They both had their secrets, and yet she still wanted more.

Hermione was so wrapped up in her own spiral of anxiety that she barely registered the shift of his body as Draco lifted himself to capture her lips. He kissed her gently, coaxing her mouth with his own, his steady breathing in direct opposition to her gasping, ragged breaths. It settled her, soothing the tangle of emotions in her chest until she felt more like herself. Like he knew she would need to be pulled back to reality with his affection, a reminder of what they had and what they could be if she continued to trust him.

"Thank you," he said into the kiss. His hands came up to rest at her cheeks, tilting her open for more, and she sighed when she felt the warm press of his body on top of hers. "Thank you."

After a moment, she managed to smile. "You don't have to thank me for anything, Draco. It's the truth."

One she could give him, at least.

"I do," he argued, pulling back. His light smile reflected her own. Happy, nearly content. "Because I know it's not easy. For either of us."

He had a point. When he brushed a stray curl from her forehead, she scrunched her nose. "Does that mean you'll let me free from these ropes?"

Instantly, his demeanor shifted back into something more mischievous. His eyes glinted as he looked down at her, assessing, before he slowly shook his head.

"Not until I give you your reward for being such a good girl."

The praise sparked pleasure in her abdomen. "But you said—"

"I did," he acknowledged, shifting his arms until he could duck his head below her chin. His lips found her neck, pressing heavy kisses all the way down to her collarbone. "But I didn't say I'd do it

immediately.”

His smirk sharpened as he kissed a path down her body. He glanced up at her, daring her to argue again, but she knew better. Whatever he had planned would be worth it. It always was.

When she didn’t fight it, and instead relaxed her body, he pressed a kiss right below her bellybutton. “Such a good girl, Hermione. My best girl.”

She could get drunk on his praise alone. Her legs began to tremble as he ventured farther south, his hands sweeping over the ropes and across the exposed skin of her thighs. Almost appraising, as if he was seeing how she responded to his touch. As if he didn’t already know. He didn’t stop peppering her with kisses even as he resumed his earlier position between her legs. He kissed every inch he could reach. Wet kisses, light kisses. Kisses with teeth and tongue, swirling and sucking and licking until she knew she would be covered in his love bites for days. Like every mark was a claim, and she loved it.

Heat rushed through her body, ramping her arousal back up easily. Despite the seriousness of their conversation, it was like he’d managed to freeze her in time. Her body knew he wouldn’t leave her wanting for too long, and she was ready when his mouth drifted to the apex of her thighs.

Draco wasted no time, using his thumbs to hold her lips wide while he licked at her clit. He blew on it softly, alternating gentle laps with his tongue and puffs of air, until her hips were rocking for more. He focused his attention there, quietly studying her responses and repeating the actions that made her moan the loudest. Like when he gently wrapped his lips around the hood of her clit and flicked it with the tip of his tongue. When he sucked with the lightest of pressure, almost whispering as she felt the pulse between her legs.

Hermione cried out with each new sensation, her hips driving and chasing more as he worked her with his mouth.

“Draco, please,” she begged him. Her cunt was aching, her inner walls fluttering and clenching at the lack of pressure. With her orgasm building, she knew it wouldn’t be long. She couldn’t hold off. “Fuck me, please.”

“Tell me when you’re close,” he instructed, pausing only long enough to speak the words against her flesh. They vibrated her clit just lightly, and she shivered.

“I’m close, I’m close—I need you, please.”

If he was going to join her, he needed to do it soon. But instead he continued his pace, watching her with his mouth between her legs and his grey eyes burning and intense. They were focused on her face, watching her as she fought to control her response. To hold off from her orgasm the way he had the night before, but she could feel herself failing.

“Ask me.”

The directive had barely left his lips when she sucked in a harsh breath, trying to cool down the heat that was flushed across her chest. She was straining against the ropes, her entire body beginning to shake.

“Can I come? Please, Draco. Come with me. I need it.”

But instead of joining her, instead of pulling away or changing their positions so he could thrust inside and meet her hips with his own, he shifted his grip and thrust two fingers right into her aching cunt.

“Then come. Come for me, darling. I want to taste it.”

“But you—” She was still fighting, still shaking with the need of her release. It was right at her fingertips, a whisper of pleasure that was hers if she just let go.

“This is for you,” he said as he shook his head, then flattened his tongue to increase the friction on her clit. Her eyes rolled back.

When his lips wrapped around her clit once more, increasing the suction and timing the pull with the thrust of his fingers, she came. She fell apart on a broken moan, the sound pulled from her lungs as her body gave in to everything he wanted to give her.

She felt herself pulsing, fluttering around his fingers, and he didn’t stop. He prolonged it, continuing to suck and lick, his fingers curling up and rubbing inside her the way he knew she liked. The way he knew would keep her body clenching and twitching, pulling her orgasm out with every stroke of his hand and every pass of his tongue. It nearly paralyzed her, flooding through her body with the kind of ease she used to be desperate for.

Raw sounds vibrated through her throat as she fought against the ropes. His name, over and over again. Blessings to the Gods and Merlin and Circe and anyone who would listen, thanking them for the man they’d given her. She felt Draco’s laugh around her clit, and she twitched at the sensation. Finally he pulled away, and she opened her eyes just in time to see him lift his body up and onto his knees, kneeling over her. He pulled his hand from between her legs slowly, giving her time to adjust to the slip, before raising his glistening fingers to the light.

He smirked at her again, his lips and chin shining with her orgasm, then rubbed her juices all over his cock. The remaining tendrils of fading pleasure sent one last twitch through her muscles. Draco watched her for a long moment, his eyes raking across her body, stopping at her breasts before coming up to catch her eyes. He stroked himself slowly while his other hand lifted to his face and used his thumb to wipe off the remaining moisture from his face. Then, without pause, he sucked it into his mouth.

Heat spiked through her, her heart thumping wildly beneath her ribs. He was so powerful in that moment, so handsome in his satisfaction that it sent need twisting low in her belly. Even though she’d just orgasmed, and even though he’d satisfied her plenty the night before, she needed more. She wasn’t certain it would ever be enough.

With her legs still spread and her ankles bound by the ropes, Hermione was sure he would finally give in to her begging. But instead of using his fist to line his cock up with her entrance, he held himself. Slow, sure strokes, like he wasn’t in any kind of hurry. She nearly started squirming under the weight of his gaze when he finally spoke.

“I’m not sure there’s any part of you that isn’t absolutely perfect. Your mind. Your body. Your taste. I didn’t realize it was possible to want someone this deeply.”

She immediately blushed, blinking away on instinct. At one point, she might have rolled her eyes or rebuffed his compliment as some kind of ploy to continue to get her to give in to him. But this

time, in his bedroom and beneath the clear honesty of his features, she knew he was speaking from the heart. His praise was genuine, which made it that much harder to accept.

What could she say? *Thanks, Draco. You too.* Even the thought had her lips pulling up into a smile. She wanted to bury her face in her hands until her cheeks cooled, but instead she forced herself to look back at him.

“Thank you.” It was nearly a whisper.

Draco gave her a light smile and released his cock, leaning down with his arms on either side of her body. She sighed in satisfaction, ready for him to sink inside her, but he still held himself back.

“You have nothing to thank me for. It’s merely an observation. One that I’ve been holding back for so long I was starting to worry I might blurt it out at you when you least expected it.”

Her face flamed hotter. She remembered his stuttered praises in the grips of his orgasm, the way he spoke of her being perfect. Of how she might ruin him. Before she could manage a response, he lifted himself up again and reached for his wand, pointing it at her wrist.

“*Solvo.*”

The tension holding her arm up immediately released, followed quickly by the other. Then her ankles, yet the ropes around her arms, thighs, and chest still remained.

“Wait, I thought we were—but what about you—”

He cut her off with a light kiss, and she felt the weight of his wand fall back to the sheets beside her body before his hands came to one of her newly freed wrists. *Gods,* she could never anticipate him.

“That one was for you, darling. But don’t worry, we’re not done.”

Hermione nearly moaned at the feel of his fingers working the ropes free. Carefully, methodically he unwound them from her arm, rubbing and massaging the sensitive skin beneath.

“Are you sure?”

Draco flashed her an impatient look as he continued to slowly unwind his ropes. Surely there was a magical way to vanish them all at once, but he seemed to be taking pleasure in unwrapping her bit by bit.

“I thought I made it fairly clear that patience is one of my many strong suits,” he said with a wink, and paused to rub a particularly sore spot on her wrist with his thumbs. She nearly went boneless. “But apparently not.”

Hermione suppressed her smile. She loved him like this—cocky and teasing. When his hands moved up to her shoulders, his fingers seeking and pulling the ropes free with careful touches, she leaned up to steal a kiss.

“You just seemed so intent on keeping me bound...”

He didn’t slow, rubbing away the tenderness on her ribs as he moved to the other side. “That’s true,” he agreed. “But I’m a greedy man, Granger. And I’ve already had you bound once, at the club.”

He paused, moving to release the ropes from around her torso. His hands followed, spanning her waist as he worked her muscles with ease. Her body was growing boneless, despite the insistent warmth of her arousal.

“And I’ve already had you in my bed,” Draco continued once he had freed the ropes from her hips and upper thighs. Hermione sucked in a deep breath, realizing where he was going.

“I’ve had you on a table, and a couch...” he trailed off as he rubbed her calves, and she held back her moan. She didn’t want to interrupt him. “But now that you’re all sweaty and sticky and delicious...”

Once her ankles and feet were loose, he climbed off the bed and leaned over to thread one strong arm beneath her neck and the other under her thighs. “...I want you in my shower.”

Hermione squeaked in surprise when he lifted her from the mattress, easily bringing her body against his chest. She was powerless to do anything except latch her arms around his neck, her newly relaxed muscles tensing immediately at the sudden jolt.

“Draco, please, I can walk.” Her refusal was betrayed by a bubble of laughter.

“You can, yes,” he agreed. “But with me that doesn’t mean you *have* to, does it?”

He looked at her with completely raw, unguarded intimacy. Like he’d removed the veil from behind his eyes, he was letting her see his intensity in its truest form. When his arms tightened around her, she let herself relax. He *wanted* to take care of her. He wanted to praise her and pleasure her and give her whatever she needed, even if she didn’t know it yet herself. And perhaps part of it was the Dom in him, but she had a new suspicion that part of it was just who he was. Someone who took care of the people and things he loved.

The realization had Hermione burying her face into his chest. She took a deep breath, savoring the smell of him—the faint aroma of his cologne from the day before, mixed with the light tang of sweat and her shampoo.

“I suppose not,” she finally answered, her voice muffled. His legs carried them across the room, and he pushed open one of the doors that she had noticed the night before. His en suite bathroom was a masterpiece in marble, with a massive tub on the far wall and a walk-in shower to the left. Matching sinks stood to the right, and she took it all in as he slowly lowered her to her feet. Everything was clean and white and gleaming, with a giant mirror that reflected the space back, making it look even more gigantic than it already was. Another door, just on the other side of the tub, seemed to lead to what she assumed was the closet. Her eyes drifted back to the tub, and she nearly took a step toward it.

Oh, what she wouldn’t do to soak in that tub for hours with a stack of books and a charm to keep them from getting wet.

She hadn’t realized her mouth was hanging open until his finger pressed against her chin, shutting it, and her eyes snapped to his face with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I’ve just never seen a bathroom so...”

“Ostentatious? I assure you, the ones at the Manor are much, much worse.”

Though he was obviously teasing, Hermione rolled her eyes in an exaggerated expression. “I was going to say luxurious, but if you’d like to brag, the floor is yours.”

Draco leaned over to start the shower taps before pulling her body closer to his. Her bare breasts brushed against his chest, and she shivered as her nipples pebbled in the cool air.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “The floor is *mine*. As is the floor above and below us.”

Steam began to curl around their bodies and her eyebrows lifted. “You didn’t mention a lower floor last night.”

His kiss was soft when he leaned down, smiling against her lips. “That’s because it’s not a part of my flat. I bought it because I didn’t want to deal with neighbors.”

He seemed to like doing that—speaking against her skin directly. Like he was marking her with his voice. His words. She shivered again.

“Lucky you,” she replied with her own smile, yelping in surprise when his hands anchored themselves to her waist and pulled her into the shower.

“Lucky *us*,” he corrected, positioning her body in front of his beneath the warm spray of water. She immediately relaxed, and his hands resumed their earlier massaging motions as he worked the remaining tension from her body. “It means that I’ll never have to worry about a silencing charm, because I know how much you like to scream my name.”

His hands came around to squeeze her breasts lightly, and she didn’t have it in her to fight him. Instead she laughed and leaned back, keeping her face from getting wet, and let her head rest against his chest. He massaged her slowly, with long sweeping strokes and sure fingers. He toyed with her nipples for a moment, circling them with the pads of his fingers before sliding lower.

“Planning on that happening a lot, then?” she asked on a shaky breath once his hand delved between her legs. He simply held her, leaning down to kiss and suck at her neck. With the spray of the showerhead raining across her chest and the feel of his hand resting on the outside of her cunt, her body grew tight with want.

“I am, yes,” Draco answered as his middle finger began to softly stroke her. “At least until I’ve had you on every available surface. It’s research, you see, so we must be thorough.”

“Oh?” He knew she loved research. “And what’s the hypothesis that we’ll be testing?”

She started to rock on his finger as it slid easily through her folds. His opposite hand came up to tease at her breast, and she shuddered out a breath.

“If I can ever get enough of you.”

Hermione’s heart ached at the raw need in his tone, but she fought to keep her own response light. She knew that if she wasn’t careful, or if she let herself think about it for too long, she would be feeling the exact same way. If she already wasn’t.

“That sounds like a very involved experiment. Are you sure you’re up for it?”

Draco nearly growled in her ear, grinding his cock into the cleft of her arse at the insinuation.

"I plan to be very rigorous with my research. We'll have to try every spot in the house—in the library. On top of my piano. Up against the windows for the entire city to see as I fuck you until everyone in this city knows you're mine."

Just like he promised, he fucked her with his finger, pushing deep into her entrance before pulling out and swirling up around her clit. Over and over, he repeated the motions until she was grinding down against his hand and pushing her breast farther into his palm. Her own hands were anchored to his wrists, holding him in place just in case he thought about pulling away.

"That is—" Hermione struggled to keep up their game. "Yes, that's... that's good. That should definitely do."

Draco smiled against her neck, nipping lightly. "Kneel on the bench for me, with your hands up against the wall."

She had to force her eyes open, not realizing they had drifted shut, and she blinked through the heavy steam. There was a matching stone bench on the other side of the shower, free from the spray, and she walked toward it on unsteady legs as soon as he released her. Once in place, she settled her knees wide and leaned forward. She was aching, her body spun tight with arousal once more, and she leaned her forehead against the cool marble. It was a shock of cold to clear her head, and she let her wet hands rest on either side of her face. Her palms slid against the wall, clutching as she felt Draco line himself up behind her.

He hissed out a breath as his cock slipped easily between her legs, sliding into her entrance as she pushed back against him. "Gods," he bit out. "You feel so perfect."

Her own thoughts were the same. She could have wept with how right it felt, with the strength of his body behind hers and the hard press of his cock between her legs. He spoke of how he might never get enough of her, but she was feeling her own pull of addiction. It stretched through her body, landing deep within her chest, and she knew that no matter what, no matter how things ended between them, she would never be the same.

"Yes," she agreed, rocking back to meet his thrusts. His wet hands gripped her hips hard for leverage and the cold stone bit into her knees, but she didn't care. She only cared about the friction he was giving her, pressing deep and pulling back at the perfect pace. Their moans echoed around them, bouncing off the stone until she wasn't sure if she was hearing his pleasure or the remnants of her own.

They moved together, and as much as she wanted to let one hand drift down to his, she didn't. She held herself up until her arms were shaking and her thighs were trembling, her hips bucking with every push of his hips. But as her body started to tremble, so did Draco's. She could feel him beginning to fall apart behind her, his legs straining with every thrust. His fingers tightened on her hips, trying to adjust his grip in a desperate attempt to hold on.

"Don't hold back," she begged. Not again. Not when she needed to feel him like this.

"I don't think I can," he groaned, adjusting his stance until his chest was aligned with her back. He breathed heavily into her hair, wet and sticking to her neck, but she didn't care. "I want you too badly."

One hand slipped around her hip to find her clit, his fingers seeking as she fought to keep up with him. His thrusts were speeding up, growing harder and more punishing, and she knew it was only a

matter of time. The added sensation of his fingers were enough to make her cry out, and she twitched under his touch, clenching around his cock. It was hot and messy, the way they moved together. Not sweet and tender like the night before. Desperate. Urgent. Wanting. Like they were racing to the finish line as fast as they both could go.

"I'm yours," she gasped as he worked himself behind her. His hips surged forward at her words. "I'm yours, Draco. Say you—say—"

She began to stutter as she felt her own orgasm climbing. She was so close, but she wanted to come with him. Sensing her need, his other hand released her hip and brought it to the nape of her neck, burying it in her hair to turn her face towards his. His hips didn't stop as his lips crashed down on hers, working her mouth in a searing kiss.

"I'm yours, Hermione. For as long as you'll have me."

His promise is what pushed her over the edge, her body tightening around his. She cried out, the sound muffled by his lips, and he followed her immediately. His groan was deep, his hips slowing as he continued to thrust while his cock pulsed deep inside her. Her own body clenched in response, and they twitched against each other as the warmth of their orgasms faded. Draco smiled against her lips, continuing their kiss as he slowed, sighing as the pleasure washed through his body and he relaxed against her.

It was utterly perfect.

He gave her a moment before stepping back and pulling himself free, and she winced as he slipped from between her legs. *If she hadn't been sore yet, she was sure to be now.* But for as rough as his thrusts had been, he was careful as he helped her down and led her back beneath the water. He grabbed the soap and took to cleaning her body with careful strokes, washing her with a delicate, light touch that had her lids growing heavy. And just like he had rubbed her muscles after he removed the ropes, he did it again beneath the heat of the spray. His grey eyes met hers as his hands swept across her body, touching her with more care than she knew possible.

His big hands worked the muscles in her shoulders, her arms, her back. He leaned down, kneeling to carefully scrub and massage her legs, propping each foot up on his thigh for balance. He worked to clean her in silence, like it was the most important job he could be bestowed with, and she fought the urge to sink to the floor and wrap her arms around his neck. When he glanced up at her from his knees, a look in his eye that reinforced the truth in every word they'd exchanged over the last twelve hours, she nearly broke.

She could deal with self-assured, dominating Draco. She embraced his teasing. She craved his strength. She'd grown addicted to his thoughtful insight, and his careful consideration of everything he did. But soft, vulnerable Draco would be her undoing. Draco, who trusted her with his body. His home. And now his heart. It fed the guilt that lurked beneath the surface, blooming wider by the second. Threatening to drown out everything good that they'd just built.

But she kept her mouth closed. She swallowed past the lump in her throat and smiled at him as he leaned forward and kissed the inside of her thigh. She kissed him as he lifted himself to his feet, taking the soap from his hands and repeating the same motions for him. She let her eyes drift closed as her hands explored his body, soaping over the dips and planes of his muscles. She felt the weight of his hands in hers as they kissed and kissed and kissed, their warm, wet bodies meeting beneath the shower to rinse off together.

And as he led her from the bathroom back to his bed, with dripping wet hair that she was sure would be a mess in a few hours, she reminded herself that everything she did was for them. That she wouldn't, and couldn't, fully let go until she knew the truth. And that if it was something that could ruin them, then she deserved to know. And if it wasn't, then she would make it her mission to ensure that he never found out. She'd done worse for less, she was sure of it.

Just as much as she was sure of him.

On Sunday morning, Hermione let the warmth of her bath envelope her body. She only had one more day before returning back to work. Back to her life, her *normal* life. Sinking lower into the small tub, she closed her eyes, feeling the way the muscles in her thighs and abdomen twinged with slight fatigue. How her joints ached, and how the bruises pulled against her skin, but she savored it. It was a reminder, and one she wasn't eager to forget.

Water lapped at her chest as she sank, bubbles tickling at the loose curls at the nape of her neck. She took a deep breath, and let her hands drift over her body. A poor imitation of the feel of Draco's mouth and lips, she caressed every mark he'd left behind. The day before, after several more hours in bed together, he'd tried to convince her to let him use healing charms to rid her of the worst of the evidence, but she studiously refused.

Shock was etched across her features, reflected back at herself in the large mirror of his bathroom. After Draco had insisted on feeding her lunch from another magically-filled tray, compliments of his staff, she'd wandered in to freshen up before venturing home. She'd expected the riotous curls, tangled and out of control from the shower and lack of products, but what she hadn't expected was the smattering of love bites from Draco that bloomed across her skin. They decorated her body like a new batch of freckles, dotting every spot that he'd focused on.

Light bruises on her neck and chest, red from the suction of his mouth and the press of his teeth. Another imprint of his ring, reflected back on her hip in the shape of an M. The ghost of his fingertips on the soft flesh of her arse and thighs from where he'd gripped her so tightly.

Like she'd been claimed by him. It set off something primal inside her, something that had her body heating with satisfaction when Draco had entered in behind her, his joggers once again slung low on his hips. As soon as he noticed where her attention was focused his eyes followed the same path, tracking and cataloguing every instance of his ownership. When his nostrils flared, she knew she wasn't alone in the way it made her feel.

"I like the way I look on you."

"So do I."

He hadn't escaped unscathed, either. Light pink scratches from her nails scored across his back and over his shoulders to the span of his chest, etching her desperation into his fair skin. A few nips on his neck, right below his ear, but nothing as extreme as the bruises that bloomed on her own. But it didn't bother her. Not when it felt like a challenge.

"And you're sure you don't want any pain relieving potions before you go? Or some bruise salve, at the very least?" It was the third time he'd asked.

Her answer was the same every time. "I have some at home if I need it." It didn't need to be clarified that she had no intention of using it.

As he helped her back into her dress, his hands lingering on her body and touching her for far longer than required to redress, she tried to ignore the bundle of unease that threatened to grow in her stomach. Leaving his flat meant returning to her own. Returning to the outside world and away from the safety of his bed, where they whispered promises to each other between kisses.

Instead of more sex, they'd spent the afternoon getting to know each other, quizzing one another on their preferences and opinions. He had developed a fondness for historical non-fiction, and had laughed when she made a quip about burning any books she found in his library by Gilderoy Lockhart. She gave him a few recommendations on biographies, and wrote down an easy recipe for her favorite biscuits on a spare piece of parchment from his nightstand.

Gently touching, they learned how their bodies felt pressed together when they weren't overcome with urgent, consuming arousal. He kissed each of her finger tips, inspecting the faded words etched into her forearm with a sad expression. She traced the lines of his scars and over the planes of his face, feeling the way his lips curled around the words while he told her the story of how Harry had nearly choked on his tea when he found out that he would be resuming his Occlumency lessons with Draco. She told him about all of her failed dates while she studied the faded Dark Mark on his arm, careful not to touch it. He didn't seem to mind, but they didn't speak about her particular scars or his. It didn't seem necessary, at least, when they no longer felt like the same people who had been subjected to them.

They laid together instead, both scarred and a little bit bruised, and talked about the future. A future where neither of them were sure what might happen. She kept her reservations locked beneath the depth of her feelings, and instead focused on what their new, tentative relationship might mean.

"Are we...together, then?" she asked, after spending close to an hour working up the nerve. She knew she needed to go, to leave his flat before she overstayed her welcome, but couldn't. Not until she had some kind of clarity.

What does mine, mean, exactly? she thought. It wasn't a yes or no question, that much she was already aware of. There were a thousand different answers and meanings, all varying shades of grey. They both valued their privacy, but the boundaries of their arrangement were shifting, blurring, bleeding into something new.

"Yes." The immediate certainty of his answer soothed some of her nagging uncertainty. "Though that doesn't mean we need to make an announcement in the Prophet come Monday or declare some kind of public statement. We can explore what we have at our own pace."

Hope flushed through her. It was exactly what she wanted to hear. "I'd like to see you more often than just Saturdays, I think."

"Oh, you think?" Draco's grin was mischievous. "I seem to remember when you thought at least once a week was asking for too much."

"Yes, well," she paused to clear her throat, trying desperately to mimic his trademarked unaffected demeanor, "I thought you said you liked it when I'm greedy. Consider this part of the deal, Malfoy."

His grin blew into a full smile at her teasing. "Watch it, witch. Don't think I haven't forgotten how much you like me to swat your arse until you're dripping."

That had shut her up.

Before she left, finally forcing her feet to carry her to his fireplace, he'd given her a lingering kiss.

"I'll give you the same advice I did in the beginning. Don't overthink it, Granger. Trust your body, and your heart, just as much as you do your mind. Do whatever feels right, and we'll be fine. I don't have any expectations for this outside of that."

As she lay in her tub, the water cooling around her body, she fought the equal urges that warred inside of her. "Do whatever feels right" meant playing a dangerous game. For most of her childhood, Hermione had struggled with the desire to abide by the rules and do what was right versus the desire to do what needed to be done. And even her new, fledgling relationship with Draco wasn't safe from her old urges.

But even as she thought about him, thought about the kisses and the gentle caresses he'd given her in the midst of dominating her in bed, her guilt grew. It began to overshadow the drive that pushed her to fight for answers, to dig through the dirt and mud and muck until her hands were stained black with the evidence.

Do what's right. Do what you need to do. Do whatever feels right. What you need. What feels right.

Her mind needed answers, but her heart wanted him. How could she get the former, but keep the latter?

Monday came too soon, and as Hermione navigated her way through the halls of the Ministry to her office, she was greeted by the cheerful faces of her coworkers, still riding the high of their Wizengamot victory.

"We missed you on Friday night!" Warren teased when she stopped by the kettle to refresh her morning tea before getting settled in. Harry was leaning nearby, nursing his own mug.

"I figured you might've run home to change, but you never showed back up to the pub. Too tired?" he guessed.

"Something like that." She hoped her smile looked more amused than conspiratorial. Truthfully, their weekly Friday night drinks schedule hadn't even crossed her mind. "Guess I owe you one this week instead."

Harry grinned and held up his mug. "And I'll hold you to it. Hey, Gin's coming for lunch today. Wanna come with?"

Her mouth opened on an immediate yes, but she just barely managed to stop herself. She'd gotten nothing done over the weekend, and with the trial taking up nearly two weeks of her time, there was a veritable mountain of memos and paperwork to get through on her desk. All of her career aspirations would be for naught if she didn't stay focused. Between the extracurricular research she'd been doing on Draco's past and the likelihood that she'd be seeing more of him moving forward, she would need to start being more efficient with her time.

"I'd love to, but I really should focus on—"

Another voice echoed from around the corner, cutting her off. “And this is the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, better referred to as the DMLE.”

Beatrice stood with a younger man with ruddy cheeks and a pimpled forehead. He barely looked old enough to be out of Hogwarts, and his brown eyes were blown wide as he took in the scene. Aurors stood around, slowly drinking from their mugs, and eyed the kid with amusement.

Beatrice continued on, undeterred as she ran through the quick introduction. By the speed at which she was speaking, it was clear that this hadn’t been their first stop of the morning. “This is Gilbert, the new research intern. Gilbert, this is part of the Auror team and some other members of the department.”

“You’re not all Aurors?” he asked, his awe transforming into curiosity.

“Nope, not all of us,” Hermione confirmed and stepped forward. It was a common misconception that she’d always been eager to dispel. Working to enforce and enact laws from within the Ministry was more than dueling with criminals or showing up at crime scenes. “I specialize in researching current and former laws, and provide guidance on how to update or enact new ones.”

“You’re Hermione Granger!” He reached forward to eagerly shake her hand. He pumped her arm so vigorously that her tea nearly sloshed from her mug in her other hand. “I’m a huge, huge fan.”

A snort from behind her had his attention sliding over Hermione’s shoulders, and when his eyes grew even wider, she knew who he’d spotted.

“Harry Potter, too?”

Hermione gave him a wide berth, stepping aside so Harry could be accosted instead. While Gilbert was distracted, Beatrice moved forward to speak to her directly.

“Heard about your victory last week. Great job,” she said.

“Oh, thank you, but it really was a team effort,” Hermione replied. “I can only claim responsibility for making sure all those files stayed organized and updated.”

Beatrice gave her a light smile. “About that—” her voice dropped just slightly, “—I just wanted to let you know that I’m still working on that secondary filing request. It’s been a little busy downstairs with the new batch of interns, that’s all.”

“Oh! Of course,” Hermione agreed. Truthfully, it was another thing that had gotten pushed to the recesses of her mind. “Thank you for the update.”

Behind them, Gilbert was chattering loudly, regaling Harry with stories of being a second year during the Battle.

“I mean, I was with the rest of my house, and they evacuated the whole lot of us since we were too young, but—”

“What in Gods’ name is all this noise?” Robards stuck his head out the doorway to his office, sending a glare around the area. His eyes landed on Gilbert, his heavy brows furrowing. “Who’re you?”

“Gilbert Fletcher, sir. I’m the new research intern for the Archives.”

Robards didn't look impressed. "And you're chattering about in my department at this hour... Why?"

Beatrice stepped in, ushering him back in the wake of Robards' early morning temper. "We were just doing introductions for the departments he'll be working with."

Robards' answer was little more than a grunt. "You should do a better job at keeping your employees under control, Betty." Before he slammed his office door closed, Hermione could hear his muttering. "Bloody librarians in my department..."

Beatrice, however, didn't seem surprised in the slightest. She sent Hermione a knowing look before gesturing for Gilbert to keep moving down the hallway. "I'll make sure to get you those files ASAP, dear. Have a good week."

She watched them go before turning back toward her head to her own office, but Harry was waiting for her. "More files? Really, Hermione? We've only just barely closed one case and you've already got more on the way? It isn't even nine in the morning!" Though he was chastising her, his tone was light.

Taking a sip of her tea, she shrugged, but inside her chest her heart was racing. It took her a moment to recount Beatrice's words exactly to make sure she hadn't let anything incriminating slip, but no—no. Everything was fine. Harry was grinning, and it had sounded like every other request she'd submitted to the archives. Simple, and standard. That was all. No reason to panic.

"You know me. I never stop working."

Harry hummed his agreement as they started walking towards their respective offices. "And that's exactly the problem. Already requesting files when the ink hasn't even dried on our last case, *and* I bet you spent all weekend working on getting caught up, didn't you?"

Usually, yes, she would have. That was her standard routine. But there was no way that she could tell Harry that she'd spent the majority of it in Draco Malfoy's bed instead. Or that when she'd gone home and had ample time to get started on some of her outstanding paperwork from her home office, she'd instead taken a bath so long it had required three reheating charms to keep the water from growing too cold.

"Your silence speaks volumes," he said with a grin, taking it as a shameful agreement instead of avoiding the question. "Which is exactly why you should come have lunch with Ginny and I."

Hermione sighed, slowing her steps once they reached her door. "Fine, but I can't do today. Could we do tomorrow or Wednesday instead?"

She really did need to get a handle on some of her work tasks, lest someone realize she was spending work hours focusing on a particular blond. Between her additional research and the fugue state she'd been trapped in during the trial, dreaming about being with him instead, it was only a matter of time.

Harry, oblivious to her internal conflict, nodded happily. "Sounds perfect. I'll let you know what day Ginny prefers. See you at the recap meeting at ten?"

"Yep," she said with a smile, taking a deep breath behind the cover of her mug. "See you then."

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

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

On Tuesday morning, just after she'd settled into her office with a fresh cup of coffee and a muffin in hand, Cecelia came bustling in.

"Good morning, Miss Granger! So sorry to bother you, but these were just dropped off by a courier with your name. Said the sender paid to make sure they were delivered to you immediately."

Hermione's jaw dropped open at the sight. Her secretary was hidden by a plume of green foliage, the spray reaching a full arms width as she held the vase out and away from her body to ensure she didn't crush any of the unopened blooms. As Cecelia gingerly set the arrangement down on her desk and stepped away, Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to understand what she was looking at.

"What is it?"

"Flowers, my dear! For you!"

Hermione tilted her head, peering closer. They didn't *look* like flowers. It looked like an arrangement of weeds and buds, all picked much too soon to be considered a gift. She fisted her fingers at her sides, keeping herself from touching it, just in case.

"These aren't flow—" The words died on her lips as soon as she spied the small white card, nestled in the greenery. With no signature or identifying label, it was blank until her eyes landed on it. Once she'd noticed it, words began to flow across the surface as if inked by an invisible quill. Three simple words scrawled in a familiar script, swooping and elegant from his careful touch.

It felt right.

There was no signature, but it didn't need one. There was no question who sent the arrangement. Holding her breath, she reached out with an unsteady hand. Her chest was growing tighter now, less from fear and apprehension and more from that strange, fluttery feeling that she was getting every time she thought of Draco. But it hadn't occurred to her that with their newfound togetherness, she'd be on the receiving end of his courtship. Considering the depth of their relationship already, something so pure and innocent as a bouquet of flowers felt surprisingly...gentle.

As soon as her fingertips brushed the edge of the card, the blooms burst to life. They all unfurled with a sparkle of magic, twinkling like glitter in the air around each bud as they opened and spread their petals to a full bloom. The entire arrangement was made of a variety of flowers, all in different shapes and sizes. Some were small and clustered with small groups of petals, while others curled open with heavy, lush heads. But the one thing they all had in common was the color. They were all the same staggering shade of pure, untouched white. The fragrances mingled together, light and aromatic, and Hermione sucked in a shocked breath at the sight of them all together. It was gorgeous.

"Oh my goodness, I've never seen something so beautiful," Cecelia cooed, and Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. She'd completely forgotten she wasn't alone.

Clutching the card in her fist, Hermione brought it below the edge of her desk and out of sight. Half out of fear that Cecelia might recognize Draco's handwriting, and half because she didn't want to share such an unexpected, tender sentiment with anyone else.

"Yes," she agreed faintly. "I've never seen anything like it."

Her stomach flipped at the thought of Draco arranging for the flowers to have them sent to her. Had he picked them out himself? Or had he simply paid for someone else to select them for her? The sheer size and number of different flowers within the arrangement were staggering. Some she could recognize, like cabbage roses and tulips, but many she'd never seen before. She'd been on the receiving ends of plenty of bouquets and arrangements, but none to this size or scale. Nor had they been charmed to bloom at only her touch. Between the selection and the magic, it held a level of intimacy she hadn't quite expected, and she glanced back down at the card in her lap.

It felt right.

He'd picked them out for her himself, she knew it.

Cecelia gave her a conspiratorial smile. "Well, you're quite the lucky witch to be getting something like this. I'd bet it cost a pretty galleon, too. Must be smitten with you, whoever he is."

Without waiting for a response, she turned and strode from Hermione's office, closing the door neatly behind her. Hermione couldn't suppress her laugh, covering her face with her hands and sinking deeper into her chair. It was *absurd*, the way her stomach was fluttering and her cheeks felt hot. It was only *flowers*. The man had tied her up and licked honey off her nipples for Merlin's sake.

And yet there she sat, melting into the leather of her desk chair, blushing like a bloody schoolgirl.

Hermione picked at her sandwich, inspecting the slice of tomato beneath the bread while Harry and Ginny bickered about their new settee. Well, new-*ish*.

"It's terrible," Ginny said with a flat expression. By the way she was clutching her fork, it looked like she might very well launch a piece of lettuce at her husband's forehead. "The moment you're out of town, I will be burning it in the courtyard out back."

"It's not that bad!"

Unfortunately, Hermione couldn't quite agree with him. It was rather stiff and uncomfortable.

"Not even the best cushioning charms can make that thing decent, Harry. I know you found it in the attic but it was likely up there for a reason. And that reason is that it's a shite piece of furniture. Even Regulus knew it."

Their argument had been going for nearly fifteen minutes, but Hermione couldn't help but notice the way neither of them held back with each other, even over something as trivial as a sofa. It wasn't something she'd considered before, noting the more intimate dynamics of her friends' relationship, but now it seemed so obvious. They were honest, no matter what, about what they thought and how they felt. It felt silly to analyze such a light argument over something so mundane, but her mind couldn't help but wander.

It made Hermione wonder what that might be like. What that might be like with Draco, specifically. Even her relationship with Ron hadn't been so communicative. They'd known each other long enough to know exactly when and how to dance around each other's sore spots. When to roll her lips inward or look the other way. When to ignore those pesky little habits that drove her up the wall. He did it, too. They fought so much as teens that it seemed easier to disengage before it ever built back up to that exhausting, constant state. They were honest with each other, but careful.

Honest but careful. She nearly laughed into her lunch at the irony. The same could be said for her newfound relationship with Draco, but in a completely different way.

When the conversation lulled, she brushed the crumbs from her fingertips and set her hands in her lap.

"Can I ask you both a question? About your relationship?" She fisted the fabric of her napkin when Harry and Ginny both glanced up with matching quizzical expressions, and clarified when they didn't immediately answer. "It's just something I've been wondering about lately, that's all."

Ginny finished chewing and nodded. "Sure. What's up?"

Truthfully, the thought had only just occurred to her that morning. How similar Harry and Ginny's situation could have been to hers and Draco's. *Was* similar, at least, at one point in their lives. She gripped the napkin even tighter. Licking her lips, she tried to put it into words.

"How did you do it? Before, I mean. During the war when everything got muddy and we were all keeping secrets. How did you make it work?"

It was the closest way she could think to ask without giving everything away. Harry's expression grew serious, and he set his fork down to sit back in his chair. A quick flash of emotion passed over his face, aging him for the brief moment he let it linger.

"We didn't really, did we?" he asked, giving his wife a slightly sad look. "There was no way I could tell Ginny and keep her safe. She found out later the same way everyone else did. I just had to hope that she'd forgive me no matter how everything turned out."

A heavy weight sank through Hermione's stomach, turning and rolling into a wave of nausea.

Ginny, though she looked nearly as somber as Harry, was slightly more curious. "Why do you ask? Is everything okay?"

It had been years since the end of the war, since they all made their amends and moved on to more normal, settled lives. Arguably, there was no sane reason for Hermione to go digging into the past the way she was.

"Everything's fine," she assured Ginny. "I just found myself wondering, that's all. I don't know that I could have left it alone had I been in your position."

Ginny shrugged. "I had to trust him, and I did. That's all it came down to. I trusted all of you."

Trust. How horrifyingly appropriate.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Harry asked. "If there's something wrong, you know you can tell us."

Mustering a smile, she smoothed away the worry that she felt weighing down her own expression. If there was one thing worse than the guilt that was currently brewing in her stomach, it was the thought of dragging her friends into it, too.

“I’m okay, really.”

Ginny wasn’t convinced. She leaned closer, bracing her elbows on the table. “What’s going on?”

Harry’s green eyes were bouncing between them, narrowing the longer Hermione stayed quiet.

“Nothing!” Hermione replied again, bringing her hands up. “I told you, I was just—”

“Curious about secrets,” Harry finished. “Which means *you* have secrets.”

“I have no such thing, I assure you.” *Liar, liar*; even she could hear it in her own voice. “I go to work, I go home, I see all of you. My life is perfectly quiet with zero room for secrets. I haven’t even gone on a bloody date in Merlin knows how long!”

The words slipped out before she could think about the implication, and panic flooded her veins. In her hurry to assure them that nothing was wrong, she was only digging her own grave deeper with every syllable. Anxiety tightened her chest. Guilt swirled in her abdomen. It felt like she was lying to everyone, and the rise of emotions was threatening to pull her under the tide with every passing breath.

She was losing her footing.

Harry’s mouth opened to form another question, or perhaps an accusation, she couldn’t be sure, but Ginny’s hand came to rest on his. It had his attention turning toward her, and she shook her head slowly.

“I think this is the perfect example,” Ginny said before turning back to Hermione, “of exactly what I was just saying. If there was something going on, I’d trust that you would tell us. And if you couldn’t, I would trust you just as equally to do the right thing.”

Hermione’s guilt grew tenfold. All her life, she’d known exactly what it meant to “do the right thing,” but gone were the days that the answer was so clear. Unfortunately, the water was only growing muddier with every step that took her deeper. Weeks before, or even days, she might have argued that the right thing meant figuring out the truth, no matter the consequence. But now? Now it was changing, morphing into something more difficult to acknowledge and accept. It no longer fit neatly into her hands, instead slipping through her fingers the harder she tried to grasp at it.

Maybe the right thing *wasn’t* to chase after the truth with her usual determined desperation. Both Ginny and Draco had put it in almost identical terms—perhaps the right thing was about putting her faith in the trust she held for Draco, and not about her instincts at all.

It was ironic, too, that her situation now reflected the same dilemma she was posed with in the very beginning. The same thing she had fought to do, and eventually succeeded. But now, instead of digging into her research, instead of following it further until no stone was left unturned, she needed to let it go. To release her desperate grasp for more information and let Draco guide her, and to trust the things he’d told her from the start. To trust him completely, in a way she hadn’t quite given up to anyone. He had the trust of her body, but this—this meant giving him the trust of her mind. Her heart.

It was terrifying in an entirely new way.

She'd been raised to never give up, to never let go of the instincts that drove her. Those same instincts protected her, gave her a reason to strive and want for more. To *achieve* more. She wouldn't have survived the war without those instincts, which made them that much harder to let go of.

With a grateful nod, Hermione tucked back into her lunch, unsure of where to go next. "Thank you, Ginny. I appreciate it."

Friday evening drinks came early for the staff of the DMLE, and Hermione counted nearly every employee present. Still riding high from their victory the week before, she was packed into her chair amidst the crowd at a series of tables that stretched almost the length of the pub.

Throughout the week, Hermione had continued to wrestle with her indecision. She swung between choices, feeling determined at one moment only to lose all commitment as soon as her eyes fell on the white blooms of the bouquet Draco had sent her. Seeing it was bittersweet—it was a reminder of the way he thought of her, of the fact that he actively did so outside of their time together, but also reminded her of all the things she was hiding from him.

By Friday, the pure, white petals began to mock her. There was no purity to be found in their relationship. Not when she was actively betraying him.

While it had taken her a few days, she now recognized it for what it was—a betrayal of his trust. *That* was why it felt so wrong to continue down her path of research. *That* was why it felt like the guilt was creeping up her throat and anxiety tugged at her lungs. Even though all signs pointed to Robards and not Draco as the guilty party, she was still actively going against his wishes. He'd specifically asked her not to, and yet she still did. Every step further down that path only made her feel worse, and that realization was the reason she hadn't even looked in the general direction of the archives or her home office all week.

She couldn't stand it. She nearly couldn't stand herself.

Drinks with Harry and the team were a welcome distraction, with the loud and boisterous crowd shuffling around her. Davies, one of the more lazy Aurors on the team, drained his third pint in just a few swallows.

"Come on now, Granger! You've got to catch up!" he said before belching into his elbow. When she crinkled her nose, he only laughed.

"Perhaps you should slow down!" she bartered instead, but he was having none of it.

"Speed up, child! Tut tut, let's go!"

Although he sat next to her, Harry was not on her side. "You've barely touched your drink, Hermione! And you skipped last week. They'll never let you leave at this rate."

Laughing lightly, she took a large sip of her wine. "Fine, fine."

She was already feeling flushed and warm from the number of bodies packed into the pub, and the alcohol was only making it worse. She'd gotten caught up with Sam, having pulled out some

photographs of his twins, and then by Warren as he told a particularly hilarious story of how his wife had forced him into cleaning out their attic by charming their sofa to zap him any time he sat on one of the cushions until it was finished.

“So what’s up next for you and Ginny? Has she burned the sofa yet?” Hermione leaned closer to ask Harry. She had to shift in her seat to face him directly, opening herself up to the rest of the pub. Witches and wizards mingled about in large groups, but no one she recognized.

“Close,” Harry said with a laugh. “I agreed to put it in the upstairs sitting room.”

“The one with the smell?” Hermione fought to keep her mouth from turning upwards, but it was a losing battle.

“The one with the smell,” he echoed. The room itself was fine, located on the third floor of Grimmauld and tucked away in the back. It was nice and private, away from the noise of the kitchen and the bedrooms, and would have made the perfect study had it not been constantly filled with the odour of a mysterious and completely unfindable dead fish.

They’d searched everywhere, checking beneath the floorboards and casting every cleaning charm they knew, but nothing got rid of it.

“A good couch for a good room,” Hermione quipped, raising her wine.

Harry rolled his eyes in good fun, but lifted his drink to clink his glass against hers. “Yeah, yeah.”

He finished it off in two quick swallows, and the remainder of her wine followed suit. “I suppose I still owe you for last week,” she said, tilting her chin toward his empty pint. “Another?”

“Definitely,” he agreed.

Gathering their glasses, she carefully weaved her way through the crowd. A light sheen of sweat was beginning to stick to the back of her neck, and even with her hair pulled up into a messy bun atop her head, it wasn’t nearly enough to cool her off. She’d already cast two cooling charms and burned through both in close to an hour. A third would have just been a waste of time and magic.

An overwhelmed looking barkeep scurried over, with a stained apron and two hand towels draped over either shoulder.

“What can I get you?”

“A pint and a wine, please. Elderflower, if you have it.”

She’d barely finished her order before he was off, his attention caught by someone at the other end of the bar. Figuring she had a wait ahead of her, Hermione grabbed the nearest stool and climbed up. For a few moments she watched the other patrons come and go, ordering drinks and chatting with acquaintances at the bar. It was less rowdy at this end of the pub, what without the nearly two dozen Aurors all stacked at the same table, and she savored the room to breathe for a moment.

Until a somewhat familiar figure sidled up to her, leaning an elbow against the bar top and angling his body toward hers in a casual stance.

“Hermione Granger, we *must* stop meeting like this,” Theo Nott greeted her with a wide grin. Although he was wearing a thin sweater, he didn’t seem nearly as flushed or sweaty as she did. His

smile, however, made her hands start to itch. He looked at her like he knew her.

She fought the instinct to look around behind him to see if anyone else familiar was lurking about.

“Theodore,” she said in place of a greeting. “I didn’t think you liked this place.”

His response was an unaffected shrug. “It’s quaint. Grows on you a bit if you give it a chance. I’m sure the same could be said for a lot of things.”

Then, he winked. He bloody winked at her.

Ignoring his pointed comment, she eyed him closely. “So what brings you here, then?”

The thought of Draco being close by had her palms growing damp. Whether from need or anxiety, she couldn’t be sure. She hadn’t heard from him in a few days, not since sending him a thank you note for the beautiful arrangement he’d sent to her office.

“Well, now that my dear Draco doesn’t consider himself to be in social exile anymore, we’re making it a point to explore the finer spots that Wizarding London has to offer.” He paused to flag down the barkeep, nodding and pointing quickly at a bottle of firewhisky against the back wall. The barkeep nodded, but made no attempt to come fulfill the order immediately.

Hermione sighed, realizing that it would be a long wait beside Theo Nott before she got her drinks.

“And where might those be?”

Curiosity burned in her chest. If Draco was getting out more often, surely that would mean—

“So far? Just this place,” Theo said with a low laugh. “Seems we’re starting off slow. It’s quite funny, actually. Draco mentioned wanting to come out again tonight and somehow we ended up here again, despite Blaise’s protests. And amazingly enough—an incredible coincidence, really—that shortly after we arrive, who do I see sidling up to the bar? My newest acquaintance, Hermione Granger.”

She couldn’t bother to hide her interest any longer. Not with the way Theo was glancing at her from the corner of his eye, his lips pulling into a knowing smirk. After their discussion at the apothecary, it was obvious that Theo saw plenty from his vantage point. She let her gaze track around him, searching through the bodies at the bar to see if a familiar one stood out. But there were none. No lean builds, no blond hair. Disappointment burned. Was he only joking with her, then? Or was Draco actually there? She wouldn’t put it past Theo to be purposefully riling her up just to see what kind of reaction he could achieve.

“So you’re all out tonight then? Any other plans?”

Unlike the last time, when Draco had taken her by such surprise that she’d almost fallen out of her own seat, she could barely hold back the desire to stand up on the stool and look out across every person in the pub until she found him. No. If Draco was there—and if he wanted to see her—he could seek her out. She wouldn’t go running just because Theo wanted to play a joke on her. He was obviously up to something, and she wasn’t about to walk right into his trap.

“Hmm?” Theo hummed as if he didn’t quite hear her, but his eyes landed on her neck. “My, my, Granger, you’re looking awfully flushed.”

"It's warm in here," she said, shoving an errant curl from her face. She could feel them loosening from her topknot, and it was likely that they were growing wild from the heat and humidity of the pub.

Theo's eyes stayed focused on one curl in particular, one she could feel brushing the base of her neck. "Perhaps you should take a quick break outside. Cool off a bit." He trailed off, his hand lifting toward her. She watched it as if it was occurring in slow motion, fingers outstretched as if he wanted to stroke—

A hand shot out between them, long fingers wrapping around Theo's wrist and halting his movement mid-air.

Draco stood to her left, with an icy expression on his face. With one eyebrow raised, he tilted his chin at his friend. "Theo," he said in a hard tone. It was a warning, and a clear one at that.

Theo immediately grinned, seemingly uncaring that Draco wasn't loosening his grip. Theo took his time looking away from Hermione's shocked face, but his features only held one thing. Amusement.

"Ooh, touchy, are we? That took you..." pausing, Theo used his free hand to pull a small gold pocket watch from his trouser pocket, "...long enough that I owe Blaise twenty galleons."

Draco rolled his eyes and immediately dropped Theo's wrist. "What are you doing?"

"Having some fun." Theo grinned again. *All smirks and smiles, jokes and laughing, wasn't he?* But Draco wouldn't look at her, and instead kept his eyes trained on Theo, who carefully tucked both hands into his pockets under his friend's hard gaze.

Finally, Draco glanced her way. His grey eyes raked across her features, settling on her lips before turning back to Theo. Her heart fluttered in her chest. "Don't bring her into this."

"Is that what I was doing? My, my, I thought you already *had*. You're losing your touch."

For all of Theo's jokes, Draco remained unfazed.

"While I appreciate the chivalry, I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself," Hermione spoke up.

"Yes," Theo agreed. "She does look like a rather equipped witch, doesn't she, Draco?"

Draco's jaw went tense, and it took Hermione several long moments to catch up to what was happening between the two men in front of her.

Oh, Gods.

Theo, his eyes filled with delighted mirth, kept needling him. Like poking a sleeping dragon, he didn't seem to care that Draco's features were slowly filling with ire.

"I seem to remember *several* instances in which she took on worse than the likes of me, but if you don't seem to think she's capable..."

"Leave her alone, Theo. Now is not the time or place."

Theo looked around, his features filling with faux confusion. “Why? Is there something wrong? Did I miss it?” He brought his attention back to her. “I apologize, Miss Granger. Are you here with a date and I wasn’t aware? It would be incredibly untoward of me to approach you if that were the case. Old pureblood courting customs, you see. I don’t quite care about them so I seem to conveniently forget—”

Hermione laughed, the sound pushing past her lips before she could raise her hand to her mouth to stop it. He was so animated, so over the top, that it was almost comical the way he was egging Draco on. At her laugh, Theo smiled wider.

“...But if not,” he said, continuing as if Draco wasn’t standing between them as still as a statue, “I wouldn’t be upset if you might consider—”

“Granger,” Draco cut him off, turning sharply to face her. Tension filled his frame, but his face was coolly composed as he looked down at her. “May I speak with you? Outside, please.”

He stepped back and gave her a wide berth, dipping his head as if it was strictly politeness that spurred him to push his back toward Theo. Theo smiled cheekily at the two of them as Hermione slid off the stool, hoping that the barkeep would be able to send the drinks down to the Aurors’ table in her absence. Theo kept quiet as Draco navigated her away, his hand coming down to rest lightly above the small of her back. High enough that no one could mistake it for something untoward, but it still felt heavy and hot through the material of her dress as he guided her through the crowd. Even though she walked in front of him, he still pushed her gently. Her feet followed his guidance without question, winding through the back of the pub and toward the dark exit. However, instead of stopping at the door, he urged her to keep walking.

“I thought you said—”

“I know what I said.” He offered no other explanation.

Excitement began to flutter in her stomach with every step farther into the back hall. There were only two doors left, and both led to the men’s and women’s toilets. The noise from the crowd in the pub was growing dim, and the pounding of her heart in her chest was getting louder.

His hand didn’t leave her back, even when he leaned forward to open the door to the women’s toilets. He ignored the noise of protest she made as he directed her inside, swiftly shutting the door behind them. Luckily they were alone, the stall doors hanging open, and he spun her around to press her body against the wall.

“Draco, what’s—”

Her question was cut off by the crush of his lips, pressing tight against hers as he sucked in a deep breath through his nose. Like he’d been holding it through their walk through the pub, trying not to breathe until he had her in his arms. She felt his chest expand against hers as he took her in, coaxing her mouth open as he aligned his body with hers. He moved against her in a way that made his desperation clear—if they’d been at home, or at the club, he would have already shoved her knickers aside and been inside of her in a single thrust.

Hermione moaned at the feel of his tongue against hers, sweeping into his mouth and bringing her hands up to clutch at his collar. He was already hard against her, his hands sweeping down her waist and back up again, touching and squeezing a path across her body like he couldn’t get

enough. He was greedy for her, his kiss turning hard as he demanded more. He kissed her like he had something to prove. To himself, to her, to Theo, she wasn't sure.

She followed his urgency, lifting up and onto her toes to crush her body against his. Her skin, already warmed from the drinks and the crowds, heated even more under his touch. When she pulled his lower lip between her teeth and lightly tugged, he shoved his thigh between her leg and hitched it high enough that her toes grazed off the floor. Surprise and arousal flashed through her, and she tightened her grip on him.

"Fuck," Draco cursed against her mouth, pulling away to catch his breath. His hands were anchored on her hips, clutching her dress beneath his palms as it started to ride up. With his thigh hard between her legs, she had to fight to keep from rocking against it. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have ambushed you like that. I should—I should have more control."

Though his words were apologetic, his features held no remorse. His eyes burned black as he stared down at her, taking her in as if it had been months since he'd last seen her and not just a few days. Her own chest was rising and falling rapidly as she tried to get her breathing under control, her lungs filled with an equal mixture of surprise and desperation. She was torn between chasing his lips to continue, and retreating back into the safety of her logic. Logic that told her it wasn't wise to be sneaking off into the loo with Draco Malfoy, especially when all of her coworkers weren't too far outside the door.

"What—what happened?" she asked instead of choosing. "What was that about? Why are you here?"

She couldn't deny that his reaction had taken her aback, but the extent of it had heat building low in her pelvis. She had never been the type of woman who was interested in jealous, petty men. But as she teetered on his thigh, feeling her knickers growing slick from his sudden intensity, she couldn't deny the slight appeal it held.

Draco's hands tightened around her waist, and he lowered his forehead to hers. Propped up on his thigh, she had nowhere to go.

"Theo was..." He trailed off, exasperation pulling at his expression. "Making my life infinitely more difficult, as he likes to do."

Memories of her conversation with him in the apothecary resurfaced in her mind, but before she could speak up, Draco continued his explanation.

"We were only supposed to pop in for a quick drink, but I saw you and didn't want to leave. He figured it out and must've decided to have a bit of fun."

The thought of Draco watching her from the shadows across the pub, without her knowing, had heat blooming in her abdomen. He let out a dark laugh, tongue running over his incisor.

"He forced my hand, trying to touch you like that. I'm a jealous bastard and he knows it."

Hermione knew she should have been horrified. It would have been the reasonable response. But as much as she tried to stifle that side of herself, she wasn't always the most reasonable, level-headed witch. Not with her record, which had now grown a touch longer under Draco's hand.

"And he knows I'm already yours," she said on a shaky breath, trying and failing to conceal the effect the realization had on her body. Her pulse was beating so hard she could feel it thumping in her neck. Her fingertips. Her toes. Through her chest and into his. There was something deeply primal about the claim, even if Theo's intentions hadn't been legitimate, and her core tightened. She couldn't stop herself from shifting on his leg, rocking against the tense muscle to try and relieve the ache.

Draco's features darkened, and one hand released her hip to grasp her chin. He held her face, eyes burning into hers.

"You are, aren't you?"

His grip was so tight that she couldn't even nod. "Yes, Draco."

Pleased with her answer, he brushed his lips against hers. Not quite kissing, but feeling. Teasing. "My good girl," he murmured. "My perfect girl. *Mine.*"

Her eyes fluttered closed at the praise, and he rewarded her with a full kiss. Although she was quickly succumbing to the fog of her arousal, a small part of her was still aware of the door to their right. The door that anyone could come through and catch them, with her dress rucked up around her hips and slowly working herself against his thigh.

Thrill shot through her at the potential danger, and her hips began to move even faster. The risk only added to the embers of heat building between her legs, and she was desperate to stoke it higher. Hotter. Before she could find the right pace, his fingers squeezed her hip, stilling her movement. His voice was surprisingly hesitant when he spoke.

"Patience, darling. Not yet. I've got something for you first. I was hoping to give it to you later this weekend, but right now I can't quite bring myself to be patient any longer."

That had her eyes snapping open, but he was still looking down at her with a glint in his eyes.

"Reach into my inside jacket pocket," he instructed and released her chin. His hand drifted back down to her other hip, holding her against his body while she felt against his chest and into his suit jacket.

She had to resist the call to continue sweeping her hands across the hard muscles beneath his shirt; the memories of their night together in his bed were still fresh enough that her thighs tightened around his. She wanted—*needed* to feel his skin against hers again, and soon.

Every desperate thought about sex or the feel of his body ceased to exist as soon as her fingers found the hard edge of the box in his pocket. Her heart beat faster, fluttering around beneath her ribs as she pulled it free. She fought to swallow, her breathing beginning to grow shallow.

"Draco..." Her eyes were glued to the box—long and wrapped in thick black velvet, with a gold logo embossed into the surface. One she didn't recognize. One that looked much too expensive for a casual gift. She couldn't look at him, only the box, and her fingers began to shake. He didn't demand that she look at him, nor did he take it from her hands.

"Open it," he directed instead. His voice had gone soft, but it still held the same edge of intensity as when he'd spoken his claim.

Slowly, carefully, she lifted the lid, and her heart nearly stopped. Inside, nestled into a bed of silk, was a ruby bracelet.

“Draco,” she spoke his name again, shaking her head, unsure of what she could or should say. She couldn’t accept such an expensive gift. “I can’t. You don’t have to send me flowers or buy me—”

“Look at it, Hermione.” It was nothing short of a command, effectively stopping any excuse she might’ve mustered. Chancing a look up at his face, she felt warmth bloom across her chest. He was watching her, not the bracelet in her hands, with a look of pure, unguarded want.

It wasn’t until she forced her eyes back down to the bracelet that he spoke again. “However much you protest, I *can* and I *will*, Hermione. But this is more than flowers. This is more than courting, and we both know it.”

Her breath caught as she understood his meaning. Beneath her fingers, she could see it clearly, etched into each stone on the bracelet. Each one sparkled in the light, the silver between the mounts flawless, but it was more. So much more.

The center stone, the largest on the chain, glinted as she moved it closer. Deep inside, not quite etched, and almost imperceptible unless looking directly at it, was the letter *D*. It was scripted and flourished as if written by his own quill on parchment, rather than inside a ruby. Every stone that flanked it had been treated similarly, but they each sparkled in the same way. Identical, even. Each imprinted with a constellation, the tiny, miniature stars winking in the light.

Draco.

Instantly, she knew. She recognized the meaning, even if the mark was almost imperceptible. No one else would understand what it meant—what a bracelet like this *could* mean—unless they were familiar.

His.

“Mine,” Draco echoed as if he heard her thoughts.

A claim.

She raised her eyes to meet his. She was glad for his hands on her hips; he settled her, keeping her in place. Keeping her from running, even though she couldn’t imagine a reality where she would run from him again.

This was it. This is what they had been building to. Everything that they’d said to each other, every promise they’d made. *Yours. Mine. Ours.* It led to this moment.

“Yours,” she agreed, pulling the words from deep in her chest. But it wasn’t difficult like she might have expected, nor was it forced. He was right. *It* was right, and it was the closest thing to a declaration of love that she’d made in years.

Had she not been lifted on his leg and pressed against his body, she might have missed the way his body softened just slightly at the word. But what followed was clear—a kiss so soft, so pure, so relieved, that it made her feel like she was floating.

With her hand crushed between their chests she grasped the bracelet tighter, holding it close until the jewels began to cut into her palm. Draco kissed her slowly, stepping further against her, and didn't break the kiss as his hands came to find hers. He coaxed her lips open, sweeping his tongue into her mouth while his fingers took hold of her wrist. His teeth nipped at her lower lip as he wound the bracelet around her, the silver cool and heavy against her skin. He didn't stop until it was clasped together and he held it tightly against his chest. He gripped her so tightly that there was no mistaking the desire that burned in him. They were both desperate for each other. Always.

Her chest felt ready to explode as he continued to kiss her, pouring everything he had into showing her just how much he was feeling in that moment. It expanded inside her, pulling and morphing until it felt like a living thing inside her ribs. It felt so light and so full of hope that she thought she might burst if he didn't keep her grounded. She needed him to keep her there. To take care of her, the way he had. The way she loved.

With her free hand she felt his chest, pushing beneath his suit jacket and clutching at his torso. Her nails dug into his shirt and she shifted forward, meeting their hips until she could wrap her thighs around his waist. It was close, but not enough.

"Draco, please..." she keened, but he didn't let her wrist go. Instead he pulled his head back and gave her a hard look.

"I didn't give you that to shag you in a pub toilet, Hermione." It sounded almost like a reprimand, but she couldn't bring herself to care. "I should have waited, but—"

Hermione cut him off with a sharp bite to his neck, nipping and sucking at his neck. "I don't care," she said. "Fuck me, Draco. *Please*. Take care of me."

It was more than desire, more than urgency, that burned within her. It bled into her veins, spurring her on with a single minded intensity that she couldn't ignore. She didn't want to wait until he took her home. She didn't want to wait until they could meet at the club. She wanted him *there*, at that very moment, in his raw and most demanding form. She wanted him to lose control the way he almost had when he led her into the bathrooms. She wanted to feel every bit of his need for her, to see if his fire matched her own. To bask in it as they both burned.

When she rocked her hips against his, working her cunt against the hard evidence of his own arousal, he groaned. His fingers dug harder into her waist, and she felt him pulse between her legs. When she did it again, he bucked against her, pressing her harder against the wall.

Biting out a curse, Draco released his grip just long enough to hike the skirt of her dress up higher to expose her arse. A sharp smack followed immediately after, right on to the soft flesh and over her knickers, but she didn't care. She moaned at the spark of heat that bled across her skin, and he did it again.

"You know how much I love to hear you beg for me." The hand that wasn't massaging the spot on her arse that he'd just spanked, came up to grip her hair hard, digging beneath her bun. "Go on, then. Tell me exactly what you want and maybe I'll give it to you."

With her head forced back, she panted. Licking her lips, she pressed her breasts harder into his chest. "I want you inside of me, Draco. I need it."

Draco smirked just long enough to inspire a flash of fear through her stomach. His gaze sharpened, and he licked his bottom lip.

"You're so desperate for it, aren't you? My greedy, perfect girl. I'll give it to you, but you have to choose."

She grew even wetter, her cunt beginning to ache. "Choose?"

"Mmhmm," he hummed in confirmation, his demeanor entirely too casual for the way he was grinding himself between her legs, slowly thrusting his hips as if he was already inside her. Dragging himself against her until he reached her clit through his trousers and her knickers. His eyes raked over her face, pausing on her mouth, before sliding over to the door and the stalls against the far wall.

"You get to choose..." Draco paused and released her hair to grip her by the arse. He settled her body tighter against his before pulling her off the wall and began to walk toward the stalls, her legs wrapped loosely around his hips. "...between a silencing charm, or a Notice-Me-Not spell."

"What!?" She grappled tighter to him as he walked further and further away from the door. "No, Draco, you have to lock the door—"

It was one thing for him to shag her in public while the door to the hallway was firmly locked, but it was another thing entirely for him to slip into the stall and shut the latch with a decisive *click*. Which is exactly what he did.

"You said you wanted it, didn't you?" he asked, slowly lowering her back down to the ground. "Now choose. Choose like a good little witch, and then I'll fuck you just like you need."

Despite her verbal protest, her body still clenched at his words. Her legs felt wobbly as he spun her around to face the wall of the stall, and he closed his body in on hers. "Do you want to know something?" he asked, leaning down to whisper in her ear, his hands drifting down the sides of her hips until his fingers hooked on the hem of her dress. He lightly traced patterns on her thighs as he brought it back up and around her waist, and goosebumps skittered across her skin.

"I've thought about this *constantly*. Of stuffing you full of my cock when no one else around knows. Feeling you leak out all over me because you need it so badly. But you can't make any noise. We've got to be quiet, darling. Can you?"

His fingers were toying with the waistband of her knickers, and she choked back a moan. At some point, her hands had come to rest on the stall wall in front of her, and her new bracelet sparkled in the light. It centered her, grounding her in the moment. *Silencing charm, or Notice-Me-Not?* If anyone were to walk in in their current positions, it would be obvious that there were two figures crowded into the small space. They might even pull on the stall handle to see if it was open, and risk exposure even more.

"Notice-Me-Not," she whispered in answer. She could be quiet. She could. She *would*.

Draco growled a satisfied noise. As he pulled his wand from his pocket, he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Take off your knickers. I'll help you be quiet, darling."

"Please, hurry," she urged. As she slid the fabric down her legs, she could feel the wetness that had gathered between her thighs. Bared to the air with her dress pulled up around her hips, it felt obscene, standing in a public toilet so exposed.

Draco had barely pocketed her knickers and cast the Notice-Me-Not charm before she heard the door creak open. Sounds from the pub flooded the small room, and she glanced back at Draco in panic, but the only thing written across his features was amusement. He lifted a brow at her in challenge, and lowered his hands to begin unbuckling his trousers.

Every sound made her wince. The soft creak of the leather of his belt, the delicate clink of the metal buckle, but it was almost completely drowned out by the erratic pounding of her heart and the noisy breaths that she was trying to suck in through her nose. Trying and failing to stay calm, she watched, helpless and wanting, as Draco pulled his cock free. He was already hard and thick, and as he stroked himself he raised his finger to his lips in a cheeky instruction to stay quiet.

Whoever came in was loitering by the sinks, humming an unintelligible tune to themselves as they turned on the water. They splashed around a bit, and Draco took Hermione's distraction as an opportunity to push her shoulders forward again before kicking her feet apart. Still in her heels from work, she was thankful for the way they lengthened her legs, and she followed his palm on her back as he guided her to lean forward.

The faucet turned off as soon as Draco began pressing himself between her legs, slowly stretching her entrance with an agonizing amount of control that had Hermione struggling to breathe quietly through her nose. His cock pressed against the ache of her arousal, burning it away, and she pushed back against him, but he kept his hand anchored to her hip. Holding her in place. Making her take it as slow as he wanted to give it to her.

She could feel a moan trying to fight its way out of her chest, creeping up her throat. Once he was seated completely, she bit down on her lip as hard as she could. He didn't move, giving her time to adjust, and she fought against the urge to wiggle back against him. It would only make it worse. She could wait—she could wait until whoever was at the sink dried their hands and left the room.

She might have been able to wait, but he didn't. He began to rock behind her, starting out with shallow thrusts that had him grinding against her arse. Not enough to cause their bodies to make any kind of noise, but it gave her enough friction that her thighs immediately tightened. She pushed back against him again, tilting her hips up to let him slide deeper, and she felt herself grow wetter around him. Just like he'd said she would.

Hermione let out a shaky breath. Another moan was trying to squeak out past her lips, and she almost succeeded in keeping it in until the person outside the stall began to walk back toward the door. She held her body still, limbs going completely stiff, but Draco didn't stop.

Tension bloomed in her stomach, twisting the arousal through her pelvis. Even without friction on her clit, her need was driving higher and higher already. Hermione felt herself growing even wetter while she held her breath.

Oh gods, oh gods, oh—

Noise from the pub filled the room again, and Hermione released the tension from her body at once, sagging forward as her heart raced. The fear at getting caught was heady, driving her higher as much as it made her want to pull her skirt down and drag him outside so they could Apparate to his home instead. But despite the fleeting thought, she didn't feel an ounce of regret.

Once it was quiet and clear that they were alone once more, Draco snapped his hips hard against her arse, and she couldn't hold back any longer. The noises fell from her lips as she pushed back against him, rocking her hips so he could slide deeper. It was rougher than he'd been in the shower

the last time he'd taken her from behind, thrusting faster and harder as he worked their bodies together.

"Fuck, that's it," he cursed when she shifted her footing, bringing her thighs together so she could tighten around the slide of his cock. One of his hands released her hip and slid up her body, caressing her breast on his way up past her chest. He grasped the front of her neck and hauled her body back until she was flush against his chest, but he never stopped thrusting. With heavy breaths, he spoke directly into her ear.

"Do you know what I want, darling?"

Her answer was a needy whimper. Pressure was building between her legs; if he touched her now, she'd fall apart instantly. It was all so illicit—their location, the furious need that drove them both together, the ownership of the bracelet now wrapped around her wrist—there was only one thing she could focus on, and it was him.

"I want to come in this perfect little cunt," he whispered. "And watch you walk out of here with my spend dripping down the inside of your thighs. Right back to Potter and the rest of your coworkers, who think you're so prim and proper."

A groan escaped her, her body clenching down on his at the thought. His hand tightened around her throat, pressing lightly on the sides but only enough to remind her of his ownership. His palm didn't press against her airway, but the heavy weight of it was enough to make her moan again. He was overwhelming all of her senses until he was the only thing left, and she loved it.

"You like that, don't you? My dirty girl." He laughed lightly before running his teeth across the shell of her ear.

"Yours," she agreed, and his other hand tightened on her hip in response.

A second later, the door opened again, and Hermione sucked in a sharp breath and the fear that spiked through her. Instinctively she wanted to pull back, to hide, to stay as quiet as possible, but the feel of Draco pushing deep into her core and the heat of his breath against her ear was too much. He held her in place, his hand around her throat, and slowed his thrusts only slightly. He lengthened them instead, focusing on pulling out almost completely before pushing in again with a slow roll of his hips, and she started to pant.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered into her ear, nearly silent, as the person made their way into the stall next to theirs. She fought for control, stiffening against him, but it only made the pleasure even more intense.

Instead of speaking, she leaned her head back, opening her neck further to his grip and mouthed the words at him.

Please. Please.

He grinned down at her, cocky and nearly breathless himself. With an amused shake of his head, he let go of her neck to slide his hand up to cover her mouth. His fingers pressed past her lips and rested on her tongue, effectively cutting off any chance that she might accidentally cry out.

With his fingers in her mouth and his thumb holding her jaw in place, the relief was nearly instant. She let her eyes flutter closed as he stroked into her, and began to suck. His hips stuttered, his pace

faltering with a sudden, sharp thrust. When she opened her eyes, he was staring down at her with a ferocity that almost staggered her.

So she did it again. She swirled her tongue around his fingers, mimicking the way she would with his cock. She didn't stop when saliva began to pool around the outside of her lips, or when he pressed them slightly deeper into her mouth. His jaw dropped just slightly as he began to breathe heavier, finally losing some of his controlled composure.

The toilet flushed, and she felt him groan lightly. The sound vibrated through his ribs and against her back, just light enough to get lost in the noise, and his mouth snapped shut by the time the stall door opened and footsteps echoed away from them and towards the sink.

Hermione rocked her hips, unable to stop. She spurred him to go faster, sucking his fingers at the same pace she wanted to feel him between her thighs. The noise from their bodies grew louder, her wetness becoming more and more obvious with each heady stroke. Before the water from the sinks turned off, the door opened again and a series of heeled footsteps clicked across the tile. There was a shuffle of shoes, more muffled than the heels, and the bathroom door opened once more.

"Oh my *Gods*, I can't believe we missed him!" A high-pitched, feminine voice pouted once they assumed they were alone.

"Ugh, I know," a second voice replied. "But Missy said he was here! He must have just left. Maybe if we hang out for a bit he'll come back."

Hermione let her eyes drift closed again, losing herself to the feel of Draco and the sounds around them. She felt her core spasm every time he ground into her and she tilted her hips back for more.

"He'd better," the first voice responded, her tone turning coy. "But if he doesn't, Theodore Nott is still out there. I'd bet he could tell us where he might have gone."

Her companion laughed, but she continued. Draco's pace slowed, obviously just as interested in the conversation as Hermione was.

"I heard Theo likes blondes, so you shouldn't have any problems finding an in."

"He likes anything with a *pulse*. I've heard stories about him—it's not the *in* that's a problem, it's getting the invite *back*."

They both laughed as they continued into the stalls on either side of Hermione and Draco, but he only grinned down at her. It was clear where the conversation was going.

"Is that really so bad? I mean, I know he's not nearly as rich, but—" At her pause, Draco rolled his eyes, "—you've got to admit, he's fit as fuck. Zabini, too."

"They all are," her friend agreed.

Another giggle. "Maybe we should start with the two of them and work our way up to Malfoy instead. They could be our in."

The entire time, Draco kept fucking her. With her head back against his chest, his fingers in her mouth, and his cock buried between her legs, the witches had no idea that the man they were

looking for was almost within reach. He seemed to be enjoying himself and the feel of her body while listening to the women talk about him as if he were the most desirable man in the pub.

As they finished, the high-pitched one gave a dreamy sigh near the sinks. “Do you think they share? Ugh, that would be *scorching* hot.”

“You know they do! They must.” The echo of giggles was lost in the sound of the faucets as they washed their hands. “Honestly though, I wouldn’t mind a one-time deal if it meant getting to experience all of that at once. Just let me check out the Manor on my walk of shame in the morning, okay? That’s all I ask!”

The two continued to gossip and giggle on their way out of the room, and it wasn’t until the door was closed behind them that Draco let out a deep laugh against her back.

She let out a needy moan, the sound muffled by his fingers, and pushed back against him. Her mind was swirling with questions—was that normal, what they’d just overheard? Was that a part of why Draco hadn’t gone out in public for so long, even without his former betrothal contract? *Did* he enjoy sharing in the bedroom?

As if he could anticipate the questions forming behind her eyes, his thumb gripped her tighter and he pushed into her harder. He kept his eyes glued to her face.

“Let me clear this up now, before you can start worrying about it,” he ground out. His next statement was punctuated with the slam of his hips. “I. Don’t. Share.”

“Good,” she tried to agree around his fingers, but it came out too garbled.

Draco continued, apparently making up for lost time since he’d had to be so quiet. “And the only witch I want is right here, squirming on my cock with my name on her body.”

Hermione’s eyes rolled back, basking in the feel of him. His thrusts were growing sharper, no longer languid and slow, and he groaned when she dug her teeth around his fingers.

“Touch yourself,” he directed. “I want to feel it, Hermione.”

She didn’t waste any time, lowering the hand with her new bracelet down to her center. Her fingers slid through her folds, finding her swollen clit with ease and beginning a series of quick strokes that she knew would get her off. It was the same touch she used on herself while alone—not teasing or sensual, but direct and firm. It matched his pace perfectly, and within seconds she was twitching. Urgency made her strain toward her building orgasm, desperate to get there before someone else walked in.

The cool metal of her bracelet dug into her skin as she pressed herself harder against her hand, trapped between the stall and Draco’s body. She was shoved forward with every thrust of his hips, and when he pulled his fingers free from her mouth to grip her chin, she focused her eyes on him once more. Her saliva smeared across her cheek and chin, then down her neck as he pulled his hand back.

He didn’t have to speak again for her to know he was just as close as she was. His thighs were beginning to shake behind her, his hips slowing to a pace that she was beginning to recognize. He would drag the head of his cock closer to her entrance, his thrusts growing shorter and sharper, the tempo creeping higher as he chased his own pleasure, and she met him with the same force.

Somehow, some way, he made her want to beg for it. She wanted him like she'd wanted no other man before, and she wanted him to hear how *badly* he made her need.

"I want it," she told him, biting her lip to keep from crying out when his body began to shake. "I need it, Draco. Come in me, please. Mark me, make me yours—"

"You *are* mine," he growled, his hand closing back around her throat, and she came. She fell apart beneath his touch, her fingers rubbing frantic circles around her clit. Her channel tightened, spasming around his cock, and she felt him follow into his orgasm almost immediately. It flooded her core, hot and pulsing as he continued to thrust, the edge of urgency making him rougher than usual.

She loved it. She loved all of it, even—

"I'm never letting you go," he said right before he kissed her. As they kissed and shook through their orgasms, slowly coming down together, she shuddered against his body. Pleasure was still lingering in her veins, pulsing between her thighs and making her twitch with every press of his cock, but she wasn't in any hurry to leave. Despite where they were standing, and despite the way she could feel the mix of their come beginning to leak out and onto her thighs.

Just like he promised.

"Take me home," she whispered against his lips, breaking the kiss. She needed to show him her newfound gratitude for his gift. "I want to be in your bed again, wearing nothing but this bracelet."

His fingers and thumb tightened around the outside of her neck. "Whatever you want, darling. It's yours."

The heated expression he wore told her that he wanted the exact same thing. Pulling out slowly, Draco was careful as he tucked himself back into his trousers, and fixed her dress before she could do it herself. He put her back to rights, straightening her clothes and pressing soft kisses to her lips and cheeks and forehead. Wiping away the wet traces of her saliva with his thumb. Praising, as he always did. He didn't have to speak the words out loud for her to hear them. It wasn't until he went for the latch on the stall door that she stiffened.

"Wait—I need my knickers back."

Draco smirked, but made no move to pull them from the pocket that he'd tucked them in before. "Why? I'm just going to rip them off again in twenty minutes."

She scoffed. "Yes, but I have to go out there—to Harry and everyone else—I can't just *not*—"

"Oh, come on now, Granger. I'm sure you'd be surprised at what you can do if you really put your mind to it."

He was biting down on his lower lip, attempting not to let his smirk blow into a full smile. *Cheeky bastard*. Even as she stood there, her hands on her hips, she could feel their come mixing together and sticking to her skin.

"You're really going to send me out there like this? Where anyone could see?" She hoped his jealous, territorial side would win out over his desire to make a point, but it backfired. Instead his eyes lit with satisfaction. It seemed that's *exactly* what he wanted.

"Now you're catching on," he replied, turning to flick the latch open to step out into the open area. "Best to hurry, if you don't want it tracking down your leg by the time you make your way back to Potter. I'm sure he's already grown suspicious as to why you've been gone so long."

Draco glanced at the door before giving her an expectant look. "Meet me outside in ten. I'll settle your tab, just go grab your things."

Indignation flared to life inside her, frustration equally balanced at how easily he'd taken control of the situation. "You don't need to—"

He was halfway out the door as she stormed toward him but he stopped immediately, spinning on his heel to give her a hard look. "I know I don't *need* to do anything. But I want to, and I can, so I will. You can fight all you want, but we both know that deep down, it's one of the many things about me that gets you wet, Granger."

A quick tug on one of her loose curls and he was gone, fading into the noise and crowd of the pub. It took her a moment to gather herself, blinking back into focus when another witch came through the door.

"Needed a moment away from all that noise, huh?" she asked sympathetically, scrunching her nose as she passed by Hermione to the stall that they had just vacated. "I can't believe how crowded it is tonight."

Forcing a light laugh, Hermione nodded. "Something like that, yeah."

Draco had only been gone for a matter of seconds and her heart was already racing. The facets of the stones around her wrist caught the light as she fixed her hair in the mirror and washed her hands, her mind running through her new reality. Rationally, she knew that the bracelet was only a gesture. It didn't technically change anything after their verbal commitment to each other at his flat.

But it felt like more. And it felt *right*.

Tears stung at the back of her eyes, and she scrubbed her hands under the scalding water of the tap as she blinked them away. A familiar, cruel sense of guilt pushed through to the forefront of her consciousness. It drowned everything else out, soaking through the relaxation of having been in his arms and washing away everything good in its path. It obliterated everything else that she might have, or should have been feeling. It revealed everything in stunning clarity. It left her unable to hide behind her post-orgasmic bliss or to be distracted by the elation of having been on the receiving end of such a deep, honest commitment. He'd left her no room to question, or space to wonder—he was hers just as much as she was his.

She'd known that her research into his past was questionable at best, and selfish at worst. He'd specifically asked her to refrain, to *trust* him, and she hadn't. Everything she'd done so far was a betrayal. And it had to stop.

Before, she'd thought that she knew better. That her search for the truth was more important than anything else. That she wouldn't be able to accept him or their relationship without exposing every bit of his past to the harsh light. But now... She shook her head to herself, looking down at the bracelet wrapped around her wrist as she dried her hands.

Now none of that mattered. Her feelings were rooted too deep, wrapped so tightly around every fiber of her being that she was certain that nothing in the world could change how she felt. It was

just as Ginny had said—she had to trust Draco, and perhaps for the first time since they'd started their arrangement, she did. Wholeheartedly. She trusted that he'd done the right things, that he'd changed, and that he had told her everything that he could, barring the restrictions of his oath.

It was about more than trust, Hermione realized as she exited the toilets and pushed her way back through the crowd. It was about respect. She needed to trust *and* respect him. And she did. Which meant that she *had* to stop. She had to throw away every article and file she'd amassed, and force herself to stop looking at the past. To focus instead on the future. One they could have together.

The choice steadied her, settling and soothing some of the guilt from her chest. It didn't eradicate it completely, but it smoothed the edges. Only time would shrink it back into something manageable.

"There you are," Harry greeted as she approached the table. His drink was nearly gone, but hers sat untouched. Someone must have sent them over. "You alright? You're looking a little flushed."

Her neck and cheeks grew even warmer as she blushed, but she shrugged and kept her tone as light as possible. "I took a quick break outside to cool off but it didn't seem to help. I think that might be my sign to call it for the night."

"I won't be too far behind you, I think. Have a good night, Hermione."

"Night," she replied, giving the rest of her coworkers a quick nod as she grabbed her bag from the back of the chair where she'd been sitting before. Her movements were growing rushed, the slickness between her thighs getting increasingly harder to ignore the longer she spent wasting time. "See you Monday!"

"Don't work too much this weekend! You put us all to shame, you know!" someone called after her, and she laughed as she walked away. Somehow, with the man waiting outside the pub for her, something told her she would likely be forgoing her work for *another* weekend.

As soon as she stepped out and onto the pavement, she came to a halt at the sight in front of her.

Draco stood with his back to the door, his shoulders strained and tense, and appeared to be thoroughly chastising an amused-looking Blaise Zabini and Theo Nott.

"—*children*, the two of you. I swear—"

They all noticed her at the same time, Draco's attention instantly focused on her as he turned. She noted the relief in his eyes, and couldn't stop the light smile that pulled across her lips.

"Granger," he greeted casually, as if he hadn't just shagged her in the loo.

Theo snickered. Blaise blinked between the two of them, but amusement crinkled at the corners of his eyes, betraying his composure. Without thinking, she raised her hand in an awkward wave. Even in the darkness the rubies around her wrist twinkled, the constellations sparkling with magic and the quality of the stones too beautiful to ignore.

Realizing the mistake almost immediately Hermione dropped her hand, but it was too late. Theo's features lit up in instant recognition, and he held his hand out toward Blaise.

"Fuckin' told you, mate."

Draco's annoyance was palpable, his jaw straining as he watched his two friends exchange several galleons. Blaise dug them from his trouser pocket and dropped them into Theo's palm with an unaffected shrug, but gave Draco a long look.

"I really thought you'd have more self control."

Draco sighed and reached up to rub at his temples. "I should have Avada'd you both when I had the chance."

Pocketing his winnings, Theo stepped away and casually strolled in the opposite direction of the Apparation point. "C'mon, Blaise. Let me buy you a drink. I'm feeling generous. Oh—" he paused and looked back at Hermione, "—you're welcome, by the way. You look good in rubies."

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

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



If at all possible, Draco grew even more insatiable with his mark voluntarily worn on Hermione's body. Any time he caught sight of the bracelet he had to have her, immediately snatching her wrist close and kissing his way down her arm. He marked her with his mouth, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh right beneath the chain of rubies. His entire hand circled her wrist, and he held her down by that arm as he thrust into her later that night. She came, feeling the way it pressed into her skin.

On Saturday morning he laid her out on the desk in his study and stroked her with his tongue until she screamed so loud her throat felt raw. She'd returned the favor by dropping to her knees in front of the settee in the living room, sucking his cock in front of the wall of windows that looked out

across London later that night. Then, when she was readying for bed and only wearing one of his shirts and her new bracelet, he dragged her into the giant bathtub so he could scrub and caress every inch of her body until they were writhing against each other, desperate for release.

She'd attempted to teach him how to make eggs, and instead he had her bent over the counter before she could finish looking through the cabinets for a pan. With his borrowed shirt pulled up around her breasts and his hands digging into her hips as he took her from behind, she didn't think she minded how badly he wanted her. Their weekend was spent reveling in each other, free of the constraints of their former arrangement and no longer willing to hold back. It wasn't until Sunday evening, at nearly sunset, that Draco asked her the question she'd been considering for two days.

"Does it bother you?" He paused slightly, his throat working through a swallow, and he reached forward to trace her jaw. They were sitting on the sofa, face to face, and the fading light of the evening sun was casting a golden shadow against his living room. "That Theo and Blaise figured it out?"

Truthfully, she wasn't sure. She felt...neutral about the entire situation, which came as a surprise. She'd expected to be more horrified, more worried about the potential blowback of being seen or known beside him. And perhaps weeks or months before, that would have been correct.

She didn't mind that they knew, but she also wasn't ready to go screaming it from the rooftops either. Not when everything still felt so new and tenuous. She wanted to keep a part of it, a part of *him*, to herself for just a little while longer.

"I don't think so, no," she answered after a moment. "But what about you?"

He had seemed awfully annoyed with them in the alleyway on Friday. And with Theo's comment weeks before about how Draco would "*flee the country before committing himself so publicly*" to someone, she was ready for the worst. With a shake of his head, he sighed.

"My only concern was that they made *you* uncomfortable. Nothing more."

His answer relieved some of the tension that had been pulling at her neck, and she dug her toes beneath his thigh, poking him as hard as she could manage in an attempt to lighten the mood. "I can handle Theo Nott, I assure you. Even when he tries to scare me off."

That had Draco's attention, and he raised his brow in a silent request for her to continue.

"I ran into him a few weeks ago at the Apothecary," she explained. "He approached me and we chatted for a bit."

"Oh, is that all?" Draco's tone was dry. "Funny, he never mentioned that little conversation to me."

Hermione glanced down at her fingers, twisting them together into a knot on her lap. "It wasn't anything you aren't already aware of, I'm sure. How he'd noticed you watching me, and how I reacted to you that first night at the pub. But...he was concerned."

Leaning away, he shifted until his elbows were resting on his knees and he faced the windows. She couldn't see his features, but his posture was stiff. Unsure of how to proceed, she continued.

"It wasn't...bad, per se. But it was a warning."

“He had no right—” Draco’s tone was as hard and as cold as ice.

“He was protecting *you*,” she cut him off. “He didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know, or that you hadn’t already shared with me. He was acting as your friend, because he was worried for you.”

“I don’t need protecting.”

Slowly, carefully, she climbed across the cushions until she was perched behind his body and wrapped around his torso. With her cheek pressed into his back, she spoke.

“Theo was only looking out for you. But we all deserve protection, Draco. Even when we don’t know it, or think we need it. It’s what you do for the people you care about.”

Draco huffed out an empty laugh. “You don’t...” He trailed off, turning his body to grasp at her upper arms. He tugged her forward, pulling her around until she was seated across his lap. Something strange clouded his eyes, but he blinked it away before she could look closer. “Enough about that, then. Theo’s an arse, which we both know, but that leads me back around to my original purpose for asking. If you don’t mind that others know about us...”

“Yes?” she prompted, tensing when his demeanor shifted back into the playful flirtation that she was used to.

“Let me take you out. On a proper date. One that you deserve.”

Bashful heat flushed her cheeks. “You don’t need to feel like you have to—”

“—*I feel* like we’ve gone over this a thousand times, now, Granger—”

“—but I know that we didn’t exactly start this out in a particularly normal environment, and I don’t want you to—”

He cut her off with a kiss, holding her chin in place. When he was sufficiently satisfied that she wouldn’t continue arguing, he released her. “Fine, let me tell you what I *want*, then. I want to send you a box full of lingerie to pick from, all so I can spend the evening trying to guess which one you chose. So I can envision every scrap of silk and lace beneath your dress until I can barely stand it. I want to take you to my favorite restaurant, to my private table in the back, where I can ply you with wine until you try to teach me some kind of spell or charm that I most certainly already know, and hear all of your most embarrassing stories. I want to kiss your wine stained lips in an alcove somewhere because I’m too eager and impatient to get you to the Apparition point. And then, at the end of the night, I want to peel your clothes off like gift wrap and take you to my bed, because that’s where you belong.”

Her stunned silence had him grinning and placing another soft, victorious kiss against her lips. “*That* is what I want. And since I’m so used to getting my way, I think it’s advisable that you stop fighting it already and just give in.”

His smugness had her giggling, and she pulled away just far enough to shoot him an incredulous look. “Is this how it’s going to be, then? You insisting on spoiling me with flowers and jewelry and dates before you shag the wits out of me?”

Draco gave her a single, concise nod and swept his hair back. “Nice to see you finally catching on.”

“You’re such a prat,” she laughed before kissing him again.

Draco at work was a sight to behold. Hermione watched from her spot in the hall, peering in through the conference room door that had been left slightly ajar. With his jacket tossed onto a nearby chair and his sleeves rolled to his elbows, he commanded the room of Aurors he stood in front of.

“Separate yourself from it. Take a deep breath and imagine it however it feels most natural to you. Severing those emotional ties with a wave of your wand. Exhaling the weight of your emotions as the air leaves your lungs. Whatever you need to feel grounded. Centered. Block everything else out.”

Hermione had only meant to run down to the supply closet for more of the purple flags she preferred to use on her memos, but had stopped in her tracks as soon as the hard edge of his voice had floated down the hall to where she had been searching. She’d crept down the carpeted hallway on the balls of her feet, careful not to interrupt, and had to clutch the wall to keep herself steady once she saw inside the conference room.

Truthfully, it was a miracle that she and Draco hadn’t run into each other within the department sooner. For nearly two years he had been visiting twice a month, and she suspected that had he not chosen the conference room farthest from her office, she would have stumbled into his lap well before The Scarlet Order.

A team of young Aurors, all new recruits from the looks of it, sat around the table paired off. They each had their eyes closed and their hands relaxed in their laps, and Draco slowly toured the room as he instructed them. He paused behind the chair of an Auror with sandy brown hair, one Hermione hadn’t met yet.

“Now is not the time to be thinking about what you ate for lunch, Borovitch.” The reprimand was firm, and the man shot a chagrined look at his partner as Draco continued on.

“It’s much like muggle meditation, clearing your mind until nothing else exists. It feels impossible now, but you will need to maintain a regular schedule to practice your technique until it comes easy to you. That’s the first step in blocking a Legilimens. If you can become particularly skilled, you may even learn to withstand the Imperius curse or resist the effects of Veritaserum.”

Hermione stilled as he approached the door, but he didn’t glance her way.

One of the few Aurors she recognized, Sam, cracked an eye open. “Can you do that?”

“I can,” Draco said with a sharp nod. Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t as boastful as she might have expected coming from him. “Though the conditions in which I learned were a touch more strenuous than yours. It was a matter of necessity that I learned, not a luxury. Robards understands the needs for a skill like this, which is why I’ve continued my partnership with your department...Miss Granger, would you like to join us, or would you prefer to continue lurking about outside the door?”

Hermione inhaled so sharply she nearly choked on saliva. Clearing her throat, she ignored the way her cheeks burned as she stepped through the open doorway. “My apologies for interrupting, I was down the hall for some supplies and got curious.”

Out of politeness she sent an apologetic look around the room, but froze when her eyes landed on Harry, sitting just out of sight in the back. Supervising, it seemed, and her shame at spying grew tenfold. *Of course he would be there to witness her drooling over Draco.*

Adjusting his sleeve, Draco motioned to a chair near the door. “Please, join us. I could use an assistant today.”

“Oh, no, I shouldn’t—”

“I insist,” he said with a wide smile. “I don’t often get to enjoy special guests in my lessons.”

Bollocks. She forced herself to move, even though it felt like someone had cast a sticking charm to her feet. With every pained step, her heart pounded a little louder, but he only looked amused. Had she not been surrounded by Aurors, she wouldn’t have hesitated in telling him to sod off.

Ignoring the curious look coming from Harry’s direction, she took the empty seat that Draco was now standing beside. Once situated, she felt the weight from his hand trailing across the back of her chair.

“Now, gentleman, Granger is quite the subject.” His figure loomed behind her, but she didn’t dare look back at him. Not when it felt like there were pixies about to riot in her stomach. “The perfect subject, really. Definitely the type that a Dark Wizard would want to use Legilimency on to try to suss out her secrets. I can practically feel them falling out of her head.”

Her cheeks grew hotter, but she kept quiet. Chancing a look at Harry, she saw he was watching Draco with open curiosity.

“Some people are easier to read than others,” Draco continued. “And while I’m a better Occlumens than I am a Legilimens, I can still feel the difference. Borovitch, on one hand, is an open book—his thoughts are louder, messier and easier to slip between than Granger’s. It doesn’t take much effort in order to burrow deeper into his mind.”

Borovitch scowled at the table.

“Granger, on the other hand, is like a locked box. I can’t sense a thing coming from her. It’s likely due to the years she spent taking care of Potter and the amount of order and control she keeps over herself at any given moment.”

Several Aurors coughed into their hands to disguise their chuckles. Harry’s curiosity morphed into exasperation.

“Get on with it, Malfoy,” he urged.

The sound of Draco’s own light laugh had goosebumps fluttering down her back, and he moved to step around to the side of her chair. He grabbed the one next to hers and turned it toward her before sitting down, their knees touching as he peered closer. His grey eyes were sharp and focused, and she watched as he licked his lips before speaking.

“Borovitch, what did it feel like when I was in your mind?” he asked the Auror across the table, but didn’t look away from her face.

“It tickled, almost. Like a tingle that I couldn’t quite itch.”

Draco's lips quirked, but he smoothed his features. "It feels different, depending on the amount of resistance. Hermione, please share what *you* feel when I attempt to press against your boundaries."

His instruction was clearer to her than anyone else in the room. *When I attempt to press against your boundaries.* He was telling her, in so many words, that he wouldn't be pushing past her defenses. Not without her consent.

Almost immediately she felt a familiar pressure between her eyes. Light, just a gentle brush. "It feels...it feels like a feather, almost. Like when you try to pass someone but accidentally brush up against them."

Her answer seemed to satisfy him, and he sat back and looked around the room to finish his lesson. The pressure released immediately.

"If I were to continue pushing against Hermione's defenses, the pressure would increase. The more she fought the more uncomfortable it would feel. Pressure would bleed into pain, into something sharp and stabbing as I cut my way through. If she took a deep breath and opened her mind to me, it would feel like slipping into a pool of water. If you want to distract a Legilimens, your best bet is to let them in. To trick them into thinking you don't have anything to hide, or that your thoughts are too messy to be organized in any way that they can easily read. Once you learn how to clear your consciousness, we'll work on distraction techniques."

Sam raised his hand. "What about manifesting false memories?"

"In time." Draco nodded as he pushed his chair in. "Work on the basics first. Not even Potter can manifest a false memory, and he's been working on it for nearly ten years. The Boy Who Lived is the Man Who Can't Lie. Isn't that right?"

"Ah, yeah," Harry said with a light laugh, but when Hermione glanced over at him, his attention wasn't on Draco or the cheap joke. It was on her. His dark eyebrows were raised, and his green eyes were wide.

"*Hermione?*" he mouthed, glancing between where she sat and where Draco stood behind her. Shock doused her veins, cold like ice. She hadn't even realized—hadn't recognized the slip up since it had become so commonplace to hear her given name come from Draco's lips. Surprise and interest played across Harry's features as he watched her reaction and Hermione cringed, wishing that she could directly Apparate back to her office without having to explain.

Distracted by her own embarrassment, she couldn't pay attention to anything else that was said while Draco dismissed the group and gathered his jacket from the chair at the head of the room. He took his time gathering his things, and Harry strolled over before she could duck around the line of Aurors filing out the door.

"Secrets, huh," Harry mused as soon as he was close enough for her to hear. "Interesting choice of words from Malfoy, don't you think?"

"I don't have the slightest idea of what you might mean," she evaded, not risking a glance back at Draco. There were too many answers to Harry's particular question, too many messy details she couldn't begin to sort through, that it wasn't technically a lie.

"Right, right," he agreed, corralling her to the side of the hall when they were finally free from the conference room. "Well, as interesting as that little exchange was, I'm sure we'll have plenty to talk

about this weekend when you come to Grimmauld for dinner.”

Hermione stepped back. “We don’t have dinner plans this weekend.”

He grinned at her. “We do now.”

Gods damn it. But before he could continue his impromptu interrogation, Warren appeared from around the corner.

“Got a second, Potter? Robards wants us in his office.”

Harry’s attention slid to Warren, his amusement easily disguised as cheerfulness. “Right, thanks Warren. See you later, *Hermione.*”

He was barely down the hall before she felt another presence behind her. Spinning on her heel, she gave Draco a sharp look.

“My first name, really?” she hissed.

He didn’t even have the decency to look apologetic. Instead, he licked his lips and stepped closer, dropping his voice. “That is what you’re called, isn’t it? Or have I been getting it wrong for the last few months?”

The heat in his gaze had her looking away, nibbling on her lower lip. The look he gave her spoke volumes.

“No, but… Here? This isn’t a scene, Malfoy. We’re at work.”

His eyebrows shot up at the sound of his own last name, and his voice dropped lower. “Yes, but you are wearing my bracelet. Which means you’re mine *all* the time, Granger.”

Warmth suffused her cheeks, and she grabbed him by the arm to drag him back to her office. “You can’t—you can’t just say things like that out in the open!”

He humoured her, following along easily as she guided him through the hallways. Luckily they didn’t pass anyone else along the way, and when her door was firmly shut and locked behind them, she gave him a sharp look.

“It’s not funny.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Yes, but—you’re—” She stopped to gesture to his body, leaning back against her office door like he owned the entire building.

“I’m what?”

“You’re—you’re *you,*” she finished lamely. There was no doubt in her mind that he wasn’t aware of the effect he had.

Lifting his frame from the door so he could stalk closer to her, she took a step back. He followed her, step for step. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean, darling. Why don’t you clarify it for me?”

Laughing nervously, her pulse began to flutter in her throat. The backs of her thighs hit the edge of her desk, but he didn't stop until he was standing between her feet, staring down at her with an open, expectant expression.

"You're full of yourself."

That had him laughing in turn, his lips pulling up to the side. "Am I? Is that why I've specifically avoided coming near your office for the last..." He paused, pretending to count on his fingers. "...month and a half? Two, if we're being generous."

Her chest tightened, and her indignation began to melt away. "Really?"

"Yes, really." He nodded and raised one hand to toy with one of her curls. His eyes were trained on it as he pulled, watching it spring back up when he let go. "You set your boundaries, so I respected them. And I would have continued to do so, had you not done precisely what you accused Cambrielle of doing not all that long ago."

Shame flushed hot against her skin. "That's not the same."

"Only because I'm shagging you and not her," he countered. Somehow, during their brief conversation, he'd aligned their bodies. Their chests were flush together, and they breathed in sync. As one. Draco's attention slid to her face, focusing on her eyes, and his gaze darted between them. Trying to read her. "Tell me what you want, Hermione. If you want my distance here, you can have it. I respect your desire for subtlety, if that's what you prefer in regards to your career within these four walls. But if not..."

He was leaning down, his lips just a whisper away. She was powerless against the pull, instinct and want driving her to meet him halfway. Brushing her lips against his just once, she savoured the feel of him. She wanted their relationship to develop naturally, to let things unfold as they would on their own, not because either one of them forced it in one way or another.

"You don't have to stay away," she said finally. "I don't want to pretend like you're a stranger anymore."

"I won't do anything untoward, you have my promise," Draco assured her, his hands coming to rest on her waist. His lips met hers for a brief instant, chaste and gentle. "I'll save that fo—"

A knock interrupted them both, cutting off his words. His body stiffened against hers and he stepped away, putting distance between them as effectively as a severing charm. He turned his back to her, giving her some space while he adjusted his suit jacket as if they had only been conversing as colleagues.

"Miss Granger? I've got Beatrice here from the archives here to see you."

Horror curdled in her stomach, rushing through her system like a wave of nausea. She'd completely forgotten.

"Ah, yes—" She almost stumbled on her way to the door, her hands cold at the thought of Beatrice on the other side. Schooling her features into something more patient and understanding than she actually felt, she opened the door. "So sorry, I was just having an impromptu meeting."

Beatrice gave her a warm smile and held up a stack of files. Cecelia stood behind her, an annoyed expression playing at her features.

“I tried to insist that since your door was closed—”

Hermione waved her hand and gave Cecelia a light nod. “It’s okay. I requested these a few weeks ago.”

“Just wanted to make sure I wouldn’t keep you waiting any longer,” Beatrice said in a saccharine tone. When she lifted the files the rest of the way for Hermione to take, Hermione’s attention was drawn to the angry-looking welts across her knuckles. The skin was raw and red, almost completely cracked open.

“Oh no,” Hermione said, pulling the files into her arms. She would drop them into her desk drawer once Beatrice was gone, where she could tuck them away until the appropriate amount of time had passed to return them to the archive. “Your knuckles are raw again. Did the salve not work?”

Beatrice dropped a quick look at her hands before tucking them behind her back. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, looking uncomfortable at Hermione’s attention. “Oh, no, I just forgot to put it on for a few days. My memory just isn’t what it used to be, I suppose.”

Movement drew her eye behind Hermione’s shoulder, and Beatrice stiffened. “I didn’t realize you were meeting with Mr. Malfoy. My apologies for interrupting.”

Hermione glanced behind her, turning to see Draco giving the older woman a strange look. Beatrice’s tone was strained, despite the kind smile that still played across her features.

“I’m sorry, I don’t recall our meeting before. Have we worked together?”

Beatrice took a step back out of the doorway as she shook her head. “No, I’ve just heard so many great things about you and your work as an Occlumens,” she said before turning back to Hermione. “Keep those as long as you’d like, dear, but I won’t keep you any longer. Have a lovely evening.”

Before Hermione could form a response, Beatrice was gone, hurrying down the hall with quick, efficient steps.

“That was odd,” Draco observed as Hermione closed the door and shuffled the files into a pile on her desk.

With a shrug, Hermione brushed a curl from her forehead. “She’s nice enough. I don’t think she gets much human interaction, what with working down there in the depths of the building.”

Taking care not to get too close since her door was still angled open, Draco stepped forward. “You know, it is getting to be the end of the day. I know we haven’t decided on a day for our date yet, but I wouldn’t be opposed to seeing you tonight.”

Hermione cast him a smile, trying hard to resist the bashfulness that she felt whenever he flirted with her. When she didn’t immediately answer, he dropped his voice to a near whisper.

“We could always try your flat tonight, if you’re open to a change of scenery.”

The temptation was too much to resist. She’d considered it too many times, imagined waking up in her bed with Draco wrapped around her as the early morning light filtered in through her window.

Making him tea in her own kitchen. Laughing at the expression once he saw how cramped and tiny her bathroom was.

"I do have to be up for work in the morning," she countered, eyeing him closely, but he seemed agreeable enough. Though they hadn't spent a weeknight together yet, she knew from their few discussions that he held various meetings on his days when he didn't assist at the ministry. Estate planning and financial investments, mostly, but his schedule was much looser than hers.

"I'll be good," he promised. Somehow she didn't quite believe him.

It only took her a moment to agree, giving in to the hopeful expression written across his face.
"Fine, let me grab my things."

True to his word, Draco was a gentleman outside of her office. He kept a healthy distance between them in the hall as they walked to the lift, and didn't latch on to her waist or crowd her once inside with other Ministry employees. He let her lead as they navigated to the employee floor entrances, and took a separate queue after she'd whispered her address into his ear.

He appeared in her fireplace just a few moments after she stepped through, brushing off the ash from the trip before entering farther into her flat.

"Wow." It was the first thing he said as his grey gaze swept through the room. Having not anticipated any guests that evening, she hadn't bothered with straightening up before she left earlier that morning, and set down her work bag as he looked around. "You weren't kidding about the size."

She shrugged off her traveling cloak and hung it on the hook, trying to ignore him as he casually observed her living quarters. It didn't bother her, really, not when she'd done the same thing with his home, too. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

"It's all I need when it's just me."

While her back was turned, he'd found the bookshelves against the wall and the overstuffed chair in the corner that she preferred to read in while the sun set. She shivered when he dragged his fingers across the spines of her books, his fingers tracing an invisible pattern that she felt on her own skin.

"I like it."

Chest warming from the genuine honesty in his tone, she tried to control her breathing. It wouldn't be good form to jump him as soon as he stepped into her flat.

But as he turned on his heel, his hands set in his pockets in a casual stance, she almost broke. When his attention dipped to her body, perusing the skirt and blouse she'd chosen for work, her body began to heat on its own accord.

"Come here," he instructed.

Her feet obeyed before her mind could catch up. When she stopped in front of him, he pressed his shoulders back and raised his chin.

"Stand at attention, please."

His tone was firm, and it sent a shiver of desire coursing through her veins. Swallowing, she adjusted her stance, widening her feet and lifting her hands until her fingers were interlaced behind her head. She allowed her chest to expand on a deep inhale, pressing her breasts out toward him, but he made no move to touch her clothing. Instead he circled her. Looking, assessing, but not touching.

"Very good," he murmured. Once he was behind her, she heard a slight rustle of fabric. Before she could blink, her clothing disappeared. Standing completely naked in her living room, the only thing left on her body was his bracelet. Surprise washed through her, the same temperature of the cool air around her body. It brushed across her nipples, tensing and pulling them taught, and had warmth flooding through her core.

He could have vanished your clothes at any point, she realized. He could have done it in her office, or the lifts, or as soon as he stepped through the floor. Every bit of the realization made her even hotter. Glancing down, she saw the red blush blooming across her skin.

"How many days has it been?"

"Two," she answered, assuming his meaning. She'd touched herself on Monday night after work, but hadn't had the time since.

He finished his round and came to stand in front of her, hands still tucked into his pockets. "Then two it is. Where would you like them?"

The greedy part of her wished that she'd said three.

"My bedroom?" she requested, hope tinting her voice. She'd be happy with him anywhere, really, but she wanted to smell him on her sheets in the morning.

"After you." He motioned with his chin, allowing her to drop her stance to guide him down the hall to her room. It was the last door at the end, and every step had wetness gathering between her legs. His steps were silent behind her, and she had no idea of what he might be looking at. Her body? Her bare arse? The cheap art prints hanging on the wall that she'd found at a second hand shop?

When she finally stepped into her bedroom and turned to face him, the answer was clear. The heat in his eyes told her exactly what he'd been looking at, and her abdomen tightened.

"Get on the bed," he directed, his throat working. Instead of joining her, he walked to the end of the bed and leaned against her dresser. He waited, completely silent, as she climbed on top of the quilt and sat down. His posture was loose, but she noted the tension straining his jaw as she stretched out her legs. "Show me, Hermione. I want to watch."

Buttoned up from his visit to the ministry, his suit was a deep navy so dark it was almost black. He was a spot of shadow in her room, looming at the end of her bed while she adjusted her posture. Focus was etched into his features, but the growing thickness in his trousers was her only indication that he was as affected as she was. Her core felt tight and slick already, beginning to ache with need, anticipating what was surely to come.

His gaze was so heavy she could practically feel it sweeping across her skin as he took her in, following the lines of her legs and back up again. His attention stopped briefly between her thighs

where her fingers were beginning to rub tentative circles, but he didn't stop. He continued his perusal of her body, looking at her breasts and up to her face, smirking when she caught him. She shivered under his watch, trying to ignore the feelings of self-consciousness that bubbled up in her chest. Somehow, some way, he always made her feel as nervous and fluttery as their first time. Her fingers trailed light circles, delicate with her touch, and her hips began to rock. It was a slow build, not nearly enough to get her to an orgasm yet, but it felt good.

"Faster." His command was a sharp snap in the silence of her room, and she bit down on her lower lip. Her heart jumped. Laying back on the pillows, she was already spread wide for him. Even touching herself, he was still in control. It was a reminder.

"Yes, Draco," she answered with a pointed look, but he didn't bother reprimanding her for the snark. He only waited, watching with a stoic expression. Her fingers increased speed, tightening around her clit as it began to swell. It increased the friction and she let out a moan as the sparks of pleasure that began to tighten her core.

She could feel the wetness beginning to gather as she played with herself, but she could only focus on his face. His eyes were blazing as he watched her, his attention never staying in one spot for too long. He seemed torn between where to look. Between her thighs, watching as her fingers traced steady circles. Her thighs when they began to shake. Her ribs as they expanded on an inhale. Her breasts, swollen and nipples hard and pointed. His eyes tracked to the flush that she could feel gathering on her neck and chest, then up to her face where he looked at her. Her lips. Her eyes. All of her.

She whimpered and increased the pressure.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he said after a moment, his voice gone rough. She dipped her fingers down to her entrance at the sound, clenching and tightening at the intrusion.

It took her a moment to clear her head enough to speak, to formulate her thoughts into something coherent. "I love the way you look at me."

Under his attention, she felt invincible. His desire for her had quickly burned away any self-consciousness she was feeling, and left behind complete and utter satisfaction. He was a greedy man, she knew, and to be the sole object of his focus? His hunger? His yearning? It felt better than any victory, better than any grade, any promotion.

Pride flashed across his face. "You're finally getting it, aren't you? Finally seeing what I've been trying to tell you since the beginning?"

When she nodded, he continued. "I can tell you exactly what to do, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't fall to my knees for you. And you love every bit of it, don't you? That give and take? Knowing that you've got just as much power over me as I do you?"

Heat spiked in her abdomen, the pleasure twisting and tightening as he talked to her. Her answer was a needy moan, and she licked her lips. She could feel her orgasm building, climbing against the base of her spine, but she couldn't give in just yet.

"Yes," she whispered, her fingers never slowing.

He lifted himself off the dresser and stepped toward the foot of the bed. His long fingers began to work at his belt, and her chest tightened as she watched him pull his cock free. Still dressed in his

three piece suit and fisting himself as he looked down at her with an expression of pure hunger, she nearly came.

“Use both hands. One on your clit, and the other inside. Push as deep as you can.”

She followed his instruction without question. Her middle and ring fingers sank into her core easily, sliding through the wetness that had been building since the moment they left her office. It didn’t feel quite as good as when he did it, but the pressure still relieved the slight ache.

“Curl your fingers,” he continued directing her, instructing her on exactly how she should touch herself. She was beginning to sweat, perspiration gathering between her breasts as she sucked in a lungful of air at the sensation. She couldn’t get as deep as he could, but the friction had her thighs tightening. With her other hand working at her clit, her legs were beginning to shake but she stayed focused. Her eyes were trained on his hand, watching with rapt fascination as he fisted himself. His fingers tightened around the head, palming and swirling with every stroke.

Hermione was so wet that her fingers were starting to make noise as she stroked herself, but it only added to the eroticism of the moment. Draco watched her as closely as she did him, but she noticed his tells better than she could have before. The pink tinge of a blush on the fair skin of his neck, just above the collar of his shirt. The way his nostrils flared when she pulled her glistening fingers free to switch hands, using her wetness to slip and slide across her clit. The tension in his body pulled taut until she caught the slight tremor in his arm. The flex of his body beneath his suit, hidden but not invisible.

Beneath his gaze, want and need became the same thing.

“More,” she begged him. She wanted to come *on* him, around his fingers or his cock, she didn’t care which. She wanted her orgasm to belong to him, for him to feel the things he did to her mind and her body. How he could achieve everything she’d set out to find, as easily as flicking his wand.

“Not yet,” he refused. “I want to watch you come, spread out on your bed like this, so I can pull the memory from my pensieve and watch it every time I’m alone.”

The knowledge that he would be reliving this particular memory had her body shuddering on the bed. Her hips began to shake against her hand, and she increased the speed of her fingers across her clit. Though he didn’t tell her to change the pace, she did—she began rubbing tighter, faster, with more pressure right on the spot she preferred.

Draco noticed immediately. “Should I tell you then about all the times I’ve watched our first encounter? How I’ve relived that moment a hundred times over, seeing my fingers sink into your wet cunt after I spanked you for the first time?”

Hermione moaned, the sound cracking from her throat. She was breathing heavily, her whole body twisting and straining as she spiraled toward her orgasm. She could imagine it, as filthy and forbidden as it should be. Using his memories as his own personal entertainment, getting to see her reactions from a whole new perspective.

Her cunt fluttered around her fingers. Tightening. Tensing.

“Or how many times I’ve stroked myself watching the memory of the night that I restrained you with my belt and took you from behind. The noises you made...”

Another moan escaped past her lips, floating through the room as she struggled to stay composed. Her hips were rocking freely, pushing her fingers deeper and working her clit against her opposite hand. With her arms straining between her legs, her breasts were pushed higher into the air, taut and on display for him. But his eyes never left her face.

"I think this memory might be one of my new personal favorites," he said with a groan. His hand was working his cock even faster, the head swollen and red. "I love watching you like this. I love getting to see the things I do to you."

Finally, she broke. Her cunt spasmed around her fingers, tightening as she came. "Draco—" His name was a pained cry, but the pleasure couldn't be stopped. She continued circling her clit, rubbing through the orgasm as white hot sensations rolled through her body. Out from her core the pleasure settled through her limbs, her muscles shuddering as it pulled and twisted through her..

Draco was silent as she came and her eyes fluttered closed, watching enrapt as she succumbed to the pleasure of his words. Something shifted on the bed, a rustle of fabric and a weight by her legs, and it took her several moments to clear her mind enough to register that Draco was pulling off his clothes and climbing in to join her.

Finally. She could have wept with relief. Her body seized once more, but her fingers were already seeking him out. He caught her hand in his, encircling her wrist with his fingers, and sucked the wetness off each one.

"Gods, you're delicious." Once her fingers were clean, he kneeled between her legs. His cock was standing tall, thick and ready, but he didn't immediately align himself with her entrance. "Hands above your head, darling."

Once she complied, she noticed his true intent. During her distraction, he'd set his belt on the bed beside her, grabbing it now to wrap around her wrists. She didn't fight him, instead pressing them tighter together to make it easier for him to restrain her. Unlike the first time, he didn't leave it loose enough for her to slip through.

"You know your safeword, and I expect you to use it if you need to be released."

She wouldn't. The feel of the leather binding her hands together didn't send panic spiking through her chest the way it used to. Instead it tightened her core, making the muscles clench around nothing. As he affixed her to one of the bars on the wrought iron headboard, she tilted her hips. Searching, seeking more. With her hands above her head, she had limited movement, but it only made her sink deeper into the pleasure. She would be at his mercy.

"I didn't even think about it, that day in your bed," she admitted. It had taken her hours to realize that he hadn't left her with any additional slack, no way to free herself. But the instinct to trust him had become so ingrained by that point that she could only feel relief. She didn't need the slack. She needed *him*. And she wanted him to know. "I...I like it now."

"Good," he replied as his hands began exploring her body. Bound before him and laid out like an offering, he took his time. His palms swept across her skin, warming her with every touch, every caress. He softly stroked and teased her nipples, leaning forward to take one in his mouth while he toyed with the other. He didn't release it from his lips until it was swollen and red, and he repeated the process on the other side. His tongue dragged slow circles around her breasts, following the path of his hands as he squeezed her ribs. Her waist. Her hips.

By the time he'd pressed a kiss to her mound, right above her aching entrance, she was seeking more of his touch. Her hips ground into the bed, pressing and pushing to chase his mouth, but he stopped her with a sharp smack to her thigh. When she keened, he chuckled.

He sat back and fisted his cock, dragging it through her folds until it bumped up against her clit. He rubbed her with it and she cried out. The head was glistening from his precome and her own slick, and it was enough to make her nearly delirious. The friction was good, but it would be better elsewhere. He continued to stroke himself as he worked her clit, and she watched as his chest flushed pink beneath his scars. When she tilted her hips, searching for more, his abs tensed.

"How badly do you want it, Hermione? Tell me."

"You—" She choked on a moan when his cock dipped down to her entrance, teasing. He didn't push in, and held back just enough that she couldn't chase him the rest of the way. Not with her arms tied above her head. "—you already know."

"I do," he conceded. He repeated the teasing stroke again. "But I'm vain, and I want to hear it."

A third stroke, dipping deep enough to feel the stretch, but he pulled back once more.

"I want it—I want you so badly, Draco." She was nearly sobbing from the desire, the intensity of it surprising her even though she'd already come once. But the ache between her legs had only grown, getting worse as if her mind and body both knew what she was missing out on. "Only you. Only ever you. You're all I want. All I can think about."

It was the truth, even if the extreme need and subspace had coaxed the words from her chest. Over their weeks together, he'd solely eclipsed her desire for anything or anyone else.

Draco groaned, the sound cut off as he struggled to control himself. He pushed in just slightly again, leaving the head of his cock lodged into her entrance. "Look at me."

When she did, struggling to raise her eyes to focus on his face instead of the tension that pulled at the scars and muscles that wrapped around his torso, she saw the seriousness written across his face. Once he had her attention, he slowly thrust inside her, rocking against her. The vein in his neck was pounding, but he held her gaze. "Everything you feel. Everything you think. Everything that you know feels overwhelming and like it's too much? Know that I'm right there with you. Feeling it tenfold, Hermione. I want everything you're willing to give me, and I won't give up until I have all of you. Every. Single. Bit."

He punctuated the words with heavier thrusts, pushing himself between her legs until he was lodged tight.

"Your pleasure is mine, and mine only. For as long as I have you, and darling..." She felt herself clench around him, and she cried out. He reached down to grab her chin as he began a steady tempo, pushing deep inside her with long, sure strokes. "I intend to keep you for a very long time."

After that, he didn't hold back. He pounded into her mercilessly, until her breasts were bouncing and her thighs were wrapped tight around his hips. He held on to her with one hand, his long fingers spanning her waist, and brought the other to her center. Angling his thumb on her clit, he urged her to move her body with his, against him.

"Just like that," he praised when she followed his lead, rocking her hips and chasing the friction. She was so wet that she was losing the friction of his cock, but the way her body continued to tighten around him was enough to send more pleasure through her system. His strokes got faster, shorter and staccato, and she cried out again.

"Gods, Draco..." She wished she could voice the things she felt in the moment the way he could. The way he constantly uttered filthy things to her, voicing his deepest, darkest thoughts with such ease while she fell apart beneath his touch. Instead she grew incoherent, mumbling the same curses and moans over and over. He made her mindless, and drowned everything else out that could have existed until she couldn't care about anything else except the feel of his body against hers.

"Go on, take what you need, darling. Take it all."

Her hips were beginning to shake, her thighs trembling as she struggled to hold herself against him. His hand was slipping, and the strain of her arms above her head had her pulling her muscles so hard they began to burn. The friction against her clit was building, and he made up for her sloppy strokes by rubbing back and forth. He brushed her clit with firm pressure, giving as she took. When her body clenched, her core tightening once more, she knew she couldn't hold off.

"I can't—I'm there," she babbled. "I'm so close. Draco, I'm right there."

Whether a warning or a request for permission, she wasn't sure. But he granted it to her nonetheless.

"Hold on," he demanded, his thrusts speeding up. He hit deeper, grinding himself against her as he spoke. His voice was breathless, and his hair was mussed, but he'd never looked more beautiful to her than in that moment. "Just a moment longer. Come with me instead. I want to feel you coming around my cock as I finish inside you."

Hermione had never been one for self-control. She'd acted on her more base urges, giving in when she wanted and needed to. But holding back for him meant more, so she tried her hardest. She bit the inside of her cheek, focusing on the pain instead. She focused on the feel of the leather around her wrists, cutting into her skin just slightly, instead of the way their bodies slid so easily together. Of how his cock hit in just the right spot, not too—she clenched around him again, crying out.

No, no. Be good, she begged herself. She couldn't look at him. Couldn't think about it. She had to pull back, to keep her clit from rubbing against his thumb with that perfect amount of pressure as he fucked her.

It was a losing battle, and they both knew it. Draco let out a groan when she clenched around him once more, his head dropping back and exposing his neck to her. She wanted to latch on to it with her teeth. To suck and kiss and lick her way up and down the column of his throat until he wore her love bites like a badge of honor.

"Come down, please," she begged, arching her back up. The change in position might be exactly what she needed, but she couldn't grab him without the use of her hands. "I need—I need you here, against me."

Releasing his hold on her waist, Draco dropped his body forward until their chests were pressed together, her breasts sliding across his pecs with the light sheen of perspiration they'd both developed.

Instead of helping, the change in angle made it worse, made it harder for her to ignore the pleasure that was blooming in her pelvis.

“Fuck,” Draco cursed, apparently realizing the same thing. When her lips found his neck, his body shuddered on top of hers. With his hand still toying with her clit, he used his other to grasp at her wrists above their bodies, pressing her deeper into the pillows. The added pressure had her crying out, and she hiked her legs up higher, opening herself further so he could slide deeper.

“I need it—I need you,” she moaned. “Gods, Draco, please—”

Her begging was ridiculous, she knew, but she was lost to it. Lost to him. She nipped and sucked at his neck, finding the spots that made him go tense and repeating it over and over again. His thrusts began to fall apart, growing erratic, and she tightened her legs.

Pulling back just enough to kiss her, Draco continued his frenzied pace. Their mouths worked together, teeth clicking and tongues working against each other as they both hurtled toward the edge.

“There it is,” he said against her lips, groaning when he rested his forehead against hers. “Come, Hermione—now. Now.”

It only took three more strokes after receiving his permission for her body to follow the command, tightening around him as she came. The second orgasm was more intense than the first, pulling deeper as her body strained against the pleasure. She curled into it, hooking her legs around his arse as he continued thrusting, her muscles paralyzed as the sensations exploded across her nerve endings and took over every bit of her body.

It sent him over the edge, his body pressing deeper as she felt him pulse inside her.

“I—Gods, darling, you’re so perfect.” He groaned against her as he continued to come, thrusting lightly through his own aftershocks. “You have to know how I—you must—”

His praise tapered off into silent words spoken against her lips. He held her tight as he kissed her, sliding his tongue across her lower lip and dipping into her mouth. He kissed her with a relieved kind of passion, his lips pressing against hers with the utmost reverence. She twitched every time he thrust, her tissues swollen and sensitive in the afterglow.

“You know,” she managed once he pulled back to catch his breath. “You keep complimenting me like this and I’m bound to get a complex.”

He gave her a slight grin, pulling back to ease out of her. “It’s not a complex if it’s true.”

While he worked at unlacing his belt from her headboard, she nipped at his chest. “Is that what you tell yourself every night? It’s no wonder you have such a large bed, it must be impossible to sleep with an ego of your size.”

His chuckle was deep as he discarded his belt, his lower abs flexing, and she tried not to get too entranced by the sight. As he took her wrists in his hands and began massaging her skin, he raised an eyebrow in her direction.

“Then I suppose it’ll be tough to fit in this tiny nest you call a bed tonight. I’ll make do, but please know that it will require a herculean effort of self-sacrifice on my part.”

Her laugh was suppressed by a light moan of pleasure when he began working the tension from her palms and fingers. "Sleeping over, are you? I didn't realize I'd extended an invitation."

"That's the beauty of it, Granger," he said as he switched to her other hand. "You didn't have to ask, because I know you well enough to know how much you already want it."

"Is that so?" she asked, trying to hide her blush.

He gave her a very serious nod. "Of course. And as your partner, it's my job to give you everything you want."

She giggled, finally giving in. "I don't think that's how that works."

"Of course it is," he assured her, dropping her hands and laying down beside her. Once gathered in his arms, she let out a contented sigh. "Besides, I'm the dominant one here, so what I say goes."

Snorting against his chest, she reached up to tuck a curl behind her ear and settled into his embrace. "I don't think that's how that works, either."

"Gods, woman, have you always been this difficult?"

"Yes," she said with a smile, even though he couldn't see it.

He summoned an exasperated tone, but held her closer. "It's part of your appeal, I suppose. I never could do anything the easy way."

"You poor thing." For effect, she patted his chest, but he snatched her hand up and began pressing kisses to each of her fingertips.

"Yes, poor me," he agreed in a grave tone. "Though I know you've been known to take pity on the unfortunate souls that need help..."

She rolled her eyes, but he was already growing hard again against her thigh.

"I'll take pity on you after dinner," she conceded, but it was cut off by a yawn. Her body was growing heavy, her muscles relaxing into the mattress and the warmth of his embrace. After a long day of work and a good shag, she was ready for a nap.

Draco's lips pressed against the crown of her head, tickling her curls. "A fair bargain, I suppose."

Her eyes began to drift shut, and she barely felt it as he summoned the blanket from the foot of her bed to cover their bodies. After a moment of silence, he spoke again, his voice gone soft.

"I like your flat. It's...comfortable."

She grinned into his chest. "You mean small?"

"No, I mean *comfortable*." He palmed her arse and squeezed in warning. "I know my flat can be a little cold, at times. Yours is nice. Lived in. It..."

"It what?" she prompted when he didn't continue. Looking up, she noticed the lines of tension around his eyes.

"It feels like a home."

Her throat tightened around some unidentifiable emotion. Instead of responding, she clutched him tighter, pulling her arms around his torso until she was holding him just as much as he was her. When he kept speaking, she could feel the deep vibrato of voice through his chest.

"It's been a long time since I considered the concept," he said, his tone slightly strained. "I know my flat isn't the most welcoming of spaces, but I've never really seen the point. It's only been a place to sleep."

Hermione could only imagine the horrors hidden behind his words. She didn't interrupt him, but felt her own heart begin to beat in time with the pulse that thumped under her cheek.

He continued, admitting everything as if it were a confession. "Growing up, I thought the Manor would be my home forever. But after...seeing the things that happened there, knowing how tenuous it all was. How delicate it could be. None of it mattered. None of the history. None of my mother's attempts to keep them from desecrating our family home made any difference. It's been a long time since I've been able to notice or bring myself to care. To want to build something that mattered."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "But now?"

Sensing there was more to his statement, more meaning beneath his words, she waited.

"It makes me realize everything I've been missing."

An ache settled in her chest, and she held him so tight it felt like her arms might go numb. She burrowed her face closer to his chest, breathing in his scent, but said nothing. There were no words she could summon to soothe him, no assurances she could find to make it better. She knew, from her own experience, that time would be the only thing to heal that particular wound. Time, and love.

They were quiet, laying together for so long that the silence settled around them like a heavy blanket. She began to drift off, and almost missed it when he whispered into her hair.

"You made me realize what I've been missing."

Movement woke her from her light sleep, the shifting of the mattress shaking her into awareness as Draco extracted himself from her hold.

Mumbling into the pillow, she tried to keep her grip on him. "No..."

His laugh was deep, but he had no problem peeling her fingers from his body. "I'll only be gone a moment. You should wake up, though, or else you'll come to at midnight hungry and upset that I didn't feed you sooner."

She grumbled again. "Fine."

Unsure of how much time had passed, she rolled over onto the side of the bed he had been laying on and basked in the remaining warmth. For several minutes she drifted in and out of consciousness, trying and failing to wake herself up. Her body was sated and her mind was at ease. There was no reason to rush back into it, was there?

Minutes crept by, but she didn't hear the noise of the toilet nor the whistling of her kettle. *Where had he gone?* She'd assumed he only needed to go to the bathroom, or to get a drink, but with every passing moment that he didn't return, unease crawled up her spine. Blinking against the fading light filtering through her bedroom window, Hermione sat up and wrapped the blanket around her body.

"Draco?" she called out. There was no answer.

As her feet hit the rug on her floor, she tried again. "Draco, is everything okay?"

More silence.

Her stomach twisted, nausea building. She reached the doorway to her bedroom, opening it the rest of the way. He wasn't in the hallway, and a quick glance down the narrow space confirmed that there were no lights on in the living room or kitchen.

The bathroom door was only slightly ajar, but the light was off.

Her office door was pushed wide open and light spilled from the room and out into the hall, a shining beacon to the damning evidence that lay hidden inside. Horror suffused her system, nearly suffocating her, and she stumbled to the door, tripping over the blanket as it wrapped around her feet.

"Draco—"

Her plea was cut off at the sight of him standing in the middle of the room wearing only a pair of boxers, his body stiff as if he'd been petrified. He didn't bother turning at the sound of his name, falling cracked and broken from her lips.

"I'd ask if you care to explain, but something tells me that I've seen all I need to see."

A sob escaped her chest, and she grimaced. She had no right to cry, no right to give in to the stinging at the edges of her eyes or the tightening grip of emotion that threatened to choke her.

"Please, let me explain—" she tried to argue, one hand in front of her body as she approached and one hand holding on to the blanket that covered her bare skin. "It's not what you think. It's not—"

"It's not *what*, Hermione?" he demanded, turning on his heel. His lips trembled as he fought to keep his composure. "You promised. I specifically asked you to *stay out of this*, and you didn't listen. You didn't—"

"I stopped, I did—you have to believe me Draco, please—"

"You didn't!" he spat, the hurt transforming his features into something angry. Sneering. Disgusted, almost. Pain stabbed at her chest, ripping through the delicate happiness that they'd found.

And it was all her fault.

"How long?" he asked, his voice gone quiet. He wasn't looking at her any longer, his vision focused above her head. "How long has it been? This entire time?"

The tears began to flow freely, from both guilt and shame. They burned hot on her skin, and she blinked them away as rapidly as they appeared.

“I—” The words stuck in her throat; she couldn’t bring herself to admit it. To speak her betrayal out loud. But she knew she had to. “I thought—I—”

“You thought you knew better, didn’t you?” Draco spat. “Thought you knew better than me, thought you could get away with whatever you wanted? That my word didn’t matter, as long as you got your answers?”

His disgust was palpable, and she sank to her knees.

“I stopped, I swear. As soon as you gave me the bracelet, I realized—”

A cold, cruel laugh interrupted her, and when she glanced up, he was looking back at the wall, both of his hands buried in his hair. He pulled at the strands in frustration, trying and failing not to lash out at her.

“You finally got a conscience? As soon as I bought you some jewelry?”

Her mouth snapped shut, anger brewing in her stomach at his insinuation. She felt nauseous and her hands shook, but she balled them up to hide her shame.

“Don’t say that—don’t sully what we have—”

“What we have is a *lie*. ”

She stumbled to her feet, approaching him with quick steps. “How dare you—just because you’re angry doesn’t mean—”

“How dare *I*? Amazing that you think you have *any* right to tell me how to react when you’ve been lying to me for months.”

His features were twisted into an expression she hadn’t seen in years, not since their days at Hogwarts. He looked at her with disgust, and it broke everything inside of her.

Hot, fat tears began to track freely down her cheeks, and she wiped them away with her fists.

“Stop this, Draco. I understand that you’re angry, as you should be, but let me explain. Please, I’m begging you. I needed to know, I needed to figure it out in order to—”

Something she said set him off, and he attacked the wall, ripping down the articles by the fistful.

“I’ve tried so hard to keep you safe—and for nothing!” He shredded the parchment, tossing them to the floor in a crumpled heap. His laugh sounded detached, and much too light for the intensity of their conversation. “I kept my distance—I—I—”

He wasn’t making any sense.

“You’ve no idea the things—“ He was rambling, incoherent in his anger. Panic filled his features and he turned from her, leaning one arm against the wall as he took heaving breaths to try and calm his temper.

“That’s all this was, wasn’t it? You, searching for an answer?”

“What are you—“

"I thought—" He stopped to laugh, but it was a sad, melancholy sound. "I believed you. I thought you cared for me."

It felt like her ribs were being pulled apart, her sternum cracked open by the sheer force of the emotion in his voice.

"I do care for you, Draco, please—you have to know that I do. You trust me, don't you?"

He laughed again, shaking his head as he looked up toward the ceiling. "I thought I did. But I suppose you were a better actor than I ever gave you credit for."

She sobbed, sniffling against the congestion that was building and pressing at the backs of her eyes. "It wasn't an act—I swear it wasn't. Please, you have to believe me."

Draco was silent for a long moment, and his attention drifted down to the carnage of parchment beneath his feet.

"I should have known," he said softly, almost as if he was speaking to himself. "I should have realized sooner. The signs were all there. It felt too good to be true, and it was."

His words hit her like a hex. She hiccuped, shaking her head. "It's not—"

He shook his head once, a sharp motion that cut off her argument. "Today, in your office. That woman who came by—the one who knew me. You've been working with her, haven't you?"

She couldn't hide the horror that lanced through her at the realization, her shaking hand coming up to cover her mouth. The way it looked—he would have no idea that she *had* given up, but none of it mattered. It was a cruel twist of the knife that she'd stabbed herself with. At her reaction, Draco nodded slowly. She didn't have to speak for it to confirm his assumption.

"Exactly, Granger. It's always been you against the world, seeking out answers to problems you shouldn't have to solve. I suppose I'm the joke now, for falling for the same thing you've been doing since we were children."

"Please," she begged, reaching out for him like a lifeline. When he flinched, stepping back from her, she sobbed again.

"Take it off," he demanded. "The bracelet."

Cradling her arm to her chest, she refused. "No. It's mine. You gave it to me. I won't let you take it back when you're this angry."

He rushed her, his hands coming to grip her upper arms. His touch burned, digging into her skin. "You have no right to it when you've been lying to me for months."

When he shook her, she cried out, and he released her so quickly that she would have thought he'd been burned. He looked at his hands, grimacing to himself before turning back. He muttered to himself, something unintelligible from her distance, and paced the length of the room. After several steps, he looked at her with a sad expression.

"I tell you what, Granger. There's a way that you can get the answers you've been searching for. There's technically a way around the oath, and since you seem to want it so badly, I'll give it to you. But you have to do two things for me."

He seemed too calm, too composed, considering his outburst just moments before. But his eyes weren't focused on her, and instead the grey of his gaze was shuttered completely. He was occluding.

"W-what is it?" she asked, sniffling and hoping for the best.

"You have to take an oath of your own," he started, turning from her. The muscle in his jaw twitched, the only indication that he wasn't feeling as cold as his demeanor suggested. "And I want the bracelet back."

When she didn't immediately respond, he straightened his shoulders. "You can get the answers you've so desperately fought for, and we can go our separate ways. No one has to be any the wiser."

Licking the salt of her tears from her lips, Hermione knew there was only one answer. If she didn't agree, he would still leave. He would still demand the bracelet back and never return. She didn't care about what had happened to him, or what was said at his trial. None of it mattered, except her relationship with him.

But by agreeing, she could buy herself time. She could hold onto the bracelet until the very end. To convince him that she *had* given up, and that all wasn't lost. That she was falling for him, wholly and completely, despite her reasoning for starting things to begin with.

"All right," she said after a heavy swallow.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't really think I was going to just leave it all to settle so nicely with five chapters to go, did you?

Banner by the beautifully talented K/dreamsofdramione.

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Here it is, folks. The moment you've been waiting for. Good luck and godspeed.

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

Draco wouldn't speak to her, wouldn't look in her direction, as she readied herself to go to his flat. He pulled on his own clothes, buttoning up the layers of his suit with a methodical kind of calm that had her heart growing cold. His jaw was tight, and his eyes were shuttered. With every passing minute, he grew more distant.

He grabbed the fistful of floo powder first, leaving her to follow behind once the flames had cleared. Once at his flat, in his barren living room, he waited for her with an absent expression. Keeping himself out of arm's reach, he jutted his chin at the staircase that sat along the far wall and took off towards it as soon as she stepped from the fireplace. She followed silently behind, letting him guide her through the space as if she was a stranger, keeping her eyes down and counting every footfall between their bodies. Every step closer to the answers she so desperately sought was another step closer to the end of their relationship.

She had been foolish for not realizing they were one in the same.

Her legs were weak and her body was starting to shake from the nerves, but she kept her breathing even as they climbed. Kept her focus on the weight of the bracelet around her wrist and the steady inhale and exhale of her lungs. *In, out. In, out.* She'd gone through worse than this, faced down life and death and everything in between.

She could fix this. She could. She had to.

When she stopped on the landing and turned to face him, his gaze was focused above her head.

"Draco, please—"

She tried reaching out to him but he flinched, stepping back to put even more space between their bodies.

"Don't." The command was low, almost a whisper, and she noticed his throat constrict before he turned to open the door to his study.

Her chest ached, a deep crack that felt like it reached all the way down to the bone. Another sob pulled at her throat, tightening as she swallowed the emotion that threatened to drown her.

She followed him inside, her fingers finding her wand in her pocket. She clutched the wood as tight as she could, like it might provide an anchor in the storm.

Draco ignored her as he walked to his desk, pulling free a sheet of parchment. He worked as if he was alone, setting down a pot of ink and a quill before raising his own wand. He charmed the

parchment first, weaving the binding spell over the paper until the surface shimmered. As she stepped forward, he began to write. He still paid her no mind, even when she stopped at the side of the desk.

His penmanship wasn't nearly as neat as she'd seen in the letters he'd sent her before, slightly sharper now, and her stomach flipped as she read the words from beside him.

Reflected by this binding oath, I do so agree to the following terms:

I shall not, for any reason or desire, continue any research or inquiry into Draco Malfoy or his past.

I will, without exemption, destroy any and all existing evidence connected to said research.

Both parties do so pledge to honor this agreement as a binding magical contract, and swear both silence and privacy regarding all information learned and gleaned.

Beneath the oath, he scribbled his own signature, then dropped the quill for her to take. Not even willing to hand it to her. With trembling fingers, she picked it up, pausing to glance at him. Anger was rolling off of him in waves, and pulling the words from her throat felt like a physical ache.

"I've—I've never signed one of these before. What happens?"

His wording was clear enough, but that wasn't what concerned her. It was the fact that she had no idea what awaited her on the other side of her inked signature.

"The magic will prevent you from doing exactly what it says. You'll be physically bound by it."

She hesitated, a heavy drop of ink gathering at the end of the quill. "I won't...I won't die, though? If something happens?"

His lips pulled back into a disgusted grimace. "Already thinking about betraying me, are you?"

Horror flashed through her, and she dropped the quill. "That's not what I meant and you know it. I just...I don't want to do this if it means endangering either one of us."

Again, he laughed. It was hollow, and she felt a pain stab deep through her sternum.

"It's already too late for that."

She didn't understand.

"How can you even do this in the first place? How doesn't this go against your own oath?"

This time, he didn't answer. He looked away; the blank, empty expression returned to his features. After a moment of silence, it became clear that he wasn't willing to say anything else on the matter. Glancing down, Hermione considered her options. The bracelet was still clasped around her wrist, no longer a gift, but a bargaining tool. There was no option, really. He would reject her no matter what. Even if she didn't sign the document, even if she refused to take the oath, she had betrayed him.

She'd made a mess of the entire situation, and now it was hers to clean up.

Picking the quill back up, she tried to hold it steady. Somehow, some way, he knew of a path around his own oath. Which meant that he could have shown her from the beginning, but didn't want to. He must have had his reasons, whatever they were, and she trusted that they were legitimate. She might not have in the beginning, assuming and falsely inferring that her own curiosity was more important than anything else, but she'd been wrong. So, so wrong.

Without letting the emotions rise back up to overtake her once more, she scribbled her name beside his. Magic warmed her hand, drifting up the veins into her arm until she felt it spread across her chest. But she couldn't think about it, couldn't register the feeling of it coursing through her body. Binding her. She could only think about Draco, and their relationship, and what this moment might mean for them tomorrow in the light of a new day.

Whatever it was, whatever she was about to find out, it would be a burden for them both to bear. She would help him with it, help him with whatever continued to plague him, even if he didn't want her to. She would be there for him, even if he refused it. Stand by him, even if he wouldn't look at her. She wouldn't let him continue on alone. Not like he had been.

He wouldn't give up on her, no matter how angry he was. He couldn't. *He couldn't*. Not after the things they'd been through together, or the things they'd done. Not when she knew he felt just as strongly for her as she did for him. She would just have to prove it to him, to show her trust through all the ways he'd taught her.

She willed away the burning behind her eyes, squeezing them shut as she focused her mind and her body. *In, out. In, out.* Maybe, if she tried hard enough, she could believe the words she told herself.

Setting down the quill, she braved a glance back towards Draco, but his eyes were focused across the room. Jaw grinding, a muscle ticked in his temple, but he didn't blink. He only stared. Following his attention, she realized he wasn't just looking off into the distance, but at the wall.

"What now?" she asked. When she looked back at him, it didn't appear that he'd registered the question. She waved her hand in front of his face, but he didn't even register *her*.

With a huff, she stepped in front of him, setting her hands on her hips. "I know you're upset, but you can't just ignore me. What am I supposed to do?"

His eyes glistened lightly, but he still wouldn't blink. Instead he lifted a brow, but that was the extent of his reaction.

Hermione's brows furrowed, tension pulsing at her temples. He wasn't acknowledging her now, acting as if she wasn't even there. It was as if he was looking right through her. She paused, peering close to him. When she leaned forward his lips thinned, but his eyes didn't move.

What if... Her mind began to turn over the tentative idea as it formed. Yes, he was ignoring her, and he was angry, but... *What if it's more than that?* What if he *couldn't*?

Turning, she stepped back and out of the way, following his gaze back to the far wall. He blinked finally, but didn't speak. He only looked at the wall, focused on it as if it was the only thing in the room. There was tension pulling at his neck, and she saw it in the line of his posture as he stood there. Like it was taking every bit of strength he had to keep staring at the wall.

"Is it the wall?" she asked, already knowing that he wouldn't answer her. But she did anyway, needing to think out loud. "What is it? What could it..."

She trailed off as she took several steps towards the wall, focusing on the bare patch in between two bookshelves. It was narrow, without anything to fill the space besides the white paint and navy blue wainscotting, not quite a big enough space to fit a painting or any kind of art.

Something niggled at the back of her mind, and she crept closer. It was an odd spot for him to be staring at, considering everything else that was in the room. Bookshelves and several windows lined the other walls, and there was a large leather chair in the corner that she knew he preferred to sit in while he read. He'd brought her into his study before, and although they hadn't been able to stay focused on anything besides sex for very long, she hadn't even *noticed* the gap before.

Another step, and another, tentatively padding along the thick carpet. When she blinked, she almost missed it—the wall, or rather, a spot, shimmered just slightly. Hermione froze, squinting her eyes, but it didn't happen again. *Could it have been a trick of the light?*

Glancing back at Draco, her suspicions were confirmed. He was still staring at the spot she was heading towards, and hadn't looked away.

There's something there.

She couldn't see it, but she could sense it. It was the only way, the only explanation.

It took three more steps before the spot shimmered again, a glistening spot of gold. Unmistakable magic, and her breath caught. Heart hammering a heavy tempo, she reached out towards the wall. *In, out, in, out*, she continued her mantra to keep steady, to keep from giving in to the nerves that threatened to overtake her entire body.

Finally, when her fingertips brushed along the cool surface of the wall, her lips parted on a gasp. It wasn't a wall at all—it was a *door*. The wood grain, although invisible to the naked eye, was obvious under her fingertips. Bringing her second hand up to the spot in front of her, she ran her hands across the area, seeking, searching. They followed the ridges of the door, all the way down to the hidden knob. Once her hand wrapped around the cool metal, it shimmered again. The magic gave way, rippling back as she gripped the door handle, and exposed a thin, narrow door right before her very eyes.

A Notice-Me-Not charm, and an incredible one at that. Stained dark like the rest of the doors in Draco's flat, and she suppressed a smile of victory at finding it through the magic that had kept it hidden from her. Spinning to see his reaction, her immediate satisfaction dissipated. He was looking back at the binding oath that they had both signed, a sad, solemn expression ghosting across his features.

"Draco..."

At the sound of her voice, his eyes drifted closed, and he shook his head. Her heart felt like it was cracking open, sending more of that sharp ache slicing deep through her chest. With a pained exhale, she turned back to the door. She was on her own.

It took her to the count of eight to summon enough courage to open the door, stepping back to pull it open slowly. It was silent, with no creak of the metal hinges, but she felt her skin ripple with goosebumps nonetheless. In front of her was a void of black, but she could tell by the stillness of the air that it was a small space. No draft or brush of a cool breeze. Pulling out her wand from her pocket, she held it in front of her face before stepping through.

"Lumos."

The tip of her wand began to glow, pulsing with magic and the intensity of her emotions, and her eyes grew wide at the sight illuminated before her. It wasn't a room at all. It was a closet, large enough for several people to walk into, but it held no clothes, no boxes, no books or items that were typically kept in a storage space like this one.

No, it held something much more valuable. It held a pensieve. *Draco's* pensieve.

He'd told her that he had one—boasted about it, almost—and yet she hadn't considered that *this* would be his answer to his oath. He hadn't told her anything. Hadn't even opened his mouth. He'd found a way to guide her right to what she needed without lifting a finger.

Ensconced in a polished black cabinet, the basin itself looked to be cast from pure silver, the sides etched with runes and dotted with different faceted jewels that twinkled in the low light. It was by far the most beautiful pensieve she had ever seen, with a shallow bowl and sleek lines that spoke to expert craftsmanship. However beautiful it was, it couldn't hold her attention for long, because what surrounded the pensieve was what startled her even further.

Set into shelves within the cabinet, nestled both above and below, were rows and rows of memories. All labeled and organized into identical vials, each one held Draco's meticulous script. With cautious steps she entered the closet, relieved when the door didn't immediately slam shut behind her. Careful not to touch the vials too soon, she realized there was still one mystery left to unravel. She had to figure out *what* memories she needed to view. There were too many—she would have to be strategic about what she searched for and which ones she selected, or else she'd be inside the closet for days.

Using the light from her wand to guide her, Hermione began to examine the labels, trying to decipher his organizational system. Some of the vials were obviously older, with the labels beginning to curl and yellow at the edges. Others were more well-used than others, and some looked dusty and untouched by anything except time. Certain labels only held a quick scribble of a date, and others had additional details listed beneath the numbers.

18.10.1991

05.06.2001

France

22.08.1994

Focusing, she began to look for trends in the groupings of the vials. Assuming that the most important memories were kept closest to the basin, she started there.

05.07.2003

Her heart flipped. The date was the night of their first meeting at The Scarlet Order. The vials beside it were all arranged chronologically in intervals of seven, and it was clear. They were all Saturdays, and all of the nights that they would have been together. Hermione swallowed thickly, trying not to get lost in the desire to follow down that path. He'd made no secret that he'd watched their nights together, and as much as she wanted to see things from his perspective, that wasn't what she was there for.

Continuing, she came across a cluster of vials, all dated with holidays. Then some more, various years around his birthday and another set that she assumed must have been for his mother's. There were no dates from 1996 to 1998.

She had to kneel on the floor to view the lower shelves, growing frustrated when she couldn't find a trend. Some were marked with notes like *Hogwarts* or *Summer*, but there was no clear delineation between what was saved for posterity and what might have been saved by necessity. With a huff she began to raise herself back up to her feet, but a small trio of vials caught her eye. Pushed to the very back of the shelf and almost completely hidden by the other, larger ones, they held no labels. But each still swirled with the pearlescent proof of an extracted memory.

Slowly, carefully, she moved the other vials out of the way. She gathered the three into her hands with a delicate touch, careful not to clink the glass, and set them on the ledge as she finished standing.

Certainty tugged at her mind. These ones were clearly different from the rest. They were the only vials that weren't labeled, and the stoppers to the bottles looked like they'd been sealed with black wax. Sealed and tucked away from prying eyes, as if he wanted to forget about them entirely.

Fear began to thread through her body, a sharp, cold sensation that had her wishing that Draco could be standing beside her, guiding her. Behind her, the room was silent. There was no telling if he was still waiting for her or if he'd left entirely. All things considered, she was alone.

Soothing away her nerves, Hermione took a deep breath. She ignored everything else around her, every thought that filtered through the recesses of her mind, every desire to put the closet back to rights and to go find Draco instead.

She had to finish this. There was no more time to waste.

Using her nail to crack the wax seal, she dumped the contents of the first vial into the basin and lowered her face to the surface.

Dropping into the memory felt like floating through water, a heavy body sinking to the bottom of a pool.

It took her a few seconds to focus on the scene in front of her, a familiar room unfolding. Robards office. One she'd sat in many times, with its familiar furnishings, not unlike her own. Looking around, her eyes caught on Draco, sitting in a chair across from the desk in the center of the room. He was skinnier than she remembered him being, with smudges of dirt and filth outlining the sharp lines of his face. He looked younger than the man she'd just left behind, and the standard issue Azkaban uniform he wore told her enough about the time point of the memory even without a label on the vial.

It must have been almost immediately after the Battle, sometime during his initial intake into Azkaban before his own trial. Hermione took an unsteady step forward, dropping her body carefully into the seat beside Draco as the memory moved on.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Mr. Malfoy? There is no going back."

Robards eyed him with open suspicion, his expression bordering on hostility. On his desk was a series of files and photographs, but at a glance, Hermione couldn't recognize any of them. Two

women, one younger and one older, sat talking over a table. Both slightly incongruous, nothing seemed amiss in their actions.

Draco didn't seem to be fazed by Robards' suspicion in the slightest, nor the photos, and his grey gaze swept through the office around them as if he was taking stock of a friendly gathering. Hermione froze when he looked right through her, but everything continued on if she wasn't there.

"There was already no going back," he finally answered. "Are you sure that we're completely alone?"

Robards grunted. "Of course I am. I'm obviously capable enough to bring an active Azkaban prisoner into the Ministry without notice, so please don't insult me by insinuating that I don't know how to cast a detection charm."

Draco blinked slowly in response. "I will admit that I did underestimate your ability to follow through considering your lack of response to my or my solicitor's letters."

"I don't make it a habit of corresponding with criminals, Mr. Malfoy. But based on the information you were able to provide me," he paused to gesture at the photos in front of them, "I came to the realization that perhaps I could make an exception to my rule."

"So you believe me, then?"

Robards paused, gauging Draco in the same way Hermione saw him do with many of the upper level Aurors within the department. It was the same expression he scrutinized Harry with, and one that she'd seen many grown men wither beneath. Draco looked like he couldn't summon the energy to fake the appearance of being ruffled. Finally, Robards answered.

"Unfortunately, I do."

Draco exhaled, the only sign of his relief. It was one she had learned to spot, and she held her breath when he sat forward in his chair. His elbows rested on his knees, and he leveled Robards with a look that spoke to a man in power, not in a prisoner's uniform.

"No one can know about this. I need you to vow it."

"You want to take an oath?" Robards asked in surprise.

Draco gave him a quick, sharp nod. "They couldn't have been working alone. There's bound to be more of them, and I was only privy to a few specific discussions. Any noise or attention will only cause them to scatter even further. This—this isn't something we want getting out or becoming public knowledge."

Robards looked between the photos and Draco, his jaw working as he thought through what Draco was saying.

"I have no reason to trust you, you know."

"I know," Draco answered. "And I deserve whatever sentence that's chosen for me. I acknowledge that. But I'm done sitting behind the scenes and watching things as they happen. I'm done being an accomplice to the whims of my father and that madman. I know that I should have spoken up

sooner, instead of cowering, but that doesn't mean it's too late. I can't let them get away with this, even if my own future is damned."

Steepling his fingers in front of him, Robards took a few moments to consider Draco's words. They felt so serious, so heavy, that Hermione felt the weight of them press against her skin. He truly, genuinely believed what he was saying. He wanted to do better, to be better. There was no doubt about it.

He'd been telling her the truth the entire time.

"All right. You have my word. Without your wand or a third person to conduct the spell we can't perform an unbreakable vow, so a binding contract will have to do. But if I do this, if we do this, then I'll need you close to ensure that we flush out any remaining sympathizers that might be left in the shadows."

Relieved, Draco sat back and nodded. "Thank you, Gawain."

Hermione watched as Robards drew up the contract, murmuring the same spell that she'd just heard Draco recite in his study. But Draco didn't look nervous, or angry, or fearful.

Only relieved.

As she stood from the chair, pulling her attention away from Draco and to the words on the parchment, she was pulled from the memory with a stiff yank.

Hermione surfaced in the study closet, her half-lit wand still clutched in her fist beside the basin as she gasped at the sensation. She could never get acclimated to using pensieves—they felt too much like flying when you were pulled free. The entrance into a memory wasn't too bad, but the release made her stomach flip over onto itself.

She choked out the spell to cast the orb of light into the air so she could use her wand to gather the memory back into its vial. She couldn't waste time searching for a light-switch, running purely on instinct, and shook out the second memory into the pensieve as quickly as she could. She had to know more—had to see what was on that contract in Robards' office.

Hermione tried to prepare herself as she dropped into the second memory, but when she opened her eyes, it took her a moment to comprehend the change in scenery.

Draco sat at the back of the Wizengamot chamber, flanked by a man in a stiff suit that she assumed to be his solicitor. The witness seating was almost empty, save for the two of them.

Her heart skipped, dropping heavy at the sight. Draco was frail and pallid, his blond hair hanging in greasy strands down to his eyes. His Azkaban uniform was even more tattered and grimy, hanging off his bony frame, but his shoulders were still set back. He sat rigid with his chin in the air, unblinking as the trial progressed in front of him. Curiosity surfaced... Why was he watching from the witness section, but still wearing his robes from Azkaban? Prisoners weren't typically permitted to act as witnesses in active trials, not even if they were pulled in for their own testimonies. Following his gaze to the accused, she grew even more confused.

A middle-aged woman sat on the accused bench, her prisoner's robes just as worn and threadbare as Draco's, but her attention was focused on the empty testimony stand instead of the committee sitting around the room.

"Bring in the next witness, please," the committee chairman spoke through the din, cracking his gavel to bring the chamber to silence.

A young woman entered the chambers, her narrow shoulders somewhat hunched over as she walked. She was wearing a gray, drab dress, and kept her eyes on her hands as she was led to the witness stand.

It wasn't until the accused woman's face moved to the side, exposing her profile as she watched the newcomer, that Hermione realized who they were. Who they both were. The women from the photographs in Robards' office.

In person, they were both as unassuming as they had been in the photographs. With plain features, neither of them stood out. They could have been any random women that Hermione had passed by on the street without realizing. No crooked teeth, no hooked noses, no pockmarked skin. They were both reserved in their features and body language, and aside from the older woman's Azkaban robes, neither looked too out of the ordinary. It was clear, though, that the woman on trial had been treated better while imprisoned than Draco had. Her skin was clean and her dark hair had been brushed at the very least.

Draco's eyes sharpened at the sight of the two women, his posture stiffening almost imperceptibly. So much so that even his solicitor didn't notice as he glanced down at his own notes. Hermione tensed in response, that whatever was coming wouldn't be good.

"Please state your name for the chambers."

"Adelaide Burke," she answered, her tone feather-light and wispy. She continued to stare down at her hands, picking at the skin of her thumb.

"Louder, please," a chamber member requested.

Adelaide started, finally looking up. With wide brown eyes, she looked almost owlish, and her gaze swept around the room. She avoided looking directly at the accused, and Hermione could see her delicate throat move as she swallowed.

In a slightly louder tone, she repeated her name. Satisfied, the committee head nodded.

"Please note on the official trial record that on the grounds of being an employee of the Department of Mysteries within the Ministry of Magic, Miss Burke has waived the wand review, as is within her purview. Due to the sensitive nature of the trial today, the chamber has been closed and any record of today's proceedings will be sealed under the authority of this committee. Miss Burke, if you would, please begin your testimony pertaining to Cordelia Malatesta."

Tension was pulling at the edges of Draco's eyes, yet the solicitor still didn't notice the change in his client's demeanor. Glancing between the woman on the stand and Draco, Hermione felt unease begin to unfurl in her stomach. Was this one of the employees that Robards had run off? She hadn't looked closely enough at the files from Beatrice to tell, but the way Draco was staring at her had Hermione's hair standing on end.

"I was hired under Miss Malatesta three years ago, into the Department of Mysteries, as a research assistant. It was my understanding that I was hired to shadow her work and further the magical science that was being studied."

“And what was the magical science that was being studied?” a female committee member asked, sitting forward.

“I am not at liberty to discuss many of the initiatives within the department,” Adelaide answered after another thick swallow. Draco shifted in his seat. “Though Miss Malatesta was primarily in charge of theoretical magics.”

Another committee member raised their hand in turn. “And what do you mean by ‘theoretical magics’?”

Adelaide’s response was stiff and flat. “We focused on experimenting with common magic and pushing known, existing spells to their limits. Stretching the magic, almost, to see what would happen and what the limitations might be. To understand what was safe to use in specific environments, or how magic might be manipulated from light to dark.”

The crowd began to murmur, but the Wizengamot chair banged his gavel again to restore order. To his left, Robards watched the proceedings with an unaffected expression. Once given the clear to continue, Adelaide looked back down at her hands and began speaking. Her posture was meek, and Hermione could tell that her answer was somewhat rehearsed by the way she nodded as she spoke.

“For the last two years, Miss Malatesta insisted on studying what she referred to as ‘source magic.’ It was her belief that magic flowed through a person, and as our wands harness the energy, it can be manipulated at any point from beginning to end.”

Robards sat up straighter, his head lifting towards Adelaide with a more interested expression at her words. Hermione glanced between her boss and Draco, but they weren’t paying attention to each other. Only Adelaide, as she meekly continued.

“She was convinced that if we could pinpoint the source of our magic, it could be harnessed or amplified in different ways. Miss Malatesta claimed that her ultimate goal was to uncover what fueled our magic in the first place, so that we could better understand and utilize it.”

“I fail to see how this relates to the charges at hand,” a woman on the committee spoke, raising an eyebrow at the Chair.

“Continue, Miss Burke. How does the accused’s research pertain to her charges today?”

Adelaide cleared her throat lightly, and Hermione watched as her focus drifted down to her hands instead of the expectant looks that she was receiving from the committee. She continued to rub at her knuckles, obviously nervous, but refused to look at her former boss.

“Miss Malatesta preferred to use wandless magic when possible. She’s a very skilled witch, and has studied the subject for almost as long as I’ve been alive. But after a few months, I noticed that there was an additional...layer to her interest that she continued to emphasize.”

“And that was?” Robards prompted, finally speaking.

Adelaide blinked a few times at her lap before glancing up. “What makes us magical in the first place. Why some are born with magic and others aren’t. Why squibs can be born to pureblood families, and how muggleborns exist in the first place.”

The committee collectively stiffened, and Draco turned to his solicitor. He dipped his head to whisper something into his solicitor's ear, but it was so quiet that even Hermione couldn't catch more than a few broken syllables. The solicitor nodded, putting his hand up to keep Draco from saying any more.

"And what proof do you have that Miss Malatesta meant to do harm with her research?" the committee chairman asked, sitting forward until his elbows rested on the ledge in front of him. Everyone in the room seemed to grow still, including the magical stenographer.

Adelaide froze, her nails digging into the skin on her hands, and chanced a look at the accused. Hermione noticed Cordelia Malatesta's body go tense.

"She..." Adelaide stuttered, caught under the attention of her old boss. "She—"

Before she could answer, the courtroom descended into chaos. Cordelia leapt from her chair, hitting the table with such force that it sent her solicitor's paperwork flying. She let out an anguished shout, screaming and thrashing against the magically reinforced chains that kept her from going any further.

"You fucking traitor! You dirty, lying piece of—"

The committee scrambled to get her sedated, Robards standing and brandishing his wand faster than any of the other witches or wizards could react.

"Immobilus!"

Cordelia immediately seized, going stiff as her body pulled against the restraints. Cordelia's solicitor began shouting in opposition.

"Release her immediately! This is an abuse of my client!"

Draco's solicitor jumped from his seat, protecting Draco and shielding him with his body as the committee members began to argue about the best course of action. Adelaide openly wept on the testimony stand, wiping away the tears with shaking, reddened fingers. Her sobs echoed between the shouts, adding to the cacophony of noise.

"Order! Order!" the chairman yelled as he struggled to get the room under control once more.

Azkaban guards burst into the chambers, splitting up to grab Draco and his solicitor while the others moved to restrain Cordelia Malatesta even further.

Before the trial could continue, the memory dissolved into nothingness.

Hermione pulled back with a gasp, her breathing heavy and her heart racing. The energy in the Wizengamot chambers had spiraled into complete and utter chaos. Although it was clear that Adelaide and Cordelia were the two women from the photos in Robards' office, Hermione couldn't be certain what the memories were leading to.

It was no secret inside or outside of the Ministry walls that the Department of Mysteries weren't bound by the same laws and regulations of the rest of the wizarding world. Their sole purpose was to understand and review the fringe edges of magic, to press the boundaries of what should and should not be done.

Gathering the trial memory back into its vial, Hermione wasted no time dumping the final memory into the basin.

So far, she understood that Draco's oath of silence and his subsequent sentencing deal was related to the trial of Cordelia Malatesta and the Department of Mysteries. It wasn't a name she recognized, nor had it been in the news. *A private trial, with no record.*

A chill of fear settled deep in her chest as the pieces came into focus. Draco's file was suspicious enough with its missing documentation... But one that didn't exist entirely? Whatever he had provided against Cordelia or the DoM was bigger than she could have expected. Whatever it was, it had the potential to ruin more than just personal reputations.

Two down, one to go. Blinking down at the swirling memory, Hermione gripped the edges of the cabinet. *This is it. This is the end.*

It was already too late to go back, she knew that. Her relationship with Draco had already been damaged beyond repair by her actions, but she could only hope that whatever was on the other side of the memory—whatever she found at the bottom of the basin—wasn't something that would ruin the rest of their lives, too.

Everything was dark. The kind of inky blackness that blankets everything and absorbs light, sucking it from the air like a candle being snuffed out. Hermione rubbed at her eyes, blindly reaching out to try to guide her way. After a few moments, however, her vision began to adjust. Dim sconces flickered into view, the golden light dissipating almost immediately before it could provide any relief from the darkness.

Slowly, painfully, the room came into focus. As it did, so did the smell. It was a metallic sort of dampness, something sour that lingered in her nostrils and made her pull back.

"What—" The start of the question was already well past her lips before she realized that no one would be able to hear her, even if they could see her.

Something shifted across the floor; a heavy, sliding sound that rumbled beneath her feet. More light bled into the room as a large stone door was shoved open. A figure stood in the light, and it wasn't until Hermione glanced around that she noticed the familiar space.

The dungeons in Malfoy Manor.

Her chest constricted at the sight across the room, now lit by the space from the door that shielded the staircase.

Draco, his wand in the air...repairing cracks in the stone facade? She recognized the cut of his clothes and the style of his hair from their days in school. Which meant this wasn't after the trial in the last memory she saw—it was before. Years before, possibly.

"Boy," Antonin Dolohov spat the word in Draco's direction. "The fuck you doing down 'ere?"

Draco's posture was stiff as he turned, lowering his wand but still keeping a tight grip with his fist. Readyng, Hermione realized. Just in case.

"I was told to make sure the cellar was secure," Draco said in an even tone. His voice floated through the semi-darkness, and Hermione shivered at how detached he sounded. Once he stepped

further into the light, everything in her, every thought in her mind, came to a standstill.

Although he still clutched his wand at his side, everything else about him was blank. His expression. His posture. Dark shadows stained the pale skin beneath his eyes. How had she forgotten how terrible he looked those last few years at school?

Movement shifted in the corner behind Draco, and Hermione gasped at the small frame curled up on the floor. Luna. She appeared to be sleeping, tucked into a ball on her side while her chest rose and fell with even, steady breaths. Though her clothes were visibly stained with dirt and grim, she didn't appear to be injured as far as Hermione could tell. Instinct drove Hermione forward several steps, reaching out to touch her. To help her.

Catching herself, she pulled her hand back to her chest. It's just a memory. It's already happened, she had to remind herself. If Luna was here, in this section of the cellar, it meant that there were likely others nearby, too. Trapped.

Somewhere in the darkness, they were all in need of help. Help that they would get, if they could hold on just a bit longer. She already knew how that part played out; had relived it for months and months in her nightmares. She couldn't afford to get distracted, and pulled her focus back to the task at hand.

His eyes were cool, his gaze empty, as he looked back at Dolohov with an expression that could only be described as hollow. His clothing was all black, causing his body to blend in with the darkness behind him, but even his white-blond hair looked dull and his normally fair skin was pasty white. He barely resembled the man she now knew. The man she...

Hermione swallowed down the emotions in her throat, stepping back and out of the way when Draco approached. He raised an eyebrow at Dolohov.

"Did you need something? Because the last I checked, this was still my home and I don't believe I'm required to justify my whereabouts to you."

Ignoring Draco's dry remarks, Dolohov grinned. It was crooked, pulling to the side of his face, and his eyes were too wild to be considered totally sane.

"Yeah," he grunted. "Just got word that the Snatchers caught themselves a bounty. Thinks it's Potter and his slag. You're up, boy. Time to make yourself useful."

Draco didn't flinch. "Do those idiots no longer have functioning eyesight?"

"The girl hit Potter with a stinging hex. Sounds like his face is swollen all to shit. We gotta be sure before letting the Dark Lord know...They'll be here any second now. Don't you think it's time for you to pull your weight, eh, junior?"

Hermione recognized the brief moment of hesitation that passed across Draco's features. It flashed quickly, his eyes tightening just slightly, but disappeared before Dolohov could question it. She noted the careful control of his composure, the way he held his body, and the delicate facade of unaffectedness that he cast over his face.

It was all an act. Draco Malfoy was scared.

She knew him well enough now to see the slight differences, the small tells that she wouldn't have been able to notice before. It was all in the pull of his spine and the corners of his expressions... nothing noticeable, unless you knew where to look. What he was afraid of, she couldn't be sure. Her own fear swirled cold in her stomach, heavy and paralyzing as Draco moved to follow Dolohov up the stairs and away from the dungeon.

He didn't look back at Luna, but his hand gripped his wand tighter as the door shut with a forceful thud.

Dolohov rambled on as they ascended the stairs to the main level of the Manor, Hermione following closely behind so as to not miss anything.

"...might even be able to recoup some of that good grace you lost."

Draco snorted in derision, but didn't reply. They wound their way through the halls, and Dolohov kept chattering. The excitement rolled off his body in palpable waves, his shoulders jumping and his arms flying through the air as he spoke.

"Good lot this'll do for us, you just wait." He spun to give Draco another lecherous grin. "This is exactly what we need. All of us."

Draco hesitated, his steps faltering just slightly, but he caught up to Dolohov before he noticed.

"What do you mean, all of us?"

Someone down the hall shouted for Dolohov, and his attention drifted away from Draco before he could answer. Without bothering to excuse himself, he took off, jogging towards the fading voice.

Once alone, Draco bit out a quiet curse. He turned to the wall and reached out to steady himself, taking several deep breaths before straightening back up again. Once he was centered, Hermione leaned closer. His eyes held a renewed focus, cold and empty once more.

His head snapped up at the sound of more voices, filtering through an open door nearby. It was cracked just slightly, the slice of space just enough for the sound to weave its way out into the hall.

"This is exactly it," a female voice said, excitement bleeding into her tone. Draco cocked his head, casting the door a curious look. "It's exactly what we need. Everything we've been waiting for."

Another voice answered, a gruff sounding man, grunting in satisfaction. "It's about time. We need someone who will finally make them take notice. To appreciate what we're doing here."

"I know, I know," the first voice agreed. "But you have to admit... This is more than we could have hoped for. More than we could have dreamed—"

"—she's the perfect subject."

The two laughed loudly, and Draco used the noise to muffle the sound of his shoes as he edged closer to the door, hiding in the shadows of a nearby bust. Hermione stayed with him every step of the way, looking around the corner of the door frame to see once Draco had enough of a vantage point to see clearly.

Cordelia Malatesta paced the length of the room, fidgeting with restless energy. She smoothed out her robes and straightened her collar, spinning on her heel before taking another lap. Her dark

hair was longer in this memory, plaited and twisted at the base of her neck in an elegant design. It was clear that she'd put some effort into her appearance, her body language reminding Hermione of the ways that the girls in school used to do when getting ready for a date. Preening, almost.

Across the room, a Death Eater sat on the settee, his mask tossed carelessly onto the cushions beside him. It wasn't a face Hermione recognized, so he couldn't have been in Voldemort's inner circle.

"Gods!" Cordelia laughed. "Can you believe it? Hermione Granger!"

Hermione startled at the sound of her name.

"Ours!" Together they laughed again. Hermione grabbed the door frame to steady herself, holding on to it so hard that she could feel her hand shake.

Once the mirth died down, Cordelia paused and tapped her cheek with her finger. "Shall we start with the smaller experiments first? Then build up to the full scope?"

Hermione's blood ran cold.

The Death Eater shrugged. "Nah. Make a spectacle of her. Teach them all a lesson, right from the start."

Cordelia paused, her features twisting into distaste. "But if it doesn't work..."

"What's better than a mudblood without her magic, Malatesta?" When Cordelia didn't immediately answer, he sneered. "A dead mudblood. It's a win-win, either way. She loses her magic or we string her up for dead. There's no downside. Maybe once you're done with her, we can still kill her just for fun."

Nausea twisted in Hermione's stomach, rolling and pulling until she felt bile rising up at the back of her throat. When Cordelia's face lifted into pure, undisguised interest, the feeling doubled over.

They wanted—they were going to—

"Just imagine if it does work," Cordelia mused, smirking to herself. "Draining the Golden Girl of her magic. Sucking it right out of her veins. She'll be the ultimate example—kicked back down to the gutters with the rest of the filth, right where she should have stayed from the beginning. If I were a poetic woman, oh... I've been working on this for so long now, Bernaby. She's the perfect subject to start with."

Giddy once more, Cordelia resumed her pacing, her hands fluttering up to her chest.

"Gods, I do hope they hurry up with this shite. I'm eager to get started. I can't wait to get that filthy mudblood beneath my wand and watch her squirm as I drain her dry."

"Patience, Cordelia," Bernaby cautioned. "All in good time. We'll get our turn, just you wait."

Cordelia paused, and Hermione choked back a sob. She had to fist her knuckles between her teeth to keep the worst of it at bay, to keep herself from breaking any further. Cold sweat was gathering on her skin, clammy and damp.

"If we have some time, it might be beneficial to call for another hand. Someone who knows the theoretical magic. I should—"

Their voices began to fade, growing distorted, twisting and pulling into nothingness.

No matter how hard Hermione tried to hold on, to stay grounded in the memory so she could hear more, she was sucked from the memory with a stiff pull, landing so hard she stumbled back and fell onto the carpet with a harsh thud.

The sound of her choked sob was the first thing she registered, the anguished, angry noise cracking from her throat like a shout.

They wanted to take—they wanted—

A fresh wave of horrified nausea rolled through her, a combination of the journey through the memories and the contents themselves. With trembling hands and weak legs, she climbed back up to standing, grabbing her wand and leaning against the cabinet as she struggled to process what she had just seen. It didn't take long to understand the entire picture, to be able to step back and see the memories as they intertwined with Draco's history.

Everything he'd done. Everything he'd said.

It all made sense.

Hermione's eyes burned, her bodily instinct to give into the intense emotions that were coursing through her veins. Horror. Fear. Frustration. Anger. So much anger.

Anger at Draco for never telling her about the threat that she'd been targeted with. Robards, too. Anger that no one told her when *she* was the one lined up for the experimentation block. Anger that she could waltz through the halls of the Ministry, wanting to one day become the head of such a prestigious institution, just to see the disgusting reality of what hid behind the curtains.

He couldn't, reason broke through the haze of fury that was bubbling inside her chest. *His oath.*

She didn't care. She'd deserved to know. He'd had the solution all along. He could have gotten around his oath at any point if only he'd *wanted* to. But he hadn't. He'd deliberately chosen to keep her in the dark, thinking he knew better despite everything they'd been through. Everything *she'd* been through.

Anger drove her heavy footsteps out of the closet and back into the study. Draco sat in his desk chair, elbows resting on his knees, and lifted his head at the sound of her stomping.

He looked tired.

"How dare you," she seethed. "How dare you ask me to *trust* you when you kept something like that—they wanted to take my magic? And you *knew*? How could you—"

Draco's voice was quiet as he shook his head. "My oath with Robards. I still can't. It...it wasn't—I couldn't."

He said it like it was final and Hermione stepped closer in challenge.

“You could have, *before* you took that oath, just like you could have pointed me toward your memories at any time. You just didn’t want to. You might as well have lied to me that night at the club, omitting something this big.”

His lips thinned, his own anger making his features turn hard. Cold.

“I’ve been trying to protect you. To protect *everyone*. ”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s been to protect yourself. If you cared about me, really, you would have found a way to tell me sooner. And to think that you stood in my flat and accused me of lying—”

That had him shooting up to his feet, towering over her as he stared her down.

“How *dare* you insinuate that I don’t care for you. You’re *all* I’ve come to care about for the last several months. You don’t think I considered it? Considered going to Robards to request that he release me from our oath? You don’t think I laid awake at night, trying to think of ways around it so that I *could* tell you?”

“And just how long has it been since you realized exactly how you could get around your oath? How long have you known that you *could* tell me, but decided against it?”

“I specifically requested that you leave this alone. That you trust me—”

“*Trust you?* All you’ve done is ask me to trust you, but what about trusting *me* with information about *my own life*? ”

“—and gods only know how much damage you’ve done.” Stepping away from her, Draco shook his head as he licked his lips, wetting them. It was clear he was struggling to speak, struggling against himself or the oath, she wasn’t sure which. He continued. “Years of work. Years of waiting, and you likely just went and ruined it all. All because you had to go looking for something—”

“Of course I had to go looking!” she shouted. “They wanted to take my magic, Draco. And if that didn’t work, they would have killed me. And you seem to think that it’s not important that I know!”

“Don’t act like that’s why you went looking in the first place. Don’t pretend that you didn’t go digging solely because you *wanted* to,” he snapped, his attention rounding back to her.

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing I did. If I’m in—”

“It wasn’t *just you*.” His jaw tensed, working and grinding until the muscle in his temple throbbed.

To protect everyone.

The pieces clicked together instantly.

It wasn’t just about her.

She’ll be the ultimate example.

Hermione might have been the one witch that Cordelia Malatesta wanted to start with, but she wasn’t their only target.

"They would have..." Hermione had to swallow back the disgust to continue. "They would have continued, after me? It would have been all muggleborns, wouldn't it?"

"Now do you get it?" he asked, his tone biting. "Now do you understand how this was about more than you? Your curiosity is nothing in comparison to the bigger picture."

An ache settled in her chest, cold and deep, and she forced herself to turn away from Draco while she processed it.

"None of the other Death Eaters admitted it," she said quietly, her voice thick with emotion. That's what he'd had that was more valuable than anything else during the series of trials after the war. The one thing that would have been enough to save himself and his mother. "They were hoping someone would be left to continue, weren't they?"

His silence was enough of an answer. *That would have been why Robards*—she stopped with a gasp.

Robards.

Her research settled into clarity with the new information. Robards and his trail of destruction, hunting down and finding ways to get rid of Ministry employees that opposed him.

Perhaps *that* was why he was so willing to hear Draco out. Why he was willing to keep him close to the chest, bringing Draco in as a contractor. To keep an eye on him. To make sure he wasn't going after the wrong—or right—people. Readily agreeing to an oath of silence with a criminal on trial, ensuring that he wouldn't be able to tell *anyone* what he knew.

Hiding in plain sight.

"It's—it's Robards, Draco," she spoke, the realization turning everything upside down. She had to grasp at the edge of the desk. It all made sense. "He's the one left. He's the one—"

Robards had never, to her knowledge, made a deal with someone on trial. He would have no reason to. Not even with what Draco had to offer—he could have taken the information as he pleased and left Draco to rot.

"What?" Draco asked, incredulous. "That's ridiculous. He and I have been working together for years."

With a sigh, Hermione turned back around and gave him a hard look. "Exactly. He's needed to keep you close. To keep an eye on *you*, to make sure you haven't gotten any closer to what you're looking for. Can you at least tell me what you've been looking for? Or does that go against the oath as well?"

It seemed so painfully obvious, now that she had the context.

Draco shook his head. "That's not what's happening at all. I would know."

"That doesn't answer my question!"

Frustrated, he ground his jaw once more before answering. "My work involves...listening. I test the Aurors and report my findings back."

It was vague, but Hermione understood.

“And have you found anything yet?”

He didn’t speak, his mouth clamped firmly shut. Frustration welled inside of her. This was pointless—trying to work around his oath and not being able to get anywhere.

“We need to talk to Robards,” Draco finally said. Hermione stepped back in shock.

“Absolutely not!”

“We *have* to, Hermione. It’s the only way. It’s too late to pretend you don’t know now. And if you’ve attracted any kind of notice, he needs to know. He can protect you.”

Her hands curled into fists by her sides. He wasn’t getting it.

“I can take care of myself,” she replied tartly. “You may have forgotten, *Draco*, but I’m not helpless, nor am I inept. And Robards can’t know—if he’s the person behind all of this, that’ll do more harm than good and you know it.”

“He’s not what you think he is!”

“You don’t know that!”

“Actually, I do!”

“Did you even look at the things I’d found? The information I’d gathered? Robards has left a trail of destruction through the Ministry that no one knows about! There’s been a slew of employees who have quit or disappeared, right under his watch. He runs them out when they oppose him—he’s cleared house so it’s safe for him to stay in a position of power. It’s strategic. It’s *him*. ”

Draco’s features twisted into something cruel, his expression souring. “Have you ever considered that, perhaps, you don’t know *everything*? That just because you’ve done a bit of research, it doesn’t make you the most knowledgeable person on the subject? This is the reality in which I’ve lived for *years*. He was never involved in this. He only wants to finish it, the same as I do.”

The insult had her stepping back.

“How dare you insinuate—”

“I haven’t insinuated anything,” he cut her off. With slow, careful steps, he closed the distance between them. His voice was low when he continued. “It’s the same as you’ve always done. Running in to save the day with your *skill* and your *knowledge*. Assuming that the rest of us are idiots and that you’re the only person capable. I’ve never once doubted you, Hermione. Not even when I was filled with all of that misguided hatred as a child. But you joke about my ego while you blatantly refuse to see your own. You’re so blinded by it that you’re unwilling to really trust anyone but yourself.”

“That’s—that’s not true. That’s not true and we both know it.”

“Do we?” He let out a heavy, sharp sigh. “Or did you play at trusting me, so you could get close enough to figure out the mystery for your own ends?”

She had no answer, and his grey gaze saw right through her.

Continuing, he shook his head. "If you attracted any kind of attention...if the wrong person noticed that you were looking into me, or Robards..."

He trailed off, frustration filling his features. It mirrored her own.

"You want me to trust you, but you can't give me anything except half answers and vague warnings. You want me to go against everything I know, everything I've learned, to trust a man that you can't guarantee *isn't* the person we're looking for."

"There's no *we* in this," he assured her. "Not now, not anymore."

The pain that sliced through her at his words was so visceral she sucked in a gasp.

"You don't mean that. You can't."

He was silent for several long moments, but when he spoke again, he didn't address her statement. He looked towards the door to the hall, exhaustion beginning to pull at the edges of his expression. It was more than sadness, more than regret. He was *tired*. Tired of trying, or failing, she wasn't sure.

"You should go home and get some sleep. It's late."

In that moment, she saw him. She saw past the control. Past the power. Past his defenses, shrouded by Occlumency and distance and the understated elegance of his clothing. He was just another man. One that had failed her, and one she'd failed in return.

They were both guilty. But she wasn't the type to give up or accept failure so easily.

"We're not done, Draco. I'm not leaving until we figure this out together. Even if you hate me, even if you never want to see me again after this. But it's too late for anything else. I'm involved now, and I intend to see this through until the end."

"Fine," he sighed. "But whether or not you want to tell Robards, I have a duty to uphold. In the morning I'll go speak to him to see about destroying our binding contract. I won't be able to tell him what you know, but if he requests my memories or uses Legilimency, he'll see everything."

Unease filtered through her, but logically, she knew it was the only way. If she wanted to work with Draco instead of against him, they would have to be able to discuss everything, without the boundaries of his oath holding him back.

"Okay," she finally agreed. It wasn't ideal, but they would find a way to work around it.

He stepped around her and headed towards the door. Once at the threshold, he paused, not quite glancing back.

"You can stay in my room. I'll take the couch."

He didn't wait for her to respond before he walked away, and she nearly sank back to the floor in his absence.

Everything inside of her ached. Her heart, her stomach, her head. It was all too much, and despite her determination, it felt like she might very well fall apart at the seams.

This part of her life was supposed to be over. She'd earned her reprieve, and everything that came with life after winning the war. But Draco Malfoy had continued fighting on long after the rest of them had stopped. Silently fulfilling his duty when no one else knew. One that wasn't his to take on alone, that wasn't his weight to bear.

One that Gawain Robards had ensured he would be stuck with, likely using Draco's skills at Occlumency for his own gain while making sure the coast was clear for his own wrongdoings.

As she left his study and made her way down to Draco's bedroom, she considered it. Considered all the ways that Robards could have used his position of power to escape notice during the war, or the trials. An errant thought rattled at the back of her mind as she closed the bedroom door behind her with a soft *click*, setting her wand on the dresser before digging through the drawers to find one of Draco's oversized quidditch sweaters.

Wouldn't *someone* have caught on if Robards had been sympathizing with Voldemort or the Death Eaters? Surely it couldn't have gone unnoticed until now.

Her head pounded even harder, the after effects of all the crying and the intensity of their argument, compounded by jumping through multiple memories within the span of a few hours, and she let the thought go with a sigh and pulled his favorite shirt over her head. Draco would be angry at her for stealing his clothes to sleep in, but she didn't care. He could deal with it. Still angry, still full of grief, but she couldn't resist the way the scent of his clothing comforted her as she crawled into bed.

She couldn't figure out who she hated more. Herself or him. *No*, she thought instantly. *She hated Cordelia Malatesta the most*. That much was obvious.

Settling in, Hermione tried to steady her shaking hands by twisting them into the duvet. Tried to soothe her racing thoughts, running through everything she'd learned in the last few hours. Everything she'd said. Everything she'd heard. But no matter how hard she tried, no matter how much distance she tried to put between her heart and the pain of betrayal she'd seen on Draco's face, it was impossible.

Rolling over, she pulled one of his pillows tighter to her chest and tried again. She focused on the feeling of air in her lungs, and the soft surface of the mattress beneath her body.

In, out. In, out.

It didn't work. The only sound in Draco's flat was the heavy thump of her heart and the steady, controlled breaths in through her nose and out of her mouth as she tried to lull herself to a more relaxed state. Her eyelids were gritty and swollen, but sleep still eluded her.

She tossed and turned, hours passing by as her mind refused to settle. Over and over again, she played through the events of the night, then farther back. She relived every moment since that first meeting at The Scarlet Order, hearing his shocked voice on the other side of her blindfold.

"...*Granger?*"

Every memory weighed her down even further. Kept her body curled into a ball, clutching at Draco's pillow and surrounding herself with the scent of his cologne and soap.

Instead she focused on the good memories. The ones of his hands and his mouth, soothing her. Whispering promises against her skin that she didn't fully realize the weight of.

Emotion welled in her chest again, but it was a better ache. A bittersweet one. One that she held onto with both hands, gripping it as tight as she could. She would hold him to those promises. All of them.

Sometime in the early hours of dawn, her body gave in to the heavy pull of exhaustion. She sank into sleep, her mind still filled with thoughts of Draco. Robards. The Ministry. Death Eaters and magic, studied and sampled and taken.

Her dreams morphed, twisting into a hazy mix of personal memories and ones borrowed. Draco, sitting in on all the trials she'd witnessed as an employee of the DMLE. Smiling and winking at her as Robards cast his votes. *Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.*

Hermione, twisting around in Draco's sheets beneath his touch. Sheets turning to carpet. Pleasure turning to pain. A knife against her skin, a wand against her neck.

A file on her desk, duplicating. Photographs spilling from the folder, popping up from the floor like a burst of wings. The flap of paper, moving images surrounding her like a muggle film flipping to life in front of her eyes. Cordelia Malatesta laughing, her dark hair like a spot of ink. Adelaide Burke, her hands shaking as she cried on the stand. Wiping away tears with her knuckles—

Hermione awoke with a start, sitting up in bed as her heart pounded beneath her ribs. The scene from the dream played through her mind on a loop. Over and over again, highlighting the one thing she'd missed the night before.

Adelaide Burke, picking at her hands. Digging and rubbing at her knuckles until the skin became red and inflamed. The same thing she'd noticed on Beatrice.

They were connected. They had to be.

Hermione's heart raced even faster as she tossed the sheets off, her feet hitting the floor. She had to tell Draco—she had to see if he could help her connect the dots.

"Draco!" she called out into the flat. Judging by the early morning light filtering through the wide windows, it was just past sunrise. But the living room was empty. A pillow was left discarded on the sofa, still indented. A blanket rested on the cushions beside it, but that was the only sign of life.

"Draco?" Her voice echoed through the flat. He wasn't in the kitchen, either. *One of the bathrooms, then?*

As she continued her search, her mind began to catalogue the potential links between her knowledge.

Beatrice's eager offer to help her catalogue the research files. Her perfectly timed insight into Robards and his past. Her willingness to help Hermione without question, jumping in with enthusiastic assistance. Her strange reaction to Draco in her office. It cast a shadow of doubt on her

former theory. *Had* she stumbled onto a discovery with Robards, or had Beatrice led her to it on purpose? Could it be a simple coincidence, or was there more at play?

Draco wasn't in the guest bath, either. She didn't bother checking the guest bedroom on the second floor, already knowing that it would still be empty. He'd admitted to her during her first tour that he never considered having guests over, so he didn't make it a point to furnish the space. *I never saw the point in it. A home.* His words from the night before at her flat only sliced the wound back open. *How had it only been a matter of hours?*

Hesitation stilled Hermione's movements, the quiet settling around her heavily. Too quiet for anyone else to be inside the flat. No sounds of running water, or footsteps, or even light music. *Would he have left without her?* She rushed back to the living room to check the clock on the wall.

Nearing 7 AM. It wasn't out of the realm of possibilities.

Continuing to turn over her newfound theory, she headed back to his room to redress. She took several minutes to transfigure her muggle denims and shirt from the night before into a more appropriate set of trousers and a basic blouse, then headed into the bathroom to smooth back her curls.

The longer she considered it, the more suspicion burned inside of her. It was too similar, the way Beatrice's knuckles were constantly raw and dry, and the way she'd seen Adelaide picking at her skin. The same bloom of irritation, in the exact same spots. Even the day that Hermione had noticed the redness had faded, easily assuming Beatrice had used the salve she'd recommended, and then the reappearance of it the next time she'd seen her.

Polyjuice.

Hermione's hands stilled as she finished plaiting her hair, tying it off before leaning forward to grip the edge of the marble sink.

The toffee offer that day in the archives. The way she— Beatrice hadn't been looking at the candy in disgust. No, she had been looking at *Hermione* in disgust. Offered something by a muggleborn. It was the same expression that Hermione had seen as a child, right before someone spit the word *mudblood* at her.

Ice cold horror suffused her veins, chilling her skin and slowing everything around her to a standstill until it all faded away.

How had she not noticed?

Another memory floated to the surface of her consciousness. One of Draco's this time.

"It might be beneficial to call for another hand. Someone who knows the theoretical magic."

Adelaide Burke.

More memories catalogued themselves instantly, filling in the gaps.

Cordelia's instant, consuming fury at Adelaide's testimony. Thrashing about as she accused her of being a traitor. Of betraying her. So much so that it sidelined the entire trial, right then and there.

Adelaide had been involved from the start. Perhaps not as the head of the operation, but close enough that she would have had a hand, no matter what. A willing hand, pulled back at the right moment so as to not be seen.

Her mentor.

The photographs in Robards' office made it clear enough. They worked together, whether Adelaide was caught or not. Whether it was obvious, Adelaide obviously shared her boss' sentiments regarding muggleborns.

Was she the one left behind? Was Beatrice actually Adelaide Burke?

It felt too right, the pieces sliding together too easily, to be a mere coincidence. Draco and Robards knew that there were likely remaining supporters within the Ministry, and had set out on a path to quietly flush them out. They'd likely known that Cordelia couldn't be working alone, but why would anyone choose to stay behind after she was caught? Why would Adelaide choose to disguise herself as an old woman and hide herself down in the Ministry archives? Wouldn't it have made more sense to flee? To start a new life, far away from the one place where she could be caught?

Grabbing her wand and shoes, Hermione realized she needed to catch up with Draco as soon as possible. If he was already meeting with Robards it could be too late. They needed to know—she needed to tell Draco, to have him use Legilimency or to pull the memories from her mind as proof that the two women were connected.

As she strode towards his floo, her hand already outstretched for the small container of powder he kept on the mantle, her eyes flitted around the space in an instinctual check. It was the same thing she did at home, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything and that the wards around her flat were set and secure.

The front door was unlocked.

That was odd.

Not that she'd paid any particular mind to the front door, considering they always used his floo to come and go. Truthfully, she rarely used her own, save for a few muggle deliveries here and there. *Perhaps Draco had stepped out to check something and simply forgotten?* The evening before was a blur of emotion and memories, but she couldn't pinpoint an opportunity where he would have needed to use the door.

Unless it had been last night, after she'd gone to bed, or sometime that morning.

"Draco?" she called out one last time, certainty settling in when there was no answer. He must have left quickly and missed it.

With a quick flick of her wand, the locks clicked into place, and she grabbed a fistful of floo powder.

"The Ministry of Magic!" she called out, dropping the sandy ashes into a rush of green flames.

Hermione stepped through the employee floo entrance into a quiet atrium. The daily rush of employees wouldn't arrive for another hour, but there were still a few early risers milling about on their way up to the offices or stopping by the cart that sold coffee and pastries.

Flashing a quick smile to a few witches and wizards that she recognized, she hurried to the lifts. An empty one arrived immediately and she stepped in, jabbing the buttons for the doors to close before someone else could join her.

Blessedly, they shut quickly, and she was alone. In the silence, her adrenaline surged. Her hands twitched by her sides, her wand heavy in the pocket of her transfigured trousers. A sense of urgency propelled her, restless energy spurring her to pace through the lift. She twitched when it shuddered and jolted to the side then up again, flying up to the floor that housed the DMLE.

Beneath the panic, guilt clawed at her throat. Draco had been right. It wasn't Robards at all. She'd even had the thought the night before—*someone* would have noticed Robards' sympathies, sooner or later. His memories would have been pulled for the Wizengamot committee, and his wand would have been tested for dark magic regularly.

"Come on, come on..." she murmured to herself, willing the lift to go a little faster. She tapped her foot, impatient as the small indicator dial above the door crept closer to her destination.

She had been so blinded by her own bias from the beginning, assuming that Draco had been up to no good, that it hadn't occurred to her that the rest of her theorizing might have been tainted by the same school of thought. She'd ignored every other sign. Robards was her *boss*, for Merlin's sake. He was incredibly and notoriously thorough in every way. Always making sure their cases were ironclad, and ruling his department to the truest, most just word of magical law. And if he had been working with Draco to flush out sympathizers, *of course* there would be a trail. But the people affected wouldn't have been the poor, innocent Ministry employees like she'd been led to believe.

And Beatrice—*no, Adelaide*, Hermione corrected—had positioned herself perfectly. Disguised as a harmless old woman, coming to help at just the right moment. Playing on Hermione's famous need to help the wronged... She could have laughed at her stupidity, had it not been so painful.

She had been played for a fool, and once again, she failed to do the one thing she'd promised. To trust Draco. Over and over again, she'd failed.

Finally, the doors separated, and she darted through before they could open fully. With hurried steps she headed towards Robards' office, slowing down only so that she could keep a keen eye to her surroundings. Not arousing suspicion, but checking through the empty offices with quick glances on her way through. Down the hall past her own office and around the corner, through the bank of cubicles for the Auror teams and the conference rooms, everything was quiet. Few lights were on, but it was peaceful.

It made her feel even more uneasy.

Robards' door was closed when she reached it, her stomach and heart fluttering with the same nervous energy. Even her knocks sounded rushed and uneven, a sporadic pounding instead of light taps.

Her pulse thumped as the time passed. Silence built. Nothing. She knocked again, harder this time.

"Robards?" she called, hoping he was just busy. Hoping they were both inside, deep into conversation instead of answering the door.

No answer.

A cheerful voice from down the hall startled her, making her jump back from the door as if it had burned her.

“Hey, Hermione. You’re in early this morning.” Sam stood with a paper cup in his hand, the contents steaming as he took a quick sip. “Come to suffer with the rest of us on the dawn shift?”

“Oh, hey, Sam,” she replied with a forced smile. “Have you seen Robards this morning? Or Draco?”

With a nod, he motioned over his shoulder. “Ahh, I can’t speak for Robards, but I saw Malfoy a bit ago.”

Everything inside her stilled. “You did?”

“Yeah, maybe an hour ago? An hour and a half? Was surprised to see him here, honestly. It’s the only reason I noticed.”

“Where is he?” Her voice grew tighter, sharpening with urgency. “Did you see where he was heading?”

Sam’s face clouded with concern. “Ah, yeah, I saw him in the atrium, actually. He grabbed one of the lifts ahead of me. He was with that woman—”

Panic spiked inside her, but Sam continued, unaware.

“—from the archives. The older one?”

“Beatrice,” her reply was more of a whisper, exhaling the shock and alarm that was coursing through her veins. “Beatrice.”

She wasn’t sure if she was talking to herself or Sam any longer, but he answered anyway.

“Yeah, that’s the one. But it was weird, they didn’t head down to the archives—the lift went up instead. Not sure where they could’ve gone.”

The Department of Mysteries.

Her mouth was dry, her hands so cold they felt numb, but the only thing she could register was the fear that took over every instinct in her body.

She was too late.

“Is everything okay?” Sam asked slowly, and Hermione had to blink in order for her vision to focus enough to look at him.

“No,” she answered after a thick swallow, pulling her wand out. “Call Robards, now. Tell him—” Something pulled at her tongue, pushing at her lips and jaw until it shut entirely, grinding down by the force of the magic that bound her. In her silence, Sam grew more alarmed.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?”

She could only shake her head, trying to find the words, *any* words, that she could say. *He’s the only one who can help. The only one who will know what we’re up against.* The man she’d

mistakenly accused was the one she would have to trust now.

“Tell Robards,” she ground out through her teeth, trying again as she backed up towards the lifts. She couldn’t waste any more time. “There’s an emergency. Send him to the Department of Mysteries. He’ll know. Get Harry too. Now!”

The last thing she saw before turning was the look of shock that overtook his features, but she couldn’t say more. Her lips clamped shut, and she took off at a full run.

Chapter End Notes

WELL. That was a bitch to write, but here we are. We made it. Sort of. Almost? Please don't hate me. There's still three chapters to go and plenty of resolution left.

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 14

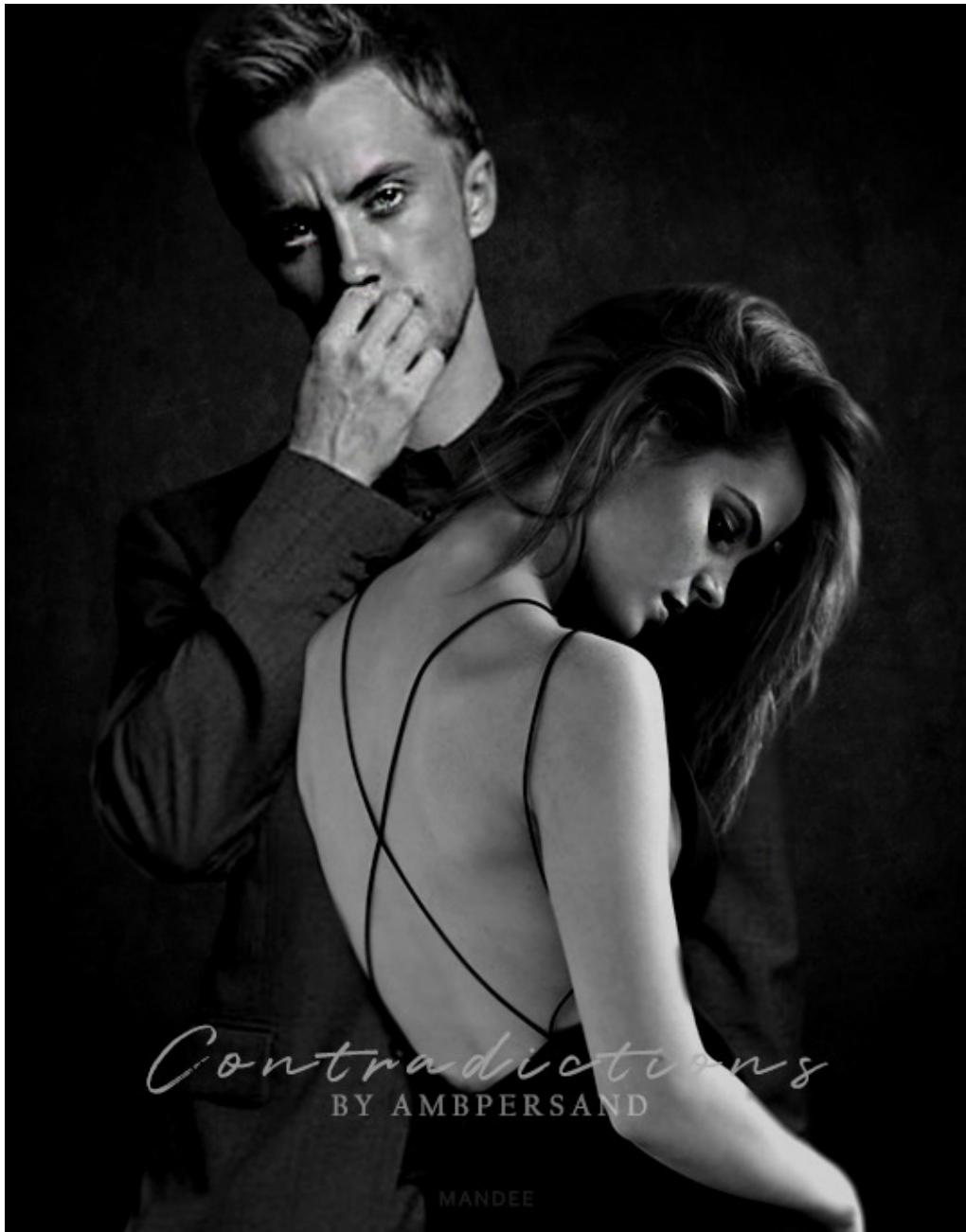
Chapter Notes

It's a Sexy December 28th miracle! Happy early update, since you've all been so wonderful about that cliffhanger I left you on and the extended wait.

A giant hug and forehead smooch to my Brit, who worked tirelessly through her holiday trip to get this beta'd for you all.

Graphic by the incredible Mandee.

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



The ding of the lift echoed through the empty hall.

"*Department of Mysteries*," the disembodied voice filtered from above, setting Hermione's teeth on edge. With her wand gripped tight in her palm, she stepped out. It had been years since she'd been inside the DoM—the last time she'd come to help Harry, and they'd lost Sirius in turn.

She couldn't lose Draco, too.

With her heart thumping heavy beneath her ribs, she set one foot in front of the other. She crept down the hall towards where she knew the Entrance room to be, with its twelve black doors all arranged in a circle. Emotion tightened her throat as it came into view, memories from that night flaring to life right before her eyes.

The Brain Room. The Death Chamber. The Time Chamber. The Hall of Prophecies. *The Veil.*

The doors were all gleaming and polished, seemingly untouched. The floor still looked like it was made of a sheet of glass over dark water, and not the reflective, flawless marble she knew it to be. There was no sign of life, of anything, despite the scorch marks and destruction she and the Order had left behind years before. Silence grew thick around her, eerie in its stillness, and she stepped into the centre of the room and simply waited. The knowledge of what was about to happen was only slightly soothing to the nerves that were coursing through her veins.

The sconces on the wall, flickering with blue flames, were the first indication of movement. The circular room started its rotation, the same as the first time they'd stepped inside. It sped up until the flames were a blur of light, the sound of the walls grinding and sending slight tremors through the floor. She shut her eyes, trying not to grow dizzy, and waited until the sound began to die down before cracking them open. Once everything had stilled back into silence, she turned on her heel to survey her options.

She knew what was behind a few of the doors, but not all. Taking stock of her options, she knew the odds were against her. Time was of the essence but she couldn't risk a single wrong move, considering she had no backup and there was no telling how long it might take Harry or Robards to catch up to her.

Just like the first time, she would have to be careful. But this time, she would need to leave a trail.

Approaching the first door, she pulled her wand up in preparation for what she might find. She adjusted her grip, and took a deep breath before opening the door.

She immediately went still at the sight of the familiar stone dias and archway in the centre of the room. Her throat caught, chest constricting into a painful knot, but she pushed past the immediate onslaught of memories. The shouted curses, the flashing lights of spells. Instead it was empty, no traces of life or blood anywhere. The gauzy white veil fluttered from an invisible breeze, but she couldn't hear the telltale whispers from her vantage point so far away.

One less danger.

Relief felt heavy on her shoulders, loosening the tension beneath her ribs just slightly, and she quickly shut the door before speaking the spell and marking the door with a wide X.

"Flagrate."

She barely waited for the sparks to clear before backing up several steps, the room beginning to spin before her wand was completely lowered. The sconces blurred and her hair kicked up in the artificial breeze from the movement around her. Once it slowed, she stepped forward, wand at the ready.

The second door was locked tight and warded heavily. Casting several detection charms, it was clear that the warding spells hadn't been altered in any way. They were solid protective barriers, but not fresh magic by any means. It had long since settled into the wood of the door, imbibing it completely. She could see it burning a dull red beneath her wand, but the edges were blurred by time. From her experience, Hermione knew there was no way Beatrice could have cast something so advanced if she were in a hurry *and* keeping someone else under control. Especially Draco, who had the skills and experience to know how to ward off an attack.

Fear curled in her stomach at the thought of just *how* Beatrice could be controlling him. She hadn't stopped to let herself consider it completely, but Draco had admitted to a room full of Aurors that he was skilled enough in Occlumency to resist the Imperius curse. He was an advanced dueler, and could cast nonverbal and even some wandless charms. He *should* have been able to take Beatrice without any issue.

Unless she'd taken him by surprise, or managed to get some kind of hold on him—some kind of leverage that had him following her willingly into the depths of the Ministry, straight to his certain demise.

There was no question that *that* was the end goal. To kill Draco, and probably Hermione herself. There could be other motivations at play, especially if Beatrice was indeed Adelaide Burke, but Hermione knew from her time in the DMLE that there were few things more dangerous than a witch or wizard who knew they were about to be caught. Driven to the edge, Beatrice would be reckless and unhinged, and likely willing to take more risks than any sane person would otherwise.

Backing up, Hermione marked the second door before checking the third. Inside, mirrors stretched as far as she could see. As the door creaked open, the light bounced off the first, following down the hall as it slowly illuminated. On and on it went, until the very end became a blur of light and reflection. It glowed a strange golden hue, and the energy in the room began to pulse the longer the door was open.

Not that one, either.

Stepping back, she repeated the process quickly, marking the door with the same X as the first two. The room spun again, around and around, and she waited, losing precious time.

A fourth was locked. Then, the fifth as well. She marked them both quickly.

Hermione spotted it just as she reached out to open the sixth door. A chip in the paint, down in the corner. Almost unnoticeable from a distance, but it stood out like a beacon once her attention caught on the small detail. Her heart stuttered, her hand stilling in the air. She pulled her wand back to cast another detection charm.

The wards were broken, dissolved and burned away into near nothingness. Only the frayed edges of magic remained, sputtering and flickering dimly beneath her wand. Once locked just as tightly as the other three warded doors, it was clear that this one was recently busted through.

Her fingers grew cold. This was it—this was the one they'd gone through, and she knew it without a doubt. Quickly, she stepped forward to press her ear against the cold surface, but there was no sound from the other side. No murmur of voices or the buzz of magic, and she backed up, ready to keep moving forward.

A quick charm shot sparks against the door, marring the paint even further. She did it three times, arching her wand through the air until it was clear. A scorched *H*.

Whipping the door open, she came to a stop almost immediately. Deceptively normal, the hall that stretched out before her looked almost identical to some of the halls down on the lower levels. Similar halls twisted through the entire Ministry, and even her own department, with sporadic, plain doors on either side. At the end it appeared to shift left, leading somewhere she couldn't track.

A foreboding feeling settled in her stomach. *Was this where Adelaide and Cordelia conducted their research?* Hermione knew, logically, that the entirety of the Department of Mysteries wasn't composed of mysterious chambers or rooms of strange experiments. Unspeakables or not, normal witches and wizards came up here every single day to work, and this had to be where they did it.

Hesitantly, she stepped through the threshold but as soon as she cleared the door frame, the door itself slammed shut behind her. She started forward, holding her wand closer to her chest, but the sound didn't seem to draw any attention. None of the doors in the hallway opened, and no employees stuck their heads out at the commotion. Dim lights lit the hall from above, but there was no sign of life outside of the sound of her own heavy breathing.

Every step deeper into the hall only confirmed her suspicions that she'd found the office area for the DoM. Small windows in each door gave her a quick peek inside—one seemed to be a normal office, and another appeared to be a conference room, stocked with the same furniture they used in the DMLE. A third looked like a lounge, with a small kitchenette and a table surrounded by six chairs.

The sudden shock of normalcy only unsettled her further.

She continued to pass them by, searching for anyone, *anything* to indicate that she was getting close to finding Draco.

It wasn't until she rounded the corner that she found it.

A body, crumpled on the floor.

With a gasp, Hermione rushed forward, reaching to pull the man up into a sitting position. His head lolled to the side, his jaw lax. There was no blood on his clothing, but he didn't appear to be breathing, either.

She smacked his cheek a few times, but he didn't rouse. She shook him by the shoulders. Still nothing.

"Come on... Wake up..."

Struggling to keep quiet, she pulled out her wand and whispered a reviving spell.

"*Rennervate.*"

He didn't respond. Her heart sank at the realisation, and she knew before she slid her fingers around to his neck that she wouldn't find a pulse.

Shite. Her panic only grew, and she raised herself back to standing. With every passing second, her breathing grew shorter, every heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her vision swam for a brief second, the hall tilting and sliding to the side, and she screwed her eyes closed.

She needed to remain calm. Logical. Reasonable.

Just because one man was dead didn't mean that Draco was too.

She wasn't too late. She couldn't be too late.

She would stop Beatrice, even if *she* had to die doing it.

Opening her eyes, she pressed forward.

Her pace increased, darting from door to door as she ducked beneath the windows, taking as much care as she could not to be seen. If Beatrice had the skill and wherewithal to break into Draco's flat, take him hostage through the Ministry undetected, get through the wards in the DoM, *and* kill an employee? Her odds didn't look good, even with her experience and abilities.

She froze mid-step at a muffled sound from the next door ahead, her feet pulling her closer to the wall as she crouched down low. With a racing heart, she slowly stepped closer.

A voice. *A woman's voice.* Agitation imbued the words, an angry half-shout, and something slammed against the wall. Hermione jumped, tightening her fists, and sucked in a deep breath as she waited. A muffled curse followed, then another light thump... Then silence. It stretched on as Hermione waited, and she could only hope that if it *was* Beatrice, that she had left the room completely.

Lowering herself beneath the edge of the window in the door, Hermione peered through the glass. A stunned cry pulled at the back of her throat from a mixture of horrified shock and relief at the sight inside.

Draco.

His unconscious body lay draped across a table, his skin a pallid shade of white. Healer charms glowed above him, flickering in a rainbow of colours. Blue, green, orange, red. Overlapping, it was almost impossible to tell where one stopped and another began.

From her distance, she couldn't read them, but what was even more alarming was the large gash that ran down the inside of his forearm as it hung off the side of the table. His bicep was tied off with a crude-looking tourniquet, his shirt ripped and torn at the elbow. A rough wound sliced right through the marred, blurred remainder of his Dark Mark, and blood flowed freely from the cut, down his fingers, and into a black stone basin placed on the floor below.

Nausea crept up her throat. He wasn't even strapped down. It could only mean one thing—Beatrice didn't expect him to fight back.

Though Hermione was certain she'd heard the sound of the woman's voice just moments before, the room appeared to be otherwise empty. Raising her hand to the door handle, she quietly pushed her way through, holding her breath as she slipped in and closed it behind her.

Once inside, the scene became clear. Two other doors were set against the wall at the back of the room, on opposite ends. Between it stood a row of cabinets and a countertop, filled to the brim with a variety of glass jars. Varying sizes were stacked together, full of murky looking liquids and mysterious substances. A stand of medical supplies was to her left, and to her right was a desk, stacked tall with rolls of parchment and textbooks. Some old, some new; it was clear that whoever worked inside the room was performing some kind of research.

Not just a room, or an office, but a *lab*.

A large piece of parchment was stuck to the wall, with some kind of data graphed across it. It was almost impossible to decode at a quick glance, and Hermione forced herself to ignore it in favour of rushing to Draco's side.

"Draco," she hissed, her hands finding his cheeks. His skin was cold to the touch. "Draco, wake up."

He didn't respond, and her fear grew. Though his blood was still dripping slowly into the onyx bowl by her feet, she knew he had to be alive.

"Draco, please," she begged, her fingers sliding below his jaw to find his pulse. His skin was slick with sweat, but it was there. Faint and weak, it rippled irregularly beneath her fingers. "Come on... Come on..."

Tearing the tourniquet from his bicep, she replaced it lower on his arm, tying it across the wound instead to try to stem the blood flow. Once in place, she tucked his arm against his chest and grabbed her wand.

"*Rennervate.*"

His eyes drifted open. He blinked slowly, struggling, but he couldn't seem to focus. His eyelids seemed heavy, pulling back down, and his head rolled to the side when he tried to pull himself closer to awareness.

"Her...mione?" His voice was little more than a raspy whisper, the sound an arrangement of broken syllables as he heaved out a heavy breath. His hand lifted, reaching through the air, but it dropped back to his lap well short of his intended target.

Relief washed away some of the sour taste on her tongue, and she stepped forward to press her lips against his forehead. He was cold, so cold, that it felt like she'd placed her mouth against a frozen pane of glass. "I'm here, Draco. Hold on. Where's your wand?"

Her words only seemed to confuse him, and his head dropped to the side as he struggled to regain consciousness. "The woman—the one—she—"

"I know," she cut him off, keeping her voice low. "It's Beatrice. She's Adelaide Burke. She was leading me down a false trail—"

"She's coming..." Draco groaned. "There's a man—she made... She made me..."

When his words faded, she smoothed his damp hair back.

"I know, I saw him. But I need to know where your wand is. Do you have it?"

It was a shot in the dark, she knew. But she would need every advantage she could get.

"Magic... Taking—She's trying..."

His eyes were growing unfocused, his eyelids growing heavier with each blink.

Forcing herself to ignore the bubbling fear at Draco's incoherent gasps, Hermione drew her wand. She cleared her mind, thinking back to every happy moment she could gather.

Reading on the beach as a child with her mother. The sun heavy on her shoulders, and her father teasing her about sprouting more freckles like seedlings in the garden.

The day she received her Hogwarts letter, and Minerva's kind smile from her doorstep.

The feel of Draco's lips against hers as he wrapped the ruby bracelet around her wrist, every emotion pouring from her chest and into the kiss, mixing between them until it was clear. Until what they had was undeniable.

It was love.

Through everything, it was the purest love she'd ever known. What started as an exercise in dedication and trust, she had no question that what had come from their original arrangement was genuine. It had only been a matter of time.

She was in love with him. Despite their pasts. Despite everything they'd both been through. Despite what they had both hidden from each other—it was love. Perhaps not perfect, but theirs alone. And she wouldn't stop fighting for him, or it, until this was finished.

It brought heavy tears to her eyes, gathering in her eyelashes, and she cast the charm.

"Expecto Patronum."

Blue light burst from the tip of her wand, swirling like smoke into a corporeal otter. It flipped and floated through the air, looking at her as it awaited her command.

"Find Harry Potter, tell him to find the door with the H—we don't have much time. I need—"

"Reducto!"

Beatrice's scream of fury cut off the message, and Hermione turned so quickly she couldn't be sure if her patronus was able to get away. Yellow light fizzed past her head, and she dropped her body to the floor just in time for it to singe the edges of her hair.

"You stupid bitch!" Beatrice screeched, sending another hex flying toward her. Hermione ducked behind a nearby chair, popping up long enough to throw up a shield charm to buy her a few moments of protection. "You could never mind your own business, could you?"

"Stop!" Hermione shouted. "It's over!"

A purple blast of magic slammed into Hermione's shielding charm, and she braced herself against the sudden force.

"Oh no," Beatrice laughed. "I think it's *only just beginning*."

Each word was accompanied by several more balls of magic, popping and sizzling against her shield.

If there was any doubt left in her mind regarding her theory, it was confirmed by the way Beatrice continued to scream at her, throwing hexes and spells between threats.

"I can't believe I finally get to be the one to finally kill you. After so long—it's just a shame that Cordelia isn't here to see it. I know how badly she wanted to be the one to do it."

"Why are you doing this?!" Hermione shouted over the commotion, jumping up when the chair she'd taken shelter behind melted into a pile of mangled metal and scorched leather.

"Deprimo!"

“Stupify!”

They both threw their spells and shields up at the same time, ducking and dancing around the room. For all of her fury, Beatrice didn't seem to care enough to answer.

“*Reducto!*” Hermione shouted, trying to cover herself and Draco's body with her shield, but it wasn't enough.

Beatrice sneered and twisted her wand through the air. “*Deprimo!*”

The force of the blast sent Hermione flying backwards through the air, her body slamming into several metal cabinets before sliding to the ground. The air rushed from her lungs, heaving out as she curled into a ball from the impact.

Beatrice's cold, cruel laughter echoed around her. Hermione struggled back to her feet, gasping for air.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Beatrice dodged it easily, and continued to laugh. “Still using those baby spells they taught you at Hogwarts? It's amazing you even made it past your first year. I always figured you were a disgusting little cheat.”

Her own anger began to brew inside her, overtaking the myriad of emotions that made her stomach burn. Shock at Beatrice's sudden hatred after hiding it so well. Fear for Draco's survival. Guilt at her inability to see it all before it was too late.

“Shut up!” Hermione shouted. “It's over—I know who you really are!”

There was no sense in reasoning with her, no sense in trying to find some sort of common ground. There was none.

Beatrice's eyes went wild, her grey hair frizzing out of her bun and her lips pulling back from her teeth as she smiled. She didn't lower her wand, but a sick look of satisfaction bloomed across her features.

“Well look who's finally caught up. Maybe the Mudblood isn't so stupid after all.”

Beatrice didn't wait for Hermione to absorb the easy confession, and quickly sent another hex at her. It hit a glass jar behind Hermione as she dodged again. Glass shards rained down, liquid spilling out and dripping onto the floor.

They circled each other around the room, sending curses and spells flying in sharp flashes of light.

Hermione began to pant, growing breathless from the exertion and the drain on her magic. It had been too long since she'd duelled—too long since her days with Dumbledore's Army or on the run when she was always at the ready for the worst.

And though her reflexes were fast, Beatrice's were faster. She was fueled by fury, her magic spilling through her wand at full force. It was clear she was a woman possessed by revenge, and she sent hexes that knocked Hermione back again and again.

Planting her feet apart, Hermione whipped her wand through the air.

“*Impedimentia!*”

Beatrice twisted out of the way just in time.

“*Crucio!*”

Instead of hitting Hermione, the curse slammed into Draco’s limp body. He seized, contorting on the table before going slack once more. The flickering charms above his body began to pulse with more light.

Beatrice laughed again. “That’ll be you next, bitch.”

She sent several curses through the air, growing even more agitated when Hermione managed to block or displace them. Hermione conjured a group of arrows and sent them flying across the room, one snagging into Beatrice’s shoulder.

Shrieking in pain, she wrenched it free before tossing it to the ground. She stalked closer, and Hermione knocked over a nearby chair, pushing it with her foot into Beatrice’s path. They were going around and around, never gaining any ground or traction against each other.

Hermione didn’t want to have to use dark spells—she needed Beatrice alive so she could prove that she was actually Adelaide. But if she had to take her unconscious, she would.

“*Diffindo!*”

The hex sliced across Beatrice’s face, cutting through her lips and up her cheek before she could move fast enough. Blood began to well, and she spat it toward Hermione.

“I’m going to make you pay for that one,” she threatened before flicking her wand toward Hermione’s. She didn’t have time to relaunch her *protego*, and her wand flew into the air.

Beatrice snatched it in her fist as it fell, then snapped it clean in half.

Shock flashed through Hermione. It was easy to forget in the heat of the fight that Beatrice wasn’t actually an elderly woman who puttered around in the basement all day, but a fully capable witch who had worked for the most magically advanced department in the entire Ministry.

Without a wand, Hermione was sure to lose.

“Just tell me why,” Hermione argued, trying to buy herself some time. “Why send me after Robards? I never would have noticed you if you hadn’t made it known.”

Beatrice’s laugh was loud and dry.

“Because—you disgusting little cretin—I *knew* that you were looking for something. It was obvious, how you were digging about down in the archives with no real reason.”

She spat the words toward Hermione, sending a stunning spell alongside it without pause. Hermione ducked, grabbing the nearest item—a glass jar filled with a viscous green substance, and threw it with all her might.

Beatrice dodged it easily, waving it out of the air with a flick of her wand. “You’ve never known how to mind your own fucking business, and I knew that it was only a matter of time until you got

too close. I knew you would be a problem—”

Hermione scrambled to find more things to defend herself with, sending them flying across the room and hoping that it wouldn’t hit Draco instead. A bottle of clear liquid. A ceramic container, filled with metal instruments. A heavy reference text. One after the other, Beatrice sent them smashing to the ground as they circled each other.

Beatrice took a moment to catch her breath, swiping her wand up. In a flash, all of the remnants that Hermione had thrown towards her shot up through the air. Jagged glass, ceramic shards, and metal pieces all hovered in stasis, pointed directly at Hermione.

Beatrice’s mouth stretched wide.

“I was hoping you would go on another one of your famous little crusades and get yourself fired. I was ready to leave the evidence for Robards to find, too. I was so fucking close—you would have ruined your own reputation for me, had you not gotten involved with *him*. ”

With a jut of her chin towards Draco’s nearly lifeless body, Beatrice sent every piece of shrapnel raining down on them both.

Hermione couldn’t move fast enough. She turned, twisting her body and dropping her weight so hard that the air rushed from her lungs with a painful *smack*.

It was only a brief distraction from the sudden and intense pain that sliced across her skin. Her back, her shoulders, her exposed cheek—all cut through with stunning efficiency.

The sound of her scream was lost in the clatter of glass and Beatrice’s high-pitched laugh.

Her skin burned as she moved, struggling to stand. Pain blurred the edges of her vision, but she knew she couldn’t give in—there was no time. The skin on her arms and spine stretched and pulled open as hot, fresh blood tracked from the wounds, but she gritted her teeth against it all.

She felt a bead of it sliding down her cheek, catching at the edge of her lip, but her focus wasn’t on herself or her own pain.

Draco, still unconscious, had suffered even worse. Red cuts marred his face and neck, the fabric of his shirt ripped to shreds. Blood gathered at the surface, but it didn’t flow as freely as hers.

Hermione looked back up at Beatrice, the pressure of her rage building inside her chest with stunning clarity. It eradicated everything else—the fear, the guilt, the doubt—and made her path clear. Everything in her mind went silent, with only the sound of her heavy breathing matching the tempo of her heartbeat. She could feel it against her skin, thumping in her fingertips, and it spurred her forward. One step in front of the other, timed with her pulse, she stalked Beatrice around the table.

Beatrice watched as Hermione approached, her features twisting from maddened amusement into suspicion. A sneer pulled at the edges of her lips, but she didn’t drop her wand.

“You really don’t give up, do you?”

Hermione only laughed in response, channeling her own anger.

No. She did not.

Alone, and without a wand, Hermione couldn't duel Beatrice. Even with a wand, trying to do so while protecting Draco in the middle of the room was a nearly impossible task.

There was one thing she could do, though. One thing that Beatrice likely wouldn't expect.

She could fight like a muggle.

"Tell me why," Hermione demanded, stepping over the chair she'd thrown in the way. Beatrice began to back up, but Hermione didn't give her time to question what was about to happen. "You're going to kill us anyway, that's clear enough. You could have been *free*. You could have disappeared completely. But now you've thrown it away for nothing."

"You don't know *anything*," Beatrice hissed, throwing a halfhearted hex toward Hermione, but she blocked the worst of it with her arm. It burned, but no more than any of her other wounds.

Gritting her teeth, Hermione forced a shrug. Each step brought them closer, and it was clear that Hermione's refusal to back down was taking Beatrice by surprise.

"Then enlighten me. What was your grand plan, exactly? Do you actually think you'll walk out of here after this? That I haven't already called for help?"

"*Shut up!*" Beatrice screeched. "*Shut up!*"

In response, Hermione laughed, her best impression to echo the madness that Beatrice was so clearly imbued with. She would need to drive her closer to the edge, until she grew so angry that she was sloppy and careless.

"You wasted your time hiding, and now you're grasping at straws!" Hermione shouted in return. "We both know it. You're sad, and pathetic, waiting around in the basement of the Ministry—"

With an agonised yell, Beatrice twisted her wand through the air. She sent spells flying, flashes of orange and red and yellow, but only one landed. It hit Hermione in the stomach, sizzling through her shirt and settling against the skin of her ribs, but Hermione didn't reward her with proof of her pain.

"You thought you were important, didn't you? You thought that—"

"*I am!*" Beatrice shouted, stumbling back as the heel of her shoe landed on some of the debris that littered the floor. "I am important, and I'm the last one left! This was our plan all along. That I would *wait* for Cordelia, because someone needed to. Everyone else is gone—run off or locked up, but I was smart enough to know how to not get caught. *I* was the one Cordelia trusted, the one who helped her discover the magic—"

Hermione smiled, spitting some of the blood that had gathered against her lips.

"Is that what she told you? You didn't *matter*, and you still don't," Hermione countered, carelessly interrupting her. "Has she even contacted you? Written you any letters? Honestly, you think *I'm* the stupid mudblood, but—"

"*I* was supposed to be the one to carry on her work! To make sure that it didn't get destroyed!" Beatrice pointed her wand at Hermione's chest, stopping suddenly. "And you just sped up the timeline."

Stillness settled through Hermione's limbs. It had been one thing to assume that's what was happening, but to hear Beatrice admit it so freely, and without guilt... Goosebumps tracked down Hermione's spine in a heavy shudder. She must not have hidden her shock well enough because Beatrice's smile returned.

"We always thought you would be the perfect test subject. To start with The Golden Girl herself? We would have made an example of you—but it only would have been the beginning," Beatrice sneered before turning back to Draco. She dragged her wand through the air and tapped it delicately on his chest. Once. Twice. Three times. He was barely breathing. "But I do have to admit there's something special about taking this blood traitor's magic instead."

Hermione slowed her steps, taking advantage of Beatrice's distraction. She was almost close enough to touch.

"Why kill him then?"

Hermione knew she was playing dumb—it was obvious. But every angry word, every maddened shout, was exactly what she needed to hear. *A confession*. One that would be irrefutable once she offered up her memories.

Beatrice turned back to Hermione, blinking her eyes wide with faux innocence. "Oh, you stupid little slag, I only plan to kill *you*. I intend to make an example out of him."

The words caught in Hermione's throat, but she pushed past it. The tang of blood was bitter on her tongue.

"An example?"

Beatrice took a moment to cast a wistful look around the room. Hermione let her take her time, knowing every second she stalled was another second closer to backup arriving.

"All I needed was the opportunity to get back up here, to recover the remainder of our research that that idiot Robards never found. I was willing to be patient, to bide my time until the moment was right, because the magic is so temperamental, you see... It requires a series of spells in just the right order, under the right conditions to work, and I couldn't finish it without that *right there*."

She pointed towards one of the books on the desk nearby with her wand, at one Hermione had mistakenly assumed was a textbook. Right in front of her eyes, it transformed into a battered looking journal, the black leather wrinkled and misshapen from age and use.

"Cordelia's notes," Hermione sighed in answer. It was so simple, a spell to disguise the notebook as something plain and unassuming. It had probably been tucked away at the back of a drawer for the last five years, hidden by a Notice-Me-Not. "This was *your* lab, not hers."

Beatrice turned back with a smirk. "Exactly. And considering just how well I played my part—the *poor, scared assistant*—no one thought twice about searching my things. Once that spell is complete, I'll drag his body down to the atrium and dump him in front of the fountain for everyone to see. I might be doomed, but he'll have to live the rest of his life knowing that *this* was his payment for betraying us. My only regret is that he won't be awake long enough to hear you scream when I kill you."

Hermione chanced a look over at Draco, the spells above his body still flickering. Different symbols floated around, a combination of numbers and runes revealing magical and medical data that Hermione couldn't quite read. They weren't any runes or spells she recognized, which meant that the easiest way to cut them off would be to get rid of the source itself—Beatrice.

She only had to hope it wasn't too late.

"Can I ask you one last question?" Hermione asked with a wince, letting the pain show through as she grabbed her injured arm. "If you're going to kill me anyway—"

Beatrice rolled her eyes. "Spit it out so I can be done with you."

"If your last name is Burke, then I'm assuming you're one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight?"

Beatrice stilled, lifting one brow. "And?"

Hermione swallowed and licked her lips, but her cheek had seemed to have stopped bleeding. It still throbbed painfully, and she squinted for effect.

"Then I'm assuming that in all of that pureblood society training, no one ever taught you how to properly fight."

Hermione didn't wait for Beatrice's response, and capitalised on the confusion that flashed across her features. With every bit of strength in her tired, battered body, she rushed Beatrice.

Her shoulder slammed into Beatrice's abdomen, the muffled sound of their bodies colliding lost in the noise of a shout. Hermione's or Beatrice's, she couldn't be sure. Pain erupted across her body, the cuts on her skin pulling and the burning sensation from the hexes and spells reigniting from the force.

Beatrice twisted, stepping back, but Hermione was already in motion. Using her arms, she wrapped them around Beatrice's middle, pushing with all her might until they were stuck in a free fall.

For a moment, everything went still.

They fell through the air, Beatrice screaming and twisting as she tried to get away from her, but Hermione held tight.

They hit the ground with a hard slam, Beatrice taking the brunt of the impact. Something cracked beneath her, and Hermione grunted as she drove her shoulder harder into the soft flesh of Beatrice's ribs.

"You bitch!" Beatrice screeched, trying to get away. She flailed, legs kicking and arms scrambling for purchase, but Hermione forced herself to move quickly.

She rolled on top of Beatrice, using one arm to keep her down and pulled the other back. Hermione slammed her fist into Beatrice's face.

A satisfying crunch sounded from beneath her knuckles, cut short by another scream.

Blood welled quickly.

Hermione did it again, aiming for her eye. Pain burned through her knuckles and radiated up into her wrist.

Beatrice's scream turned into a choked gurgle when Hermione's hands found her neck, her thumbs pressing down on Beatrice's throat.

Kicking wildly, Beatrice thrashed underneath her. She bucked and writhed, and Hermione lost her grip, skewing sideways before she could right herself.

They rolled. Beatrice clawed and scratched, screaming obscenities as they twisted against each other. Struggling for the upper hand. Beatrice's wand rolled away, and Hermione kicked it further out of reach.

Beatrice landed a blow against Hermione's jaw in the delay, then jutted her elbow against her neck. Hermione rolled again, locking her thighs around Beatrice's waist, and forced them over until Beatrice was face down against the floor. Hermione grabbed her by the hair and slammed her face against the stone. Once. Twice. Three times, just for good measure.

A repayment for threatening Draco's magic and his life.

Beatrice screamed in agony, arms waving about and fingers clutching at the air.

Something hard jabbed at the inside of Hermione's thigh, pointed and thin. Pressing her weight down against the back of Beatrice's head, she shifted her legs from around Beatrice's waist to see what was in her pocket.

Her breath caught, pulse ratcheting even higher. Her blood was pounding hard, but the sight had hope filling her veins.

Draco's wand.

Snatching it up quickly, Hermione took a deep breath as she felt the wand slide into place in her palm. It warmed her fingertips, vibrating with a low frequency before it settled.

Accepted.

Slowly, she loosened her grip, and Beatrice flipped over, ready to continue fighting.

Hermione had the tip of the wand to her chest before Beatrice could take a ragged breath.

"Petrificus Totalus."

A victorious smile stretched across her lips as Beatrice went still beneath her, her body solidifying in position as her eyes went wide and her mouth snapped shut. Hermione rolled off of her just as her arms and legs went straight, and collapsed against the floor. Her chest was heaving from the fight, sweat and blood stinging at her eyes, but she couldn't resist the call to look down at Beatrice as she lay helpless beside her.

"I could have killed you, and maybe I should have," Hermione told her, knowing full well she could still hear everything that was about to be said. "But there's *something special* about a stupid mudblood stunning you with a *baby spell*. Guess it's a good thing I paid attention during First Year."

Lifting herself to stand, she took her time in aiming the wand down at Beatrice's chest, knowing that she would need to be fully unconscious in order to end the blood magic spells.

"Stupify."

It helped that Hermione knew she deserved much worse. A body bind and a stunning spell were easy and light compared to many of the curses she'd thrown at Hermione, and she'd likely face a worse fate in Azkaban. Glancing up toward Draco, her shoulders went heavy with relief when she saw that the flickering spells had vanished.

Tucking the wand into her pocket, she made quick work of gathering Beatrice's before rushing to Draco's side.

Blood was seeping into the makeshift tourniquet on his arm, and his skin had grown a waxy shade of grey. He was covered in tracks of scratches and cuts, a red rash of a burn blooming across his shoulder from an errant spell.

She couldn't be sure if it had been from her wand or Beatrice's.

"Come on, Draco, wake up," she begged, anchoring one hand against the back of his neck and the other to his shoulder to pull him up. His head rolled to the side, his eyes firmly closed. He didn't answer. "Please, Draco. Can you hear me?"

Pressing her lips to his forehead, she reached beneath his jaw to find a pulse. Her fingers slid through sweat and blood, her hands shaking hard enough that she couldn't still long enough to find what she was searching for.

After setting him back down, she raised his borrowed wand in the air. It trembled slightly, the shock and adrenaline fading quickly, but she shook it off. She had to stay composed.

"Episkey," she chanted over and over again, healing the litany of cuts that crossed his skin. He couldn't afford to lose any more blood than he already had.

She left the largest, the deep gash on his arm for last. Her knowledge of healing spells was somewhat limited to those that they'd needed to use quickly and in battle, but she knew of one that had already healed Draco once, years before in the sixth floor boy's bathroom at Hogwarts.

"Vulnera Sanentur."

Slowly the wound began to knit itself back together, the skin growing and closing on its own. Any remaining blood on his skin began to seep back into the cut, his body pulling it back in and towards his heart in a last-ditch attempt to save his life.

"Come on," Hermione begged, her voice beginning to crack. "You've got to wake up..."

It wasn't enough.

His eyes stayed closed, his breathing so slow and shallow it was almost impossible to track. Even with her hand pressed against his sternum, there was little sign of life.

She would need to levitate him out. She would need to get him to the nearest healer—if someone could find—in the lift, people would be arriving for work by now surely—perhaps someone in the building had a blood replenishing potion—

Her mind began to spin, options populating for the best course of action. The fastest—

“*Hermione!*”

She startled at the sound of her own name, jumping back to hide Draco’s body. A fresh wave of adrenaline flashed through her chest.

But Beatrice was still on the floor, unconscious.

“*Hermione!*” The shout sounded again, this time louder. Closer.

Harry. Instant recognition cooled the panic in her chest, transforming it into heavy relief.

“In here!” she cried out, unwilling to leave Draco’s side. “Come quickly!”

The sound of his heavy footfalls echoed down the hall, slapping the floor before his body skidded into view.

“*Hermione!*” Worry had tightened his features, and his wand was at the ready. He scanned the room quickly, but his clear panic morphed into confusion as he took in the state of the room. “Are you—”

“Bloody hell,” a shocked voice interrupted them. Robards appeared, followed closely by Sam. Eyes wide, they both had their wands in the air in the same stance as Harry.

Before Hermione could figure out the best response, they had quickly canvassed the room, glass and debris crunching beneath their shoes. Each man kept stock of each other and any potential threats before turning back to Hermione.

Robards’ gaze was heavy and accusatory until she stepped out of the way to reveal Draco’s unconscious body. His eyes went wide, and he shot an arm out to stop Sam from coming any closer.

“He needs help—a blood replenishing potion—a healer—*anything*. I’ve done what I can, but—” Hermione tried to explain, but her hand never left Draco’s chest. Fingers knotted in the torn fabric of his shirt, she held on.

Robards simply stared.

“What can you tell me?”

Hermione held his stare, tension pulling between them. Harry and Sam were all but forgotten.

Anger curled in her stomach.

“Right now? Nothing. Not until he lets me out of the oath I signed last night. But if you don’t get him to a healer in time and he dies?” Hermione lowered her voice, stepping forward. “I won’t tell you a damned thing, purely on principle.”

She couldn’t bring herself to care that she was threatening her boss. She didn’t care that there would be repercussions, or that they had witnesses. The only thing she cared about was getting Draco to safety.

Robards blinked, lifting his brows in surprise.

"He made you take an oath?" Robards asked.

"The same as yours," Hermione answered.

Clarity darkened his expression.

"There's a healer on level three by the name of Anderson," he barked at Sam. "In Accidents and Catastrophes. Get him up here now."

Sam left without question, and Robards waited until the sound of his footsteps had gone silent before casting a glance at Harry.

"What do you know?"

Harry shrugged. "Absolutely nothing, sir."

Turning back to Hermione, Robards waved at Beatrice's limp body on the floor. "Tell me what you can, then."

Hermione ran her tongue across her teeth, tasting the residual stain of blood and stretching her jaw against the pull of her oath. Aches were settling into her body, pain burning across the cuts and scrapes from metal and glass and magic, and she wanted to collapse on the floor completely.

But she didn't. Instead she crossed her arms and leaned back against the table.

"Beatrice is—" She paused by force. Her throat stuck, tight. "*–isn't* Beatrice."

Tucking his wand into the pockets of his Auror's robes, Robards took a step toward Beatrice. He nudged her leg with his foot, and when she didn't respond, he frowned.

"Polyjuice?"

"Yes," Hermione managed to confirm.

Harry let out a noise of surprise. "You've got to be kidding."

"It gets worse." Robards let out an unimpressed chuckle. "So she...?"

He cast a pointed look at Draco beside her.

"Yes," Hermione answered, easily understanding his meaning.

"The Unspeakable out in the hall?"

"The same, I think."

"What about the blood?" he asked, pointing to the almost empty basin of Draco's blood that had been knocked over in the scuffle. It puddled on the stone floor, tacky and dark.

Hermione sighed, searching for an answer that she could push past the oath. She settled on the simplest option.

"Blood magic."

“And the mess?”

“Me, mostly. I did what I had to do.”

There was a beat of silence while Robards processed the information.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, stepping forward. “Am I supposed to understand what’s going on, or have you two devised some kind of code language in the last five minutes?”

A single document sat on Gawain Robards’ desk. Unrolled, the curled edges were weighed down by an inkpot at one end and Robards’ Auror badge at the other.

An oath. Longer than the one she’d signed with Draco, but it was unmistakable.

“Well,” he said, tapping his wand impatiently with his thumb. “Good news is he’s alive, at the very least. Bad news is that it’s going to make this quite a bit more difficult than it needs to be.”

Hermione’s already exhausted body settled a little lower in the chair, relief weakening her limbs. She knew it was little more than just a verbal reassurance, and that things could still change, but for that moment she held on. As long as his name was still inked on the signature line, he was alive.

It was known that the only way to get out of an oath was to destroy it together, or for one party to die. If Draco were to pass, his signature would fade into nothingness.

After the healer from Accidents and Catastrophes had shown up to the lab with a field kit full of potions, they still hadn’t been able to resuscitate Draco. They’d tried and tried again, Hermione growing more frantic with every failed *Rennervate*. Harry had held her back when the healer levitated Draco out of the DoM and straight to intensive care at St. Mungo’s.

As far as she was aware, Beatrice was still unconscious in the holding cells near the Wizengamot chambers.

“Auror Masalis has strict orders to alert me as soon as they get Malfoy awake,” Robards assured her as she kept her gaze on Draco’s penmanship. “Potter and his team are still overseeing the search of the lab, but I need you to tell me exactly what Malfoy included in his oath with you.”

It was all she had of him left.

Even the bracelet was gone, lost sometime during the fight in the DoM.

“Everything.” The word was rough in her throat, and she blinked up at her boss to refocus her mind. “I can only speak of it with him.”

Robards let out a deep sigh as he shook his head. “Of course. Why he couldn’t have just come to me—”

“He—” Hermione tried to explain, but her jaw grew tight. “—tried.”

He tried, and I stopped him. He wanted to, but I was so convinced you were up to no good that I kept him from getting help. And then it was too late.

Familiar guilt constricted her chest. She'd been so blind, so self-righteous in her beliefs, that she couldn't even consider the possibility that there could be more happening than she understood.

"Fantastic. Just bloody fantastic. How he even got around ours in the first place when *he* was the one who insisted—"

Robards' complaints were lost to her sudden realisation, her own words echoing in her ears.

She could only speak of it with him.

She could only *speak* of it.

It was the same way Draco had circumvented his own. He hadn't spoken a word, he'd simply *looked*. He'd directed her to what she needed without opening his mouth.

That was her loophole, too.

"I swore silence," she interrupted Robards' grumbling. He raised a single brow, unimpressed.

"And?"

Scooting forward to the edge of her seat, she tapped the oath and gave him a meaningful look.
"Silence. There are other ways to communicate."

Excitement fluttered in her stomach, ballooning and expanding underneath her ribs. It pushed down the feelings of guilt and worry and she grasped on to it.

This is how. This is how we get her.

Robards' features lit with understanding and she reached forward to pull their oath closer, dislodging the ink pot. Robards caught it just in time as she lifted it from the desk.

Surely there would be a way...

Her eyes skimmed over their agreement quickly. It was more complicated, with individual statements rather than a few catch-all lines like Draco had written, but the purpose was clear.

Reflected by this binding oath, we do so agree to the following terms:

Draco Malfoy shall, for all intents and purposes, use his skills in Legilimency and Occlumency to continue the investigation started by Gawain Robards and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

...

Gawain Robards will use any information or findings provided by Draco Malfoy to prosecute or oust any supporters or associates of Cordelia Malatesta under the provision of Magical Law.

...

Draco Malfoy may not, under any pretence or desire, speak of the work or investigation pertaining to Cordelia Malatesta and her associates, whether known or unknown, outside of his meetings with Gawain Robards.

Gawain Robards shall only speak of any information found or discovered to necessary parties, for the purpose of questioning, testimony, or prosecution.

...

This agreement shall be considered binding until both parties are of full satisfaction that the investigation is rendered final and complete.

While Draco couldn't speak of his agreement outside of meetings with Robards, Robards *could*.

"Ask me a question," she said, looking up toward her boss. Her breathing was shallow, excitement sparking in her chest. "Under these terms, you can speak of it—just ask me, and I'll find a way to answer."

Robards' smile was slow, but triumphant. "Of course you figured it out, Granger. How did Malfoy clue you in?"

Hermione rolled her lips between her teeth, considering her options. She could try to draw a sketch of the pensieve, but that would take too long...

Instead, she tapped at her temple.

"Memories?" Robards confirmed. To her surprise, she was able to nod in response.

His next question was quicker. "How did they end up in the Department of Mysteries this morning?"

A shrug.

"And that woman—what did you say her name was? Beatrice?" He paused, waiting for Hermione's answering nod before continuing. "You said before that she was using polyjuice. Do you know her real identity? Who is she?"

The instinct to speak pulled at her throat, but her jaw stayed firmly shut. Her lips wouldn't part, not even so she could take in a deep breath. The excitement pulled tighter at her ribs, and she reached a hand out to grab a quill from the holder on Robards' desk. He quickly handed her a scrap piece of parchment from the drawer.

Her fingers began to tremble as she scratched the tip across the surface, the letters turning jagged and sharp. It felt like she was fighting the Imperius curse, toeing the boundary of the oath that kept her quiet. She wasn't breaking the oath, but only just barely. She pushed past each letter, gritting her teeth as it grew harder to control the shaking of her hand.

Adelaide Burke

Robards didn't need Hermione to turn the parchment around to read the name.

"That's where she went..." His fist hit the desk and he stood quickly, snatching his badge up to tuck it into his pocket before heading to his file cabinet. "Let's go wake her up, Granger."

Beatrice sat chained to the interrogation table, her lip busted and her eye swollen. Blood stained her wrinkled skin and the collar of her shirt was ripped, but it didn't dampen the hatred that she glared

towards Hermione. Hermione's own cuts had been stitched quickly by another staff healer after they had taken Draco to St. Mungo's, though she knew her shirt was also still torn and stained with blood from their fight.

Robards sat next to her, directly across the table from Beatrice, with a pile of files sitting neatly in front of his hands. His features were smooth and patient, though Hermione knew that it was a cover built from years of practice.

He quickly flipped open the first file.

"I won't waste time with pleasantries, Mrs..." he paused, his eyes flicking down to the information in front of him, "Doyle."

Beatrice's lips thinned, but she didn't respond.

Robards continued. "I went ahead and pulled your employment file on the way down. It says here that you started working in the archives almost four and a half years ago?"

Hermione glanced over, taking in the information as Robards read through it with the kind of casual tone one might use when perusing the morning paper.

"Seems like you've kept to yourself for the most part. No complaints or commendations. No requests for raises or any promotions during your tenure. Quite unremarkable, I would say. But a brilliant cover nonetheless."

Robards shuffled the file aside to reveal a single photograph. A large black and white print of Adelaide Burke was reflected back at them, her smiling visage deceptive as she glanced toward the camera.

She looked young, and innocent, and nothing at all like the old woman who sat before them.

Beatrice's features twisted into a sharp smile.

"Finally figured it out, did you?"

"Not me, no," Robards replied. "But Miss Granger here has always been ahead of the rest of us. I have to admit, I should have noticed sooner."

Instead of letting herself fall back onto the satisfaction that should have come from the recognition, Hermione focused on keeping her demeanour as neutral as possible.

"But not soon enough," Beatrice sneered. "Let me guess—that pathetic excuse for a pureblood is still unconscious in St. Mungo's? Are the healers having a tough time waking him?"

Hermione's fists clenched beneath the table, anger bubbling inside her chest. Between her oath and her remaining self-control, she didn't justify the taunt with a response.

A knock at the door startled Hermione, and as she turned, a Junior Auror poked his head through the gap.

"Those files you requested, Sir."

The auror stepped in just far enough to hand off the folder, and was gone as quick as he came. Curious, Hermione waited for whatever reveal Robards was building towards.

“Here we go,” Robards started, flipping through the first few pages. It was a myriad of documents, with photos and letters and what appeared to be... *St. Mungo’s intake forms*? “Beatrice Doyle, age 62. Admitted to St. Mungo’s Janus Thickey ward after an improperly cast Cruciatus curse by her former husband made her lose all short-term memory. This form lists that she was checked out of the ward by an unnamed relative...four years and eight months ago. What timing, wouldn’t you say? This lists your release date just two months prior to your hiring at the Ministry. What an incredible recovery in such a short amount of time.”

The pieces clicked together instantly, and Robards’ next statement reflected Hermione’s own thoughts.

“I haven’t had time to go sorting through your family tree, Miss Burke, but I’m going to assume that Beatrice is your...aunt?”

“Second cousin,” she corrected. “Though I can’t say she was all too bright, even before the curse. She spent years rotting away in that ward, though I prefer to look at it as a mutually beneficial exchange.”

“Do you?” Robards humoured her.

“At least this way she can live in the comfort of her own home, living a life of make-believe that her husband is still alive and loves her.”

“And you, of course, get to use her identity in return.” Robards checked his watch before continuing. “Though I do have to ask the obvious—why bother coming back to the Ministry at all?”

Hermione couldn’t help but remember her angry screams in the lab, or the way Beatrice’s eyes had filled with pure hate as she cast hexes and curses at Hermione. They were still burning from across the table, though now she looked smug instead of fully enraged.

“It was only a matter of time.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure it was,” Robards agreed, his tone full of faux sympathy. He slowly unstacked the rest of the files in front of him, laying them out in a single row. “Just like it was only a matter of time for them, I suppose?”

Hermione had to lean forward to see the writing on the tabs of each file, but it soon became clear. They were all personnel files, and her stomach sank. Something told her she had matching copies sitting upstairs in her desk, hand delivered by Beatrice herself.

All of the employees she’d presented as casualties to Robards’ wrath, framing it like he’d been at work just to purge the Ministry of anyone who opposed him and not working tirelessly to get rid of any remaining Voldemort sympathisers or Cordelia’s supporters.

Beatrice’s wrinkled face turned sour.

“They didn’t have the dedication—the passion for our cause—” She lurched forward, pulling against the restraints. She scowled at Hermione, spitting the words. “Cordelia knew that it wasn’t just about

ruling over muggleborns, but taking back what was ours, too. I had to stay to finish what we started.”

Robards steepled his hands, seemingly unsurprised by her vitriol. “And look at where it got you.”

“You don’t get it,” Beatrice continued, her eyes growing wild again. The less Robards reacted, the angrier she became. “I had to stay. I was the one to hide the remainder of our research—*I* was the one who knew the magic to continue, and I was the last one left. I would have waited another four years if that’s what it took. Once it gets out into the world, there will be no stopping it. Just wait.”

Robards sent Hermione an unimpressed look. “I’m assuming she told you much of the same upstairs?”

Hermione nodded. “And then some.”

It was a vague enough statement that her oath didn’t hold her back.

“All the better for your testimony,” Robards replied, turning back to Beatrice. He checked his watch once more, as if he was already ready for the interrogation to be over. “Because as far as I’m concerned, the healers at St. Mungo’s will have Malfoy awake by the end of the day and you, Miss Burke, have led us right to everything I’ve been looking for. Your research will be burned by Fiendfyre and just like Cordelia’s trial—there will be no record of you ever existing within the Ministry archives. I’ll erase every last trace of you both, just like everyone who came before you... and there will be nothing left for the world to see.”

It was the exact right thing for him to say. Beatrice’s face flushed red, and she lunged forward, stopping with a jolt against the table.

“How dare you—” she began to scream, spit flying from the edges of her swollen lip.

“Everything you’ve ever worked for,” Robards continued as he fluttered his hand in the air, “will be gone. Wasted into nothing. Lost to history, ashes scattered to the wind, just like Voldemort himself. And you...”

Beatrice’s shout turned into a choked gurgle, and she swung her hands through the air, clawing at anything she could reach. Her face bled from red to purple, a vein pulsing in her forehead, and her skin began to ripple.

Hermione sat back with a gasp.

In her rage, Beatrice was transforming. Nodules swelled and rolled, lumps crawling beneath her skin, and her eyes began to shift wildly. It only seemed to make her angrier. She screamed even louder as the bones in her hands and arms began to ripple.

She clutched at her face. “No! No!”

Grey hair faded to plain brown, wrinkles shifted and smoothed. Until finally, Adelaide Burke was the woman screaming. Her chest was heaving from exertion, the colour still tingeing her complexion. Her clothes, now oversized, hung off slim shoulders.

A visible, tangible confirmation of her theory, finally sitting within reach.

Robards cleared his throat to continue. “And you, Miss Burke, will rot in Azkaban for the rest of your life, where you should have been from the beginning.”

Hermione could only gape at her boss. She’d always considered him to be a no-nonsense type of leader within the Ministry, but this was something else entirely. This was *ruthless*.

He gathered up the files in front of them and turned to Hermione. “If you’re ready, I’ll need your memories.”

She startled to attention, and the chair scraped loudly as she stood.

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

Adelaide began to shout again as they left the room but the longer they ignored her, the angrier she got. When the latch of the door clicked shut, the hall went silent, her screams echoing against the black tiles before fading into nothingness.

Robards stopped to give her a cautious look. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice surprisingly thick. “Or I will be, at least.”

His nod was quick and efficient, but before he could take off down the hall she reached out a hand. Though she was satisfied that there was enough proof to send Adelaide to Azkaban, uncertainty still weighed heavily in her stomach.

“Do you really think it’s over? That it was just her?”

Straightening his spine, Robards looked down at her. “With all of my professional experience, I do. I firmly believe that Cordelia and Adelaide were both unhinged fanatics, holding on to tendrils of smoke in hopes to regain some kind of credibility or relevancy in a new era. If there was anyone else, they would have been up in that lab with her this morning.”

His statement soothed away her worry, and she staggered back until her shoulders hit the wall.

“Before we go any further, I need to tell you...” She ran her hands over her face, digging her fingertips against her eyes while she searched for the words that she *could* say. “Please know that I’m sorry.”

Robards waited until she dropped her hands before answering. When she looked up, his eyes were kinder than she’d ever seen them before. No longer gruff, but soft.

“We can discuss it later. For now, I want you to head to St. Mungo’s. Relieve Auror Masalis of his duties, and let me know the moment Malfoy wakes up.”

“But—” Casting a glance back at the door, she swallowed. “But what about my memories?”

“In due time,” he assured her. “There’s a dozen questions that still need to be answered, and we won’t get all of them today. As much as I’m ready to put this case away for good, there’s no sense in rushing it. She’s going to Azkaban either way.”

It felt like a weight slid off her shoulders, and had she not been leaning against the wall, she might have fallen over completely.

“Thank you, sir.”

He smoothed a hand over his outer robes, his understanding expression still in place.

“I trust you, Granger. Now go—I expect a full report on Malfoy’s status as soon as you get there.”

Hermione stayed in place as Robards turned on his heel and walked in the opposite direction of the lifts. At the end of the hall, the Junior Auror appeared again with more files in hand. They joined together as Robards continued walking, and Hermione watched as they turned the corner and disappeared from view.

It wasn’t until she was alone that relieved tears began to burn at the edges of her eyes. She gave herself a moment to brush them away, taking several deep inhales, and pulled out Draco’s borrowed wand. After a quick *Scourgify* of her clothes and a few mending spells to fix the worst of the rips, she was ready.

It was time to go see him.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

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

Under clear directive by the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the fourth floor of St. Mungo's was heavily guarded by round-the-clock Auror detail. No visitors in or out.

No one but the upper echelons of the Ministry knew that Draco Malfoy was lying unconscious in the Janus Thickey ward and gripping the edge of death.

Not even his emergency contacts.

He didn't wake when she made a scene and pushed past the guard outside his room, citing Robards' direct orders.

He didn't wake when she collapsed in the chair beside his bed, reaching out a shaky hand to take his, or when she wept into their intertwined fingers.

He didn't wake up the next day.

Or the day after.

With every passing hour that he remained unconscious, the more she heard Adelaide Burke's maddened laugh echoing in her ears. The insults. The threats. Every time Hermione closed her eyes, she replayed the moment that Draco had looked at her through bleary eyes, begging her to get to safety.

She hadn't even told him that she loved him.

On the third day, a Healer pulled her aside. It was the first time she'd left the hospital room since arriving. Subsisting on packaged snacks left by the Aurors outside the door and cleansing charms, she had only slept in bouts and fits in the chair next to Draco's bed.

The Healer's expression was grim, but the only thing Hermione could focus on was the heavy weight of Draco's borrowed wand in her pocket and the strange, itchy feeling at the back of her neck from being away from his bedside.

"I'm sorry. We've tried everything in our power, but...he should have woken up by now," he said in clear resignation. "The only thing we can do now is wait, but you might want to consider contacting your boss to see if he'll allow Mr. Malfoy visitors."

His hand landed heavily on her shoulder, stilling for just long enough to technically be considered comforting, but he was off and down the hall before Hermione could form a coherent thought.

Staggering back, she leaned against the wall just outside Draco's door. Grief threatened to swallow her whole, ballooning inside her chest and sucking out every other thought and feeling in her body.

She had no idea how to contact his mother.

Narcissa.

It had been three days and Hermione hadn't once considered his mother.

His family. His friends.

None of them knew that he was currently sitting in between life and death, stuck between two worlds but not close enough to pass through to one or the other.

Narcissa. Theo. Blaise. Perhaps even Pansy Parkinson, too.

Hermione stared at the wall, her vision turning so distant that everything blurred around her. Her eyes felt dry and scratchy, like she had sand stuck beneath her lids. She blinked, then blinked again.

She could send an owl to Theo first. Just to see if he knew the estate where Draco's mother lived.

Or maybe Harry could contact the international consulate on behalf of the Ministry.

No.

No. She needed to be the one to contact Narcissa.

"You okay, Granger?" A voice broke through the empty haze she was drowning in, and Hermione shook herself. Warren stood in front of her, a travel cup of coffee still steaming in his hand. "You looked like you could use this."

It wasn't until she took the cup that she realised her fingers were numb. It was warm against her palms, but there was an absence of feeling past her knuckles.

"Thanks," she mumbled before turning and walking back into Draco's room.

Another day passed in a blur, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to contact Robards or to summon the strength to write an owl to Theo.

Not when doing so felt like admitting that Draco was dying.

On the fifth day, the Healer team fluttered around the room, taking stock of the charms that scanned across Draco's body.

With a steady diet of Blood-Replenishing and Wiggenweld potions, his vitals appeared to be climbing.

No healing charms or Essence of Dittany could smooth away the jagged, rough scar that bisected his Dark Mark.

His complexion was slowly coming back to something that more closely resembled himself, but he still didn't wake.

They didn't speak to Hermione as they worked, taking notes and replenishing the stock of potions in the cabinet beside his bed.

She watched as the sunset faded from the window across the room.

On the sixth day, Hermione finally succumbed to sleep, conjuring a small bed from the stiff chair she'd been napping in.

She ignored the pointed, meaningful looks from the head Healer, still unable to contact her boss or Draco's family. Call it selfish, or stupid, but the aching emptiness in her chest continued to grow.

Instead of being hungry, she only felt nauseous.

She knew it was Harry before she looked up. Familiar with the sound of his boots against the linoleum floor, it wasn't the first time he had come through the ward to check in. Though his previous visits had been brief, a quick check to press a kiss to the crown of her head and to slide some food in front of her, she could tell by the strain around his eyes that this visit was for a different purpose.

Clearing his throat, he glanced down at Draco.

"The Healer contacted Robards."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out. It was then that she realised she hadn't spoken to anyone in three days, and the sound of her voice was gone.

Two tries, before she could finally rasp out the words. "I can't."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment, dropping his head to look at his feet, and when he raised his green gaze back up to hers, the sympathy she saw almost broke her completely.

"I'm assuming it has something to do with this?" He pulled something free from his pocket, long and thin, and it glittered crimson as it swayed in the cheap overhead lighting.

Her bracelet.

Shock rippled across her skin, and Hermione was on her feet and walking toward him before she had even thought to move. Harry held it out for her, dropping it into her outstretched hands as soon as she was close enough. Cradling it to her chest, she willed away the tears that were gathering at the edges of her vision. She'd assumed it was gone forever.

With a sniff, she looked back at her best friend. "How did you know it was mine?"

"After everything we found in her lab, I didn't think Adelaide Burke would be wearing a bracelet with Malfoy's initial on it. And as vain as he is," Harry paused to glance toward Draco on the bed behind her, "I don't quite see him as a ruby bracelet sort of bloke."

The blush was hot against her cheeks, and she gripped the bracelet tight enough that the edges of the stones began to cut into her palm. Harry didn't rush her, though. He simply waited.

"I should probably explain a few things," she finally said.

"It's fine, you don't have to. Even if I did break Ministry chain-of-evidence protocol to get that back you..."

He shot her the same overly innocent look he used to when they were kids and he and Ron would beg for her help finishing their potions essays, and a sudden, loud laugh broke free from her chest. Harry matched it, equally amused, and she didn't stop, even when he pulled her in for a hug.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his head buried in her curls and his arms around her torso. She revelled in the comfort of a familiar hold, but she didn't answer—not because she didn't know the right words to say, but because she simply didn't *know*.

Pulling away, Harry's hands dropped back to his sides.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I wish I could say yes, but..."

While she worked on sorting through her emotions, Harry quickly transformed the single waiting chair into a bench for them to sit on. She let him lead her over, and sank back down. With their bodies aligned from hip to shoulder, she dived in.

No more waiting.

No more lying.

No more secrets.

"I've been sleeping with Draco for a few months."

Harry had the forethought not to stiffen, and his voice was carefully neutral as her heart began to thump heavily against her veins.

"So you're...together?"

"Well, we *were*," she corrected. "He gave me the bracelet a few weeks ago. I don't...exactly know where we stand now."

He made a thoughtful noise from beside her. "So that's what all the 'Hermione' business was about, then."

"It... Yes," she said, letting the word sit on her tongue for a moment, trying and failing to release the awkwardness that followed. Even if Harry didn't know what that particular name meant, she couldn't help but think about the connotations.

"Subtle."

When she elbowed him, he only snorted out a laugh. It loosened some of the tension in her limbs, and she could breathe a little easier.

"It wasn't supposed to be serious," she explained once things went quiet again. "I didn't—I didn't expect him. At all."

It was a strange set of words, and a half-hearted explanation, but it was the only way she could begin to describe it. It was the only thing that encompassed their relationship from start to finish.

She hadn't expected to be matched with him by The Scarlet Order.

She hadn't expected his heartfelt apology, or his explanations.

She hadn't expected the way she took to his domination almost immediately.

The way she craved it, then him.

And she definitely, most certainly, hadn't expected to fall in love with him.

"Well." Harry cleared his throat. "For someone who says she 'doesn't know where she stands'... Judging by the fact that you haven't left this hospital room in nearly a week, I have to say—it looks fairly clear from here."

Hermione looked down at the bracelet in her hands. She pulled it through her fingers, snaking the jewels across her skin, and caressed each stone before she spoke again.

"I love him."

Harry's comfort was a firm weight pressed against her shoulder as he leaned against her body, and she relaxed against him. It was as good as another hug, and her emotions broke loose.

"I don't know what I'll do if he dies," she admitted, her eyes stinging as tears began to gather. "I know I shouldn't feel this way—not when it hasn't been that long, but—"

Her voice broke, and she began to weep again.

When Harry's arm came around her shoulders, it only got worse. She shuddered in a breath before the next confession came tumbling out.

"He hates me—I betrayed him, and he'll never forgive me."

Harry's hand began to rub a soothing path across her arm, and he held on tight. "I'm sure he doesn't."

"You don't understand." Anger flared through the wetness of her tears, and she tried to shrug his arm off but he didn't budge. "I almost got him *killed*, Harry. He's about to die and it's my fault."

"Think of all the times we almost died, Hermione. We made it, and he will too."

"It's not the same!" she exclaimed, shooting to her feet and pacing the length of the room. "We were fighting for something *together*. We were trying to save the world. He was—he—"

Her oath began to work against her, her jaw growing tight until her teeth were ground together.

When she turned back toward Harry, her frustration boiling over, he wasn't looking at her.

He was looking at Draco with wide eyes.

Who was looking at them both, his features strained and impatient.

Looking.

He was—

He was *awake*.

“Congratulations,” Draco rasped out in a rough voice. He swallowed thickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing with the effort, and he winced. “That disgusting show of affection was enough to drag me from the depths of quite a blissful oblivion.”

He raised a shaking hand to his face, pressing his fingers into his eyes.

Hermione could only stare, blinking, but her feet wouldn’t move. Couldn’t, maybe. “Draco—”

Everything else got stuck in her throat. In her chest. Lodged beneath the weight of every apology and confession she’d bottled up.

“You’ve been unconscious for almost a week,” Harry filled him in, rising to stand before he shifted his attention to Hermione. “Why don’t I give you two some privacy? I’ll let the Healer know he’s awake.”

Harry briefly grabbed her hand as he passed by, and she held onto it until his fingers slipped away.

Hermione’s throat went dry. What was she supposed to say? Every thought she’d had over the last week dissipated instantly under the weight of his tired stare.

“I’m going to assume you’ve been here the entire time, then?” he finally asked.

His question had her blurting out her own.

“How long have you been awake?”

Draco licked his lips, blinking so slowly she thought for a moment that he might fall back asleep. With his eyes closed, he answered.

“I figure Potter’s stomping is the likely culprit, but I was in and out for a few minutes after that. I only really came to when you were sobbing into his shirt.”

Her mouth dropped in shock at the hard edge of accusation in his tone. “I was not sobbing into his shirt!”

“But he did have his arms around you.”

How Draco had the propensity to look up from his pillow, weak and barely alive, and still act superior to her—

“You were dying, Draco!”

Their conversation devolved so quickly into an argument that she was powerless to stop it.

“If that’s what you’re upset about,” she continued, moving toward the bed and crossing her arms in defiance, “then you definitely didn’t hear the part where I told Harry that I’m in love with you.”

His eyes snapped back open, his body going still, but he said nothing. The longer the silence went, the more her anger began to sink quickly along with the weight in her stomach.

“So you did hear, then,” she said quietly.

“I did.”

For days, Hermione couldn't begin to anticipate what it might be like if, or when, Draco woke up. If he would have his memories, or if the events of that morning had been too traumatic. If he would be happy, or sad, or angry.

But what she hadn't expected was for him to still be holding on to the same resignation that he'd shown the night before the attack.

"And you just don't care?" Her own accusation tasted sour and sharp against her tongue, but it was easier to hold on to than the thought that maybe he didn't love her back.

Draco swallowed again, moving slowly to sit up against his pillows. "You don't."

It took her several seconds to process his correction.

"*Excuse* me?"

"You don't betray someone you claim to love, Granger. Nor do you go and purposefully endanger yourself, just because you don't care about your own safety."

"My *own* safety?" she laughed. "I *saved* you! If it weren't for me, Adelaide Burke would have drained every bit of your magic and dragged you down to the atrium to make an example of you—and that's *if* you would have survived her experiment. No one would have known where you were or what she was doing until it was too late."

Blinking away, Draco settled his gaze on the window. His jaw was hard, and his cheekbone was sharper from days of nutritional potions instead of solid food.

"It doesn't change anything."

The disgust in his tone made her want to scream. Instead, she pulled her fingers through her hair and tugged on the roots until it burned.

"It changes *everything!*"

"You could have died," he snapped, turning back to her.

Dropping her hands, she used one to point at him. "And you *would* have, I'm sure of it."

"You still went against my wishes—"

"I won't let you be the martyr," she interrupted him, uncaring of whatever tirade he was about to repeat. "You're holding on to this because it's *easier*; because you wanted to do the right thing, but it doesn't change the fact that you couldn't do it alone. Even with Robards, I found more evidence in a matter of months than the both of you did in years. I'm not proud of lying, Draco... But if it means saving you? I'd take a Time-Turner and do it all over again."

His features sharpened into a scowl, but he said nothing.

In the interest of not making any more of a scene, she worked to soften her tone. "I don't...I don't want to fight. Not here. Not now."

"And yet you're so good at it."

Hermione sighed and resisted the urge to shout at him again. Instead, she redirected him.

“I know you’re in pain, and upset with me, but Robards is going to want to know as soon as possible... Do you remember what happened? Any of it, before I found you?”

For a moment, Draco looked as if he might continue arguing with her out of sheer principle. It wasn’t until she noticed how his fingers were fisted in his lap, the skin pulled white as he tried not to let the tremors show, that worry reignited in her chest.

“Every granular second,” he eventually answered, and his gaze sagged under the weight of his statement.

A spike of phantom pain lanced through her chest. Part of her didn’t want to know what he’d been through, but she knew there was no other way. With a slow inhale to clear away the messiest of her emotions, she went back to the bench by his bed and took a seat.

This wouldn’t be a quick conversation.

“Beatrice Doyle is actually Adelaide Burke,” she told him, relieved that the oath was at least allowing them to discuss it together. “She was using Polyjuice for the last few years under the guise of eventually getting back to the notes that she left hidden in her old lab. Apparently Cordelia tasked her with staying behind. I wouldn’t have realised had you not shown me your memories, but I didn’t connect the dots until the next morning. By the time—”

Regret swept through her, but she held it at bay. “By the time I realised, you were already gone.”

And nearly dead, she couldn’t add.

When she looked back at Draco, his eyes were hard. Cold and distant, he looked right through her when he spoke. Each word instilled a slow crawl of terror as he filled in the gaps for her.

“I woke up when my wards went off. I couldn’t tell what—or who—had tampered with them, but she was waiting for me when I opened the door. Wand at the ready, and pointed right at my heart.”

He didn’t seem to register Hermione’s sharp inhale of surprise, and continued.

“I mistakenly assumed it was a neighbour, venturing too close. But she took advantage of my surprise—she took one look behind me and saw the couch and knew I wasn’t alone. She threatened you if I didn’t comply.”

Nausea swirled in Hermione’s stomach. “And you just...went with her?”

Draco went silent for a moment, but his face still held no emotion. His hands stretched, fingers smoothing across the blanket in a shaky motion before be fisted them tight again.

“To keep you alive, yes.”

“Draco—” she choked out, her eyes beginning to burn. How could he pretend she didn’t love him when *this* was his own version of it? When he was so willing to step in front of Adelaide’s wand, just to buy her a few minutes?

“She kept her wand dug into my back the entire trip up to the Department of Mysteries,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “I only wanted to get her away from you. I tried to reason with

her, but it was clear she was mad. I waited until we were in the lift and managed to get my wand back, but she eventually disarmed me again and knocked me unconscious when we were in the entrance to the Department of Mysteries. The room kept spinning and she just kept laughing. I woke up beneath her Imperius curse and it was too late to try to Occlude her out."

Hermione thought back to the chip in the paint of the door that led to Adelaide's old lab. She could imagine it—the two of them duelling, the same way she had in the lab. Her own hands started to shake, and she fisted the bracelet in her lap to focus on it instead of the memories.

"And she made you kill that Unspeakable," Hermione filled in.

Draco blinked. "She laughed when she made me cut into my own arm, but there was nothing I could do. She had me under such a deep Imperius that I couldn't even scream. I finally passed out from the blood loss and it...I thought I was finally dying."

A single word stuck out like a beacon, pulling her in.

Finally.

Hermione rose to her feet, the muscles in her thighs shaking and weak from the horror and made her way to his bedside. He still didn't look at her, but he allowed her to take his hand. His fingers were stiff and cold, but at least now they trembled together, her bracelet pressed between their palms. As if a piece of jewelry could connect them, could bind them together again, she squeezed him tighter.

It was only then that he seemed to come back into himself, and he glanced down at their hands before blinking up to her. His eyes were paler than usual; his veins almost blue beneath the porcelain skin of his neck. A reminder of just how close to death he came, and how close he still was.

"Draco, I lo—"

Before she could finish, he shook his head.

"Don't. Just give me..." He trailed off before trying again. "I need time."

A sharp knock from the door cut through Hermione's shock.

"Mr. Malfoy, it's quite the surprise to see you awake."

The Healer bustled in, completely unaware of what he had just interrupted. Hermione's throat began to tighten, more tears welling in her lashes. How she wasn't completely dried out, she didn't know.

Ready to get started, he wasted no time in checking Draco's chart. "I'm going to go ahead and cast a few diagnostic charms, and we've got a fresh set of potions on their way up from the apothecary..."

Hermione's vision blurred while the Healer began to go through a checklist of questions. The noise faded into the background, a dull hum of noise while she focused on not falling apart completely. Despite it all, Draco never moved his hand away, and she held him tighter like a lifeline.

Tight enough that maybe he might not drift away.

Logically, she could understand. To him, the betrayal was still fresh. It could have been less than twenty-four hours ago, based on the gap in his unconscious memory.

He hadn't watched over her for a week, begging to whatever Gods might exist that she survive.

Right now, it didn't matter that they were both alive, or that Adelaide was locked away in a temporary cell in Azkaban while the Wizengamot convened for an emergency trial.

Draco Malfoy had spent years trying to protect her, and every other muggleborn in their world. He had been ready to sacrifice himself, to make the call that he couldn't years before. He had been ready to die for her. For *them*.

If he thought time would prove that her feelings were temporary—or that the distance would prove her betrayal to be too ruinous, she would have to do the same thing she had always done.

She would prove him wrong.

While Draco gave the Healer snipped, biting answers about his condition and pain levels, she leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Her eyes drifted closed, the taste of tears on her lips, and she finally released his hand. She silently pulled his wand from her pocket and laid it against the blankets around his legs, returning it to its rightful owner.

The Healer paused, and she finally pulled back just far enough to look him in the eye. With her hand on his cheek, she touched him one last time.

"Time won't change how I feel about you," she promised.

Months before, she'd had to summon the courage to walk into The Scarlet Order, with her head held high, unknowing of what she might find on the other side of the door. Now, she summoned that same strength to walk away, leaving the bracelet with him.

It was in his hands, now.

Hermione's flat felt achingly empty. Everything was as still and untouched as it had been the week before, and a strange and unsettled feeling weighed against her shoulders as she stood in her living room. She had avoided it for long enough, and had taken a lengthy trip to Diagon Alley to replace her wand in between leaving the hospital and coming home. She'd briefly considered a visit to see Harry, and maybe to stay in his and Ginny's guest room for the night, but it would have been a cheap excuse to prolong the inevitable.

And she couldn't allow herself to hide. It wasn't who she was.

Standing in the living room, she considered it from Draco's eyes. Following their phantom footsteps, she couldn't help but remember their path that night. With the way he'd charmed off her clothes and followed her to the bedroom. How he'd stood at the end of her bed and watched her touch herself. How he'd instructed her to, the way he would have touched her, and told her just how much he wanted her. The way he'd quietly admitted that her cramped, comfortable flat felt more like a home than he'd had in years. That *she* felt like home.

She remembered the things he'd said and the way he'd made her feel. The way he *always* made her feel, even when she hadn't wanted it in the first place. It begged the question—had he fought his

feelings the way she had? How long had it taken him to realise that somehow she'd made space for herself inside his heart? When was the moment where he felt it happen? That moment when it became clear that it was more than just sex?

It wasn't perfect, and it never was, nor would it continue to be. In retrospect, she could see it a little more clearly. The concealed surprise at her reactions. The confessions falling free from his lips, loosened by passion when hers could no longer be contained. The way his touch had strayed from commanding to affectionate, even before he likely meant to.

The way they'd constantly toed the line, together, pushing and pulling toward something inevitable. How neither of them had been willing to back down, even when they should have. He'd been just as lost as she was, relying on trust and blind faith to get them through. They both tumbled in headlong, too eager to prove themselves that they couldn't see past their own desires. They were lucky they'd made it as far as they had, both too stubborn to give up or give in or admit when they were wrong.

She stared at the rumpled blankets on her bed until her vision went blurry, trying and failing to remember every detail that they'd left behind. *Would it be her last memory of him? Would everything be different now?*

Heavy, slow steps completed her journey from the bedroom back into the hall. Each one taking her closer to the inevitable end.

Instead of being drowned by the familiar sense of guilt at the sight of her office, everything felt hollow. The empty hours that bled into days inside of St. Mungo's had given her plenty of time to retrace every step, every word, that had started in this room.

Not just for her own personal torture, either. But because she knew that every scrap of evidence she had would be crucial for Robards' case against Adelaide. Every step in her process would need to be documented, no stone or file left unturned.

Even the ones she didn't want to face.

In the silence of her flat, standing in front of the wall of documents—newspaper clippings, photographs, duplicated files from work—she took a moment to grasp at the distance that stretched between her and Draco.

It was almost worse than waiting for him to wake up, worrying whether or not he would pull through and regain his magic or if it was too late entirely.

Instead of something involuntary, something they were subjected to, it was now a choice. Like everything they'd done together. With, for, or against. She'd made her choices, and he had every right to his.

Pulling out her newly replaced wand, Hermione took a deep breath and began to set things back to right.

“So this is it?” Robards asked, looking at the vials of memories that sat between them. Lined up in a neat row on the top of his desk, Hermione couldn't help but be mesmerised by the swirl of gauzy white in each little bottle.

“That’s it.”

She’d given him everything, right back to the very beginning.

Draco’s apology in her office while he stroked her hair. The following visit to The Scarlet Order, when he gave her a more detailed explanation of his past.

Her subtle questioning of Harry, and her initial suspicion of Robards.

The first trip to the archives, and the second.

The end of the night in the viewing room at the club, when she’d tried to ask Draco about it while she was draped against his body, hers still sated and relaxed.

The documents that had been hung up in her office at home.

Every single thing, despite how private she wanted to keep some of them, or how bad it might make her look. She wanted every bit of it to bury Adelaide even further.

“We’ve destroyed our oath, so I’m assuming he’s done the same with you so we can proceed with your full testimony?” Robards’ question brought her attention back to him.

In the days since Draco had been released from St. Mungo’s, he had owled her a single document: their oath, with his signature burnt off. Attached were gruff instructions on how she could complete the spell to destroy it the rest of the way without needing to come to his flat.

She hadn’t seen or heard a word from him otherwise.

“Yes,” she finally answered. When Robards’ pulled out a quill and nodded for her to start, she took a deep breath. Most of what she was about to say would be covered by the memories, but practising her verbal recollection would be key to the trial.

“Draco and I reconnected several months ago, and I wasn’t aware of how he spent his time after the war. I hadn’t seen him around the Ministry, and when I saw an article in the Prophet about how he was working here, my interest was...piqued.” She paused when her boss huffed out a silent laugh. “I tried to discuss it with Harry, but he didn’t know the details of Malfoy’s plea deal. That was what spurred me to start digging. When I saw that there were documents missing from his trial records, I mistakenly assumed that his intentions were more nefarious than they actually were.”

“From my vantage,” she continued, “it appeared that Draco had used some kind of information to leverage himself into a position of power here at the Ministry. It was my initial belief that he had been blackmailing you. Another Auror in the department mentioned overhearing you talk about the safety of your daughter with him one day, and I assumed she had something to do with you abusing your power and working with Draco to cover it up.”

Robards spared her a quick glance, but motioned for her to go on.

“When Adelaide, as Beatrice, saw me researching in the Archives, she correctly assumed what I was doing and deliberately misled me to further that line of thought. She brought forth files of employees that you and Draco had quietly convicted, but knew I wouldn’t be able to find any evidence of what was actually occurring. She was able to frame the entire situation to her gain, so I was unaware of what she was up to or who she actually was.”

“And how did you connect the two?” he asked.

Hermione had to pause to swallow. “The night before the attack, Draco found my research in my office and easily recognized what it all was. He was rightfully upset, and we fought. He accused me of blowing your cover but I didn’t understand, and I refused to let him bring you in. So we made a deal—he knew of a way to give me the answers I’d been looking for, but I had to swear to give up my inquiry into his past and to never speak of it with anyone. He managed to direct me to his pensieve, and I found the three memories that pertained to your agreement and Cordelia’s trial. I noticed that Adelaide was picking at her hands during her testimony, but it wasn’t until the morning that I remembered Beatrice having the same habit. Given my own experience with Polyjuice, it all came together after that.”

Robards’ quill scratched against the parchment for several seconds as he caught up. Once finished, he set it down gently and levelled her with a strained look.

“My daughter, Amelia, is a muggleborn that my wife and I adopted as a toddler. The moment Malfoy made me aware of what was going on in the DoM, I began making arrangements to get her to safety. It was the only thing I could do, and Malfoy was furious that I risked our cover. He felt that any slight misstep wasn’t worth jeopardising the entire operation. If anything, he’s more thorough than you and I combined.”

The admission sat heavily between them, and he looked back down at his notes before speaking again. “I know it was selfish of me, and that Malfoy was likely right, but it was the one thing I had to do. She’s everything to me.”

Hermione nodded slowly, coming to terms with the new information. *Of course he had wanted to protect his daughter.* It was the same instinct that had driven Draco to go to extreme lengths to protect her, and why he was still angry at the things she’d done to uncover the truth.

“I understand, sir,” she finally said. “And I’m sorry for not realising sooner what was actually happening. I was convinced that I knew, but the longer it went the less it all made sense. I continued to grasp at whatever seemed like the easiest explanation, but even at the end I knew I was missing *something*. That morning when Draco was taken, I knew that something was off—that if you truly had been working for your own personal gain, it would have been impossible to hide for that long. Adelaide was the missing piece that I didn’t know existed until it was too late.”

Robards’ gave a sharp shake of his head. “Absolutely not. You did more than anyone else could have, given the limited information and the lengths Malfoy and I went through to make sure there was no trail. We knew from the beginning that if anyone caught on to what he knew, they would scatter to the wind.”

“And about the false accusations—”

He held up his hand to stop her. “It’s understandable. And while I’m not exactly thrilled, I’ll admit that the outcome was more than worth whatever temporary suspicion you might have held.”

“I’m still sorry,” she insisted.

They stared at each other for several long moments, but he was the one to finally give in with a nod. “Apology accepted, Granger.”

Assuming she was effectively dismissed, Hermione stood and turned to leave. Before she could make it more than a few steps, hesitation stopped her.

“Have you—” The words were already falling out of her mouth before she could stop them completely. A mix of worry and shameless curiosity drove her second attempt. “Have you seen him?”

Robards features were carefully blank as he gauged her intent. Once she would have assumed that he was churlish and brusque, but now that she could see it up close? It was clear that it was only from the weight of everything that he’d had to carry. The people he’d had to protect. The laws he upheld. The responsibility he took for every one of them.

For him, and Draco too, the war had never stopped.

“I have,” he finally answered, his tone casually detached. “He’s getting better every day, but the spells that Adelaide used on him were...*alarmingly* effective. His magic is still fairly depleted, and the Healers seem to believe that it’s likely that it will take him several months to recover.”

She offered him a thankful smile in return, her hand on the door. “Thank you, sir.”

Ginny’s face had stretched through a myriad of expressions while Hermione explained the general, and appropriate, version of her relationship timeline with Draco.

Harry’s, however, held the same scrunched sort of discomfort the entire time.

As with Robards, she had only simplified a few details of what had occurred between them. Specifically the whole “sex club” business. *The less they knew about that particular habit, the better.*

“Wow,” Ginny finally said from her spot across the table. “And here I thought you were committing yourself to celibacy.”

Hermione let out a light laugh before dropping her head into her hands. “It’s a lot, I know.”

“So let me get this straight,” Ginny started to summarise. “You and Malfoy were actively shagging while you were convinced he was up to no good?”

“Yes,” Hermione answered.

“And then he found out that you were digging into his past and got angry? Because you gave away his cover? And then after that woman went mad and tried to kill him, you saved his life?”

“Mostly, yes.” She didn’t bother correcting Ginny’s oversimplification of the entire situation.

“So that’s what that bit about trust was about? That day at lunch? You were trying to decide to trust him instead of...” Ginny waved her hand to indicate a vague “*everything*.”

With a light sigh, Hermione agreed again. Of course she hadn’t forgotten about that awful, uncomfortable conversation. “Yes. That was when I realised that things had gotten serious and that I should respect his reasoning to keep things private.”

“Okay, but you’re back to shagging now, right?”

When Hermione didn't answer, Ginny's fingers stretched out on the surface of the table and she leaned closer, her eyes going wide. "You're still shagging him, *right?*"

"Gods, Gin," Harry groaned. "That's what you took away from the whole story?"

"Listen, I don't have to like the man to admit he's fit—when the papers announced that he ended his betrothal, half the Harpies team wanted in his trousers. The other half wanted to *be* him."

Despite the lightened mood, Hermione's gaze dropped to the wood grain, and she traced a knob in the oak with the edge of her nail.

"I haven't seen him since the day he woke up. He said he needed time."

"That's a load of bollocks!" Ginny exclaimed, ever defensive on Hermione's behalf. "You saved his bloody life!"

When she looked up, Harry was offering her a soft smile. "He'll come around."

Hope still flickered in her chest, though the flame was starting to wane with every passing day. It had been almost two weeks since he had been released from St. Mungo's. She was giving him time, just as he'd asked, but the sudden void he left in her felt like it might suffocate her completely.

"I hope so."

Ginny's fingers curled into a fist. "He *will*."

The threat was clear, Hermione rubbed at the tension in her temple. "I'm...surprised that you're both as fine with this as you are."

Harry was the first to answer. "I mean, it makes sense. You're both a lot alike, when you get past that whole brooding heir attitude he likes to take, sometimes. And as much as I don't like to admit it, he's really good at his job. It's clear that he wants to be a better person than he used to be, and he's proven it over and over again even if his words have said otherwise."

Emotion welled, but she swallowed it back.

"He's nothing like I thought he'd be. He's...better."

"I think he has been for a while. You just weren't looking."

"Yeah," Hermione eventually agreed. "I don't think I wanted to."

The sleek black owl was waiting for her when she came home from work on Friday night. Scratching impatiently at her window, it had a red envelope tied to its leg.

Heavy parchment made of a deep, almost foreboding blood red, Hermione knew the sender instantly.

With careful fingers, she peeled back the wax seal, dread and hope an equal weight against her chest. Once free, the letter unfolded on a sparkle of magic, presenting itself to her with two brief lines.

An anonymous match has been arranged for one Hermione Jean Granger at The Scarlet Order, tomorrow night at 7 PM.

If you consent to this meeting, please wear your assigned pendant and check in at the reception desk no later than 6:45 PM.

It was identical to the first letter she'd ever received from The Scarlet Order after she'd filled out her profile. She'd read and reread the first until she'd quickly memorised each word. She'd held it until the edges were bent and soft from the sweat and tension of her fingers pulling and smoothing over the letters with worry.

Worry that she was out of her element. Worry of who might be waiting for her. Worry that she might hate it. That she might love it.

This time, the parchment in her hands only strengthened her resolve. Even if she didn't know *what* would happen, the knowledge that this was it—this was the end—bolstered her confidence.

There would be no surprise, no shock. No glamour or fake name, hiding who she really was. No dawning horror as the blindfold slipped from her eyes and she saw the stunned expression of Draco Malfoy looking back at her.

And there would be no more waiting, either.

This time, she would be going in with her eyes open and ready.

Draco had made his decision.

Chapter End Notes

This is it, folks! The final stretch. These last few chapters have been a lot to wade through, and I can't thank you enough for your patience and enthusiasm despite the lack of smut. I promise to make it up to you soon enough.

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I can't believe it's finally over! This has been an absolutely wild ride. This was the first Dramione fic I started writing last year and even though it looks nothing like it did when I started, I wouldn't change a thing. I have learned so much from this fic and it's brought me so many amazing new friendships that I could cry just thinking about it. I could never have anticipated how much would change from this one idea I had, and I'm so thankful for my lack of self control.

To everyone who has left me kudos and comments, thank you. To everyone who has flailed with/at me on Discord (looking at you, RoR/pwp-chat crew) on update days, I'm going to miss you so much. To everyone who has recommended this fic or shared it online, I am indebted to you. I love you all endlessly and I cannot say thank you enough for helping to make it what it is.

Finally, thank you to my beloved trash gang for supporting this in the very early days before I even knew what I was doing, and even more so for all the help when I realized just how fucked I was and had to reverse engineer the entire plot at chapter four. For listening to my ramblings and for embracing my rolodex of kinks. For spiraling with me about Draco's characterization and all the meta on his love languages. For the unwavering faith and (horny) support, time and time again. I love you most of all.

But this, at the end of the day, is dedicated to my amazing beta Brit. This fic would have been a mess if not for you. From cleaning up all my editing messes to spending hours helping me map out the final plot (and maybe even talking me off the ledge once or twice), you truly are the school teacher to my pirate. I couldn't have done this without you, and I wouldn't want to imagine a timeline in which we didn't.

All right, let's get back to our regularly scheduled horny programming....

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

It had been months since Hermione had stood outside of the now-familiar old stone manor. Observing the grime and vines that disguised the building, she was prepared when she stepped through the wards.

Just as she was certain that beauty of The Scarlet Order would reveal itself to her, she was certain that tonight was Draco's doing as well.

Unlike before, she'd never had any doubt. After so long, she was finally seeing things clearly.

As expected the vines pulled back, and the blackened exterior miraculously faded into a pristine light limestone. Magic rippled across her skin, granting her access via the ruby pendant around her neck, and just like the first time she had stepped across the barrier it flashed with heavy pulses of heat against her chest.

This time, she didn't stand at the base of the steps and wonder if she was making the right, or wrong, choice. She didn't consider all of her past partners, or mentally review the list of every reason that had driven her to look for answers at The Scarlet Order in the first place.

She climbed each stone step with deliberate intent, the sound of her heels echoing the nervous ticking beneath her ribs. Each one solidified the sense of conviction that fueled her.

Three slow knocks on the heavy wooden door, one for every reason that supported her certainty, and she waited.

First, Draco had only asked her for time. Not space. After what they'd been through, and everything she knew about him? There was no way he would end things without speaking to her directly. He was many things, but not a coward.

Second was The Scarlet Order itself. While he was free to do whatever he wished with his own file, hers was her own. Until she authorised her status to be open or looking for a new match, it was unlikely that it could be anyone else. They were, after all, a sex club, and offering "anonymous" meetings for role playing couples wouldn't be unheard of.

Third, and most importantly, was that it was the perfect scenario. If not slightly dramatic, it was the only way for them to move forward. That much she knew. This wasn't something simple that could be resolved in a single conversation, or with placating words. They were well past that point. Draco was forcing them back into their starting positions and resetting the score, all by recreating their first night together. And he was doing it on neutral territory where they could assess and negotiate and decide how they wanted to move forward. Together.

It was a test as much as it was an opportunity. *Would she show? Would she trust that it was Draco, arranging the night for them? Was she willing to walk in blind, completely unknowing and unprepared for whatever he wanted to do?*

It was more than trust, now. It was understanding.

The door opened and an older man, dressed in a nondescript formal suit and white gloves, offered her a friendly smile. The same as before, though his features held no indication of recognition for who she was outside of the polite way he said her name.

"Miss Jean?"

She'd almost forgotten the preferred name she'd provided on her intake survey, when she'd been concerned about the shame and stigma that came with how a visit to a sex club might affect her career at the Ministry.

A ridiculous, awkward smile pulled at the edges of her lips. *Had she only known then...*

"You can use Granger, actually. Jean won't be necessary any longer."

With a nod, the man motioned her inside. "Very well, Miss Granger. I'll update your file."

Inside, everything looked identical to her first visit. As the man took stock of her file, laid out on the entryway table, she tried not to let her anxiety grow out of proportion. She was torn between anxious want that made her fingers itch and a detached sort of resignation. There was no way to anticipate what might happen, but she knew she had to trust Draco.

“Do you have any other changes you’d like to make before beginning your evening?”

The first time she’d been asked, she assumed his look was *knowing*. Now she recognized it as something more familiar. She had been embarrassed the first time, assuming the worst. Assuming that her inexperience was glaringly obvious.

Instead, the man seemed . . . patient. Understanding almost. Not quite detached, but neutral. She’d shaded every interaction with her preconceived notions of what she thought would happen—what she *expected*. Not what was actually occurring.

“Not tonight, but thank you.”

Truthfully, she could barely remember what she’d filled out on her intake survey. She remembered more about her exchanges with Draco and the negotiations they’d made and she knew that at this point, at this moment, none of it really mattered.

This was less about dominance and submission—less about sex in general—than it was about recovering their relationship.

Vanishing her file with his wand, the man motioned toward the stairs. “Your match has requested you meet in room four, which I believe you are familiar with, and has left you a set of instructions to follow before his arrival. Do you need accompaniment tonight?”

She hoped her polite smile didn’t belay any of the shakiness that was currently taking residence in her limbs. “I think I can find my way.”

Alone, she ascended the grand, sweeping staircase. Wood panelling and familiar plush carpet dampened her steps, and she let her eyes linger on the paintings as she passed them. She focused on her breathing, though this time her chest was filled not with crippling fear but something more akin to anxious, addled pixies.

Somehow everything was both familiar and foreign to her eyes. Her fear and nervousness had shrouded her vision before, but now she saw everything with a renewed sense of focus. Clarity. Understanding.

Acceptance.

Gilded frames of still life. One with a vase full of lilies. Another, a large willow, swaying in the soft breeze.

The soft brush strokes of a pile of fruit atop a heavy wooden table. A flickering candle, the warm glow emanating throughout the painting and instilling her with a sense of unwavering strength. She watched as a bead of wax dripped down the side, then tore her attention back to the second floor landing in front of her.

The manor was completely silent, likely covered by layers upon layers of silencing charms, and she took in the six doors and the roped-off staircase leading upstairs. All dark panelled wood, she realised that only four were marked with small gold numbers. Two, one in each back corner, were blank.

Were those other rooms like the viewing room? In the months that she’d been Apparating directly inside their room, she hadn’t once considered what else The Scarlet Order might offer. They

boasted multiple properties and an “environment for everyone,” which begged the question—did every room look like the one she’d taken with Draco?

Interest mixed with the fluttering nerves in her stomach, and Hermione smoothed the fabric of her dress against her thighs.

The same one she’d worn on her first visit.

She couldn’t help but want to play the game, too.

But this time, she entered room four as herself—no glamour, no pretences, no question of what she might find or if she might like it.

Hermione knew exactly what she wanted, and exactly what she was after.

This was courage, she remembered. Facing down the unknown. Staring something down that could hurt you, but knowing that you had to trust that everything would be okay. That it would turn out the way it needed to. That she couldn’t control *everything*. Not any more.

Her resolve spurred her forward, slipping inside quickly, but it was the sudden, overwhelming familiarity that finally made her hesitate.

Their room.

Dark stained floors. A thick carpet of abstract strokes with splashes of red and grey.

Bookshelves lining the wall, stacked full of books. The place where she’d challenged him. Where he’d cornered her, pressing into her from behind while he called out her desires. With her fingers gripping the edge of the shelves, he’d tried to scare her off but had only enticed her more.

A warm leather couch with two matching armchairs. Furniture that she was intimately familiar with, having shared their innermost selves and desires for better or for worse. The place that she’d first glimpsed him after years apart. Followed by apologies and tense conversations, then the tentative exploration of their bodies. Her, naked on his lap. Bent over the back of the couch with his belt around her wrists. Wrapped in his arms after, as he stroked her hair and cradled her until she fell asleep, Draco needing the affectionate come down just as much as she did.

A plain wooden coffee table that she now knew could be charmed higher or longer, depending on the needs of the witches or wizards using it. The place she’d been strapped down for the first time and terrified about her own reactions to him. Where she’d had to come to terms with her jealousy and the instincts that pushed her to defy.

So many memories, all wrapped up in one room. But it didn’t even scratch the surface. It didn’t begin to measure the way that he’d bled into the edges of her life, into his flat and then hers, and the way her interest in him had grown into something overwhelming and undeniable before she’d even realised it could be a possibility.

He was smart, and witty, and one of the few people that could keep up with her. He challenged her. He wanted *better* for her, his own health and safety be damned. He agreed to their arrangement because she had been the one to insist, knowing how terrible of an idea it could have been. How it turned out to be.

Throughout it all, the most important thing Hermione had learned about him was this: Draco Malfoy was a man of action.

It wasn't just about how he found his own pleasure in conducting hers, or how he thrived on her permission. It wasn't about his need for control, or a power trip.

He wanted to do good, to be *better*. Everything he did was in service of those he loved. His father, for better or for worse. Putting his safety on the line to save his mother, when he surely could have been targeted by remaining survivors or supporters of Voldemort. To right the wrongs of his family. To atone for every time he hadn't been the one to step up, or to do the right thing. How he worked to serve her—to give her everything that she wanted and needed without question, because her happiness came before his own.

It was her turn to show him through action.

A piece of parchment sat on the table beside the door, written in his now-familiar script.

In the top drawer of this table is a blindfold. Please put it on and find a seat anywhere in the room you deem comfortable.

Hermione let out a deep breath before doing as instructed, leaving her wand on the table in exchange. Her nerves reignited as she made her way to the couch, taking the same seat as she had on her first visit.

This time, when she tied it around her eyes, she left no room to see. No peek of light at the bottom, no cheeky attempt to skirt Draco's instructions.

And then she waited. With her back straight and her hands resting on her thighs, she waited. She counted each breath, inhaling on odd counts and exhaling on the even, each second passed by with agonising slowness. She could have spent the extra time exploring the room, checking out the books on the shelves or poking around in the chest full of supplies in the corner, but something told her that this—this was where she needed to be.

Seconds melted into minutes, but instead of growing more nervous during the wait, she settled. Her body grew more relaxed, a sense of calm falling over her, and she leaned back against the tufted leather.

She couldn't be sure how much time had passed while she sat, waiting. Long enough that her senses became heightened with her lack of vision—every element around her distilled into something clearer than it was before. With the focus, she found her feelings falling into place alongside it.

The cool touch of air against her arms and legs. The warmth of the leather against her back. The light scent of her own perfume blending in with her surroundings.

Her ears prickled with awareness when she heard it—the metallic click of the door handle and the soft swing of the hinges—but she followed her instincts to stay relaxed, to keep her breathing steady, to not jump up and rip off her blindfold and plead for his forgiveness.

Patience, she soothed herself. There was no question that he had set up their meeting like this for a reason. The lack of communication. The detached request for a meeting “date.” The blindfold, and

the extended wait. He was recreating their first night, and they were still equally as determined to prove themselves.

When it clicked shut, she stiffened. She held her breath as he stood behind her, but she didn't turn. With her eyes closed beneath the blindfold, she continued to wait.

"A pleasant surprise," a deep voice finally drawled. The sound of his voice sent goosebumps rippling down her neck and across her arms. *Draco*. Warmth spread through her chest instantly. Like her magic recognizing his own, satisfaction bloomed beneath the surface of her skin.

It was less about being right as it was about being together again.

She waited just a beat before answering, powerless to respond in kind. "Someone once told me I was good at following instructions."

The quiet, measured sound of his steps, rounding the couch, was the only signal that he approached. When he spoke again, it was clear that he was standing close enough to touch.

"Is that so?" There was a light tug on her blindfold and a moment of silence. Satisfaction that he wouldn't find it loose was enough to light a flare of pleasure in her stomach. "I suppose they weren't entirely wrong."

"They taught me well."

He made a thoughtful noise, and there was a pressure on the cushion next to her. The heat of his body seeped into hers, the soft fabric of his suit jacket brushing just slightly against her bare arm. When the scent of his cologne, warm and luxurious, wafted over to her, she had to fight not to lean into him completely.

"Are you going to ask what a witch like me is doing in a place like this?" she asked when he didn't say anything else, trying desperately to keep their game going.

"That depends—are you going to snap at me if I do?"

Her cheeks heated, and she smiled to herself. "I'm sure that would be incredibly rude of me. Especially if, say, it were my first time."

It should have been alarming just how quickly she fell into the role play of it all, remembering almost every detail of their first visit together. With her fingers tangled in her lap, she waited for him to make the next move.

"It would, though I'm sure it would entice me as much as it offended me."

Beneath the blindfold, she could almost imagine the way he was surely smirking at her. She let her imagination fill in the gaps—the colour of his suit, the way his hair was likely parted and combed back. Could it have been mussed from his fingers? If he were stressed, perhaps. Or he had saved that particular honour for her?

"And I'm sure you would probably be wondering what kind of match I was, considering our conflicting experience levels."

Something soft brushed the bare skin of her thigh, right below the hem of her dress, but it disappeared as quickly as it arrived. His hand? His thumb?

"I'll admit," Draco started, "that there was a certain appeal that I couldn't deny. But I think now, in retrospect, I have a deeper appreciation for the way we both can't resist a mystery."

That had her biting her lip, digging her teeth in hard enough that it gave her something else to focus on instead of the new wave of anxiety and guilt that was threatening to cloud the haze of satisfied pleasure currently brewing in her stomach.

She didn't know what to say—would he even believe her if she tried to apologise? It was unlikely that he had asked her to come that night just to have sex with her, either. If he had, it would be as good as an instant rejection.

Hermione wanted a lot of things with him, but the continuation of a meaningless relationship based wholly on sex wasn't one of them.

"So what now?" she asked, willing her voice to be strong. Even.

His weight shifted on the couch beside her, his leg pressing harder against her thigh. A feather light touch began to sweep across her arm, down into the sensitive drop of her elbow, and she sucked in a breath. Want and regret and yearning added to the cauldron of emotions that threatened to consume her whole.

When the touch didn't immediately pull away, she allowed herself the slight relief of leaning further into it.

"I think we have a few things to discuss before we go any further," he replied easily. He seemed completely at ease, and not at all as nervous as she was. It only made her hands twitch, her fingers growing restless, and she focused on her own reactions instead. *Don't rush it.* Still his hand swept across her skin, tracing the lines of her veins down to her wrist. "I've heard that a game of question and reward might be a good way to start."

She swallowed past the growing anxiety. This was familiar. This was something she knew. "Okay."

"I think it's my turn to go first, is it not?" he asked. It wasn't until she nodded that he continued. "Why are you here?"

No dancing around the question. No allusions to his first question to her about her intake form, and this time, she wouldn't lie.

"Because you asked me to come." Her answer was instant. "Because I'm in love with you, and I trust you completely."

"Do you, though?" His question had an edge to it, and Hermione stiffened.

"I—" She caught herself on the edge of answering. "I think it's my turn, actually. Or I get a reward. Isn't that how it works?"

His hand paused, his fingers stilling on her skin, and fear flashed through her. Had she misstepped?

When his hand drifted away, certainty felt like a lead weight in her stomach. But instead of pulling away completely, his hand came to rest on her jaw, and he turned her face toward him.

"What would you like for your reward, then?"

This time, she hesitated.

“To show you how much I mean it.”

His shock was palpable. It stilled the air around them, and even without her vision, she knew he was likely eyeing her with suspicious uncertainty.

When he didn’t reply, she continued. “You told me once that my apologies only count if I really meant them. So let me.”

After going through so much with Draco in such a short amount of time, she knew that he needed this. That *she* needed it. He had always known just how much to give and take with her, but now, with everything that had happened, it was clear that he was holding back. Hiding behind their roles, he was waiting her out.

“And how do you suppose you’re going to do that?” His question stood as a challenge between them.

Hermione took her time standing, then put a knee on the couch beside Draco’s.

“With something that I’m not going to like. Not at first, at least.” Her reply was ruined by a nervous smile. She gathered the skirt of her dress in her fists and began to drag it up, exposing her bare thighs and knickers to Draco. She couldn’t see anything, but the feel was enough to make her start to blush. “You told me from the very beginning that the most important thing between anyone doing this was trust. That I would need to trust you to know what I needed and for you to know how to give it to me.”

She’d chosen a new set of knickers for him—this time a deep green by her own choice. A small gesture, but one nonetheless. He didn’t speak as she took position, pulling her other knee onto the couch as well and feeling her way as she slowly draped herself across his lap. With her arse exposed and her cheek pressed against the soft leather, she waited.

“And if I remember correctly, you questioned how I would know what you needed when I didn’t even know you.”

His thighs were stiff under her hips, and he still didn’t touch her, but she was willing to wait.

“I was afraid then, but I’m not now.”

She could have gone on, citing all his original reasons. How he’d told her how afraid she was to give up control. How men like him thrived on taking it and twisting it into something better, something that brought them both pleasure. But she didn’t need to. He knew her just as well as she knew him, and there was no arguing it.

He didn’t relax underneath her, but he did reward her with a firm hand on her thigh. His fingers gripped around the backside, right underneath her arse, and kneaded the soft flesh.

“You lied.”

All the air left her lungs in a rush. When she answered, it was small, but necessary. “I did.”

“I don’t take kindly to lying.”

“I know.”

She knew his next statement before it left his lips.

“I said it then and I’ll say it now—it sets a distasteful precedent for our relationship, and now look at what’s happened.” Another squeeze of his hand, his thumb creeping between her legs. She shifted just slightly, and he continued. “I realise now, however, that as angry as I am with you, I’m not surprised.”

“Wait—” She tried to sit up, ready to reargue her case, but he used his other hand to push her back down. With his palm anchored between her shoulder blades, she felt it.

She felt his shift, the way his whole body tightened.

“Let me finish.” The command was sharpened by anger, but there was no mistaking the power in his tone. She had offered, and he would be taking.

In a gesture, she moved her hands above her head, clasping her fingers together just like he’d asked the first time. Positioned and ready for whatever he wanted.

The hand that was on her thigh moved up to grasp at her knickers, pulling them tighter between her cheeks. Exposing more of her bare skin, he traced the lace edge with his finger.

“It was wrong of me to expect such extreme trust and honesty so instantaneously. I disregarded our past because I had spent years thinking of my own regret and nothing else. I failed to comprehend how you might not feel the same way, even outside of this room. I can’t blame you for doing what you did.”

She relaxed slightly, willing herself to stay calm and still. The first *slap* of his palm against her arse was a sharp crack of noise, and she startled more from the lack of warning than the pain that followed.

“Nor can I blame you for doing what you’ve always done,” Draco continued. Another spank, this time on the other side, but she focused on the sound of his voice instead. “It was foolish of me to think that I could stop *Hermione Granger* from going after something that piqued her interest.”

A third, and heat began to bloom beneath her skin.

“It’s who you are, and it was wrong of me to expect anything less.”

He rained down another two swats, and the warmth began to burn. Each one stung from the flat of his palm, and she could tell he wasn’t holding back.

Still, she didn’t speak, sensing his need—this was just as much a release for her as it was for him.

“What I can’t get over—” another smack, sharp enough this time that her breath hiccuped, “--was how easily you lied to me.”

A seventh spank had her whole body tensing, but she could feel the pleasure beginning to bleed beneath the surface of the pain. How she was getting turned on during something so emotional was well beyond her current comprehension.

“How *easily* you looked me in the eye and let me make those promises—promises that *you* returned.”

When he paused, his hand didn’t come down for another slap. Instead he gripped her arse, squeezing the reddened flesh. It emphasised the pain, sending it pulsing straight to her core, and Hermione couldn’t help but whimper against the couch. At the sound, he rained down another, then a second, then a third. All in quick succession and it had her twisting beneath his hand.

Tears began to well against her eyelashes, and she let out a shuddered breath.

“You could have *died*,” he hissed between clenched teeth. His anger was palpable, brewing around them, and he continued to spank her. Her eyes burned, her throat tightening with each lash. “You’re the first thing I’ve wanted—the first person I’ve *loved*, and—I—”

“Buckbeak—Buckbeak!” The safe word was little more than a strangled cry, but she was pushing herself up before he had time to react. It wasn’t a cognitive thought—not one that she made a deliberate choice to use—but an instinct that pulled the word from her chest. It was an instant realisation that now wasn’t the time to soldier through, to push on just to see how much she could endure. How much they could *both* endure.

She scrambled across his lap until her knees bracketed his hips, tearing off the blindfold and pressing her hands to either side of his face. There was nothing but the endless expanse of his grey eyes staring back at her, glistening with unshed emotion.

“I love you,” she said, her chin trembling. “I can’t take any of it back, and I won’t. But it doesn’t change how I feel about you. I thought I needed to know, and I thought that knowing would make it easier for me to give you a chance. I felt like I couldn’t really trust you until I knew everything. But I realised that it didn’t matter—none of it mattered—and I was falling for you anyways. If I hadn’t, there’s no telling what could have happened or who else might have gotten hurt, and for that I can’t be sorry. I won’t. Not when it saved your life.”

Draco’s eyes drifted shut at the same time his lips parted on a shuddered inhale. His hands found her waist, squeezing tight. When he spoke, it was little more than a shattered whisper.

“You’re the only thing I’ve wanted in years. The only thing I allowed myself to want. And not only did it feel like a lie, but I still almost lost you.”

Hermione rested her forehead against his. “My feelings for you were never a lie, Draco. Even when I didn’t want them to be, even when you terrified me, they were always there. You have every right to be angry with me for pursuing my research, but I never lied to you about how I felt.”

“How is there any difference?” He finally opened his eyes, resolve strengthening his words.

“Because you feel like home, too.”

It wasn’t simple, nor was it eloquent. But it was the only thing she could say—the only thing that fully comprehended the meaning of her feelings and intent. The only thing that she knew he would understand in return.

Their history would always be intertwined like a snarled knot of Devil’s Snare. Fraught with tension, it stretched back from that fateful moment that they both received their Hogwarts letters and wrapped around them with a quiet grip. Forever entangled, their paths and choices continued to

twist around each other until they were inexplicably linked. There was no changing it, no way to remove it completely, but there was something else. Something better.

Acceptance.

It wasn't until she stopped fighting it and learned to let go that she was able to slide through. To save herself, and them both.

Draco's soft kiss felt like relief. The second, absolution. The third, an apology. Her chest tightened, pressing tight against his, and her arms wrapped around his neck at the same time his wound the rest of the way around her waist.

"I'm sorry," he said against her lips. "For everything. You were right, I should have told you."

"Me too."

"Don't do it again."

"Or you."

"I won't."

"Me either."

Each kiss became a promise, punctuating their words as her fingers buried themselves in his hair. His hands pulled at the slack of fabric around her hips, holding on to her as tight as he could.

Soon the kiss deepened, tongues and lips sliding together and against each other as they poured themselves into it. Into each other. It was a slow kiss, their anger long since burned away. It was smouldering instead, and it heated her from within. He took his time kissing her, a steady exploration of her mouth with no end in sight. Each stroke of his tongue broke her and built her back up.

Draco was the first to break away, breathing heavily as he opened his eyes. His hands flexed from their hold, slowly releasing her waist and following the lines of her thighs around his hips. They settled there, gripping her bared skin.

"Robards offered to let me view your memories prior to the trial."

Hermione nodded slowly. She had anticipated as much.

"And did you?" she asked when he didn't expand any further.

"No," he answered with a slow shake of his head. "I've realised...seeing them won't change anything. It won't change what's happened between us, or how I feel."

One hand released her thigh, reaching into the inner chest pocket of his suit jacket. When he pulled it free, her bracelet was coiled around his fingers.

"I'm choosing you, Hermione. I'm ready to move on and forget it all, but I don't want to do that without you."

Her throat clogged with sudden, intense emotion.

"I don't—" she started, but it took her a second try to push past the hesitation. She had to make sure he knew—he had to understand just how much she wanted and what she wasn't willing to settle for. "I don't want this to just be about sex. I want the bracelet back, but only if it comes with everything. I want to be yours all of the time. Everywhere. I want to hear you call me Hermione in bed and Granger everywhere else. I want you to take me on dates, and to wake up in bed together. I want to get cross with you when you try to distract me from my reading by kissing my neck, and I want to teach you how to cook so you stop burning so many eggs. And I—I need to know that you want that too."

She wasn't willing to let anything be left unspoken. Not anymore. The weight of her love was pressing down against her, almost suffocating in its intensity. It filled every bit of her body, filling up the gaps until she didn't know where she ended and it began. It was just as much a part of her as her magic, and she refused to let it go.

Instead of answering her, Draco used his left hand to pull out his wand. "Give me your wrist."

Holding his gaze, she did as he requested and presented it between them. If he noticed the way her hand trembled, he didn't say anything. Instead he arranged the chain of rubies around her wrist and pressed the tip of the wand to the clasp.

"I love you, Hermione Granger."

The first time he'd wrapped it around her wrist, they'd kissed so hard Hermione had felt like she couldn't breathe. It had been intense and all-consuming, and she could remember the way her emotions pulled so taut that she thought she might snap and shatter into a thousand pieces. That feeling, that night at the pub, had been love and she hadn't even known it.

But now, with the distance and the knowledge of the truth between them, it reached even deeper into her soul. He didn't take his eyes off her as he whispered the charm to fuse the silver together, binding it into seamless permanence. It would never leave her wrist again.

Once complete, she intertwined their fingers and pressed her lips to his again.

"And I love you, Draco Malfoy."

A proclamation and a promise, her words broke something loose inside of him. He kissed her back, tracing the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue, and wasted no time taking what he wanted. What he needed. He grabbed her with renewed intent, dropping his wand to anchor one hand on the back of her neck and the other against her hips, and he used his strength to pull her body against his. His grip was tight, but she didn't fight it. She followed where he led, aligning her chest against his and widening her thighs until she was seated against his hips completely.

The contact spurred a groan from deep in his chest, and the familiarity of his body against hers sent a pulse of desire to her core.

His cock hardened, a thick ridge along the seam of her knickers, and she grew breathless quickly. From the kiss, the feel of him, or their declarations to each other, she couldn't be sure. But she was done trying to guess why Draco made her feel the way he did, or to spend minutes and hours justifying her reactions with logical, reasonable explanations.

None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was consummating their promises, and it fueled her desire and arousal instantly.

She was already wet from his swats to her arse, but the warmth between her thighs began to grow again with every press of her core against his cock and the rock of her hips as her body sought friction against his.

The lace of her knickers pressed against the swollen head of her clit, and she moaned into the kiss. He swallowed the sound, his hand coming around to bracket her jaw. Using his leverage to pull back just slightly, he brushed her wet lips with his thumb.

The first time she'd begged him to tell her what to do.

This time she knew.

"Touch me."

Arousal and desire were burning through her veins, scorching a path that left nothing behind. His touch was a welcome reprieve, his fingers pushing her knickers out of the way and sinking into her and down to the knuckle with immediate ease.

Her relieved sigh was cut short by the satisfied expression that tugged at the corner of his lips.

"I think I remember saying something about thinking you were perfect. Made for me, even."

When he began to reward her with shallow, slow thrusts, she dropped her head back, opening her neck for him to hold.

"You were right," she agreed, her eyes fluttering closed.

She let Draco set the pace, giving her exactly what she wanted, trusting he would build up to what she *needed*.

When he slipped a second finger beside the first, his middle and ring fingers moving in tandem together, she widened her thighs so far that the muscles began to burn. It had been weeks since she'd seen him, weeks since her last orgasm, and she could feel it building even before he'd touched her clit.

With his hand wrapped around her neck and his fingers buried in her cunt, Hermione writhed against his grip, revelling in it. She could hear the sound of her wetness beginning to gather against his hand, and the pull of her knickers against her skin only added to the sensations.

But it wasn't quite enough. She needed his skin against hers, his mouth against her body.

Sensing the question building in her chest, he pulled her head back up. "Ask for it. Tell me what you want."

At the same moment, his thumb pressed against her clit, and any answer she might've had ready was cut short.

"Say it," he demanded, giving her no reprieve.

Her thoughts were lost to the tight circles he traced around her clit, each pass pulling her orgasm closer to the edge.

"I want—" she panted, "-everything. All of you. *Please.*"

Using his grip to pull her closer, Draco pressed his lips against her neck. He followed a path up to her ear while his palm dropped down to her breast, covering it completely.

“Not until you come all over my hand like a good little witch,” he said, his voice dropping so low that it sent a shiver racing across her skin.

“Do you want me to promise to rip this dress off with my teeth?” he teased next, his lips crossing back down her neck and collarbone until she felt a tug on the thin strap. “Do you want me to tell you how filthy you are? How you smell like an absolute feast?”

The memory washed over her, and Hermione closed her eyes. She didn’t need the added layer of the fantasy to push her over the edge, but the addition of a third finger had her spiralling even closer. The stretch. The burn. The warm press of metal against her entrance felt like a brand, and everything between her legs coiled tighter.

“Or do you want me to tell you how every night without you in my bed, I wake up thinking I can still smell your shampoo on my pillows? How I think about the way your moans echoed in my shower? How I can only think of you—*dream* of you—and it’s a constant state of torture that I never want to end?”

His thumb pressed down, swiping harder, faster. When he nipped at her neck, his teeth digging in just slightly against the muscle, she finally broke with a cracked sob. Her inner muscles spasmed, pleasure flowing and flooding through her pelvis. It was fast and sharp, breaking over her like the crash of the tides.

He’d always wanted to hear just how much she wanted it, so this time she let him know just how much she wanted *him* instead.

“I love you—Oh Gods, Draco—I love you so much,” she gasped. “Don’t stop, please. Never stop.”

Draco worked her through it, thrusting deeper and curling his fingers forward to rub at the sensitive tissues at the front of her pelvis. Another wave seized her, flooding between her legs as she spasmed, and she curled forward to drop her forehead onto his shoulder.

Slowly, as she came down, she registered him slowly pulling his hand free from her core. His weight shifted beneath hers, and she felt him slowly uncurling her fist from his suit jacket before a familiar press of magic between her fingers.

He’d given her his wand.

“Vanish them.”

Glancing up, the heat in his eyes was molten. His jaw was set and his chest expanded on a deep inhale, and she felt his hands beginning to shake as he tugged at the hem of her dress. Whether he didn’t have the magic to spare or he wanted her to do it for them, she didn’t mind.

“*Evanesco.*”

The instant feel of his skin against hers was more than relief. It was *right*.

She let her weight rest against him, her breasts pressing against his bare chest as she arched her hips back. His cock nudged at her entrance, and his hand came to wrap around the base before he

aligned himself.

Sinking down, she let herself fall into the bliss that was the slow press of his cock. Once buried she stilled, relishing the feel of him inside her after so long.

Draco's sigh was heavy, ruffling the curls by her ear. "Gods, darling..."

His touch was as commanding as it was reverent.

He guided her back with ease, his hand resting gently against her collarbone. He didn't press or squeeze, but positioned her far enough back that he could drop his head to swirl his tongue around one of her nipples.

"Oh—" The loose breath of her moan was cut off by his other hand reaching down to trace identical circles around her clit.

It was a delicate touch, no longer angry or punishing, and he took his time savouring her until she began to squirm on top of him. Restless with both want and need, she rocked her hips against him, not quite a full tempo but enough to give herself a teasing bit of friction. It accentuated the touch of his thumb, her body working against his, and he gave her a mumbled hum of approval around her nipple before switching to the other side.

With his tongue and thumb he traced promises into her skin. Runes. Words. He whispered and mumbled against her, the vibrations of his voice and his light touches pushing her closer to the edge with every syllable and stroke.

It didn't take long until she was shaking. "I can't—I need—"

She wasn't sure what she needed. To move more fully, perhaps? To lift up and drop herself down on top of him until she was bouncing? For him to start meeting her thrusts with his own? For him to tilt her backwards until he was on top so he could fuck her into oblivion?

Any of it. All of it. Everything, all at once.

"What is it?" He asked. "Tell me what you need, darling. You know I'll give it to you."

"Take—" She stuttered when his thumb sped up, the circles tightening. "Take it."

She saw it now for what it was. By giving up the momentary control, readily offering it to him, he could overwhelm her senses in the exact way she needed.

In the way she'd always been searching for.

But she never really lost her own. She was still just as much in charge as he was. Every action, every choice, was made for her, with her best interests in mind. It brought them closer, their needs working together for each other.

As Draco took her wrists, pulling them behind her back until her spine was arched and her breasts were presented in offering, she felt it click into place.

That same sense of rightness, of surety, that she'd felt during her first time with him.

It changed the angle, and when she shifted her weight to her knees he began to move from underneath her. Utilising the position to thrust up between her spread thighs, he didn't hold back. His grip was tight, pulling her arms down just enough that her shoulders began to burn, but it was nothing in comparison to the heat of arousal in her core.

With every stroke she fluttered against him, her thighs shaking and her hips rocking.

Satisfied that she was in place, Draco shifted his grip until he held both of her wrists with one hand. The other resumed its rightful place between her legs, stroking and toying with her clit. He used two fingers, alternating each until the natural vibration had her eyes rolling back.

"Is that it?" he asked, his voice strained. His thrusts were slow and measured, but when she opened her eyes she saw the flush on his chest. He was still in control, but very obviously on the edge.

"Yes," she answered easily. "Just like that."

Though he still held her back, she couldn't help but meet his hips with her own tempo. It increased the depth and enhanced the pressure on her clit, and soon she felt the telltale signs of her second orgasm approaching.

Months before she struggled to have one. Now, she had to fight off her second.

With her teeth digging into her bottom lip, she whimpered just slightly. His hand was an iron grip around her wrists, digging the bracelet into her skin, and every single sensation was quickly piling up into something bigger and completely overwhelming.

"I'm not sure how long I can last," she breathed out in honesty. "I can't—I've missed you too much."

His smile was devastating. "I'll never make you wait again."

Pleasure tightened inside her core, fluttering around the thick of his cock, and he began thrusting harder.

"But now?"

She knew well enough to read between the lines.

"But now you wait for me. We come together."

The thought of him—the memory of it, really—pulsing between her legs and deep into her cunt almost sent her spiralling out of control. Her muscles clenched, a single spasm, and she cried out.

"I'm so close," she warned.

Draco's laugh was deep, and he leaned up to press an open mouthed kiss to the sensitive skin stretched taut across her collarbone.

"Try your best," he told her. "Be a good girl for me, Hermione. I know you can do it."

Her groan of frustration melted into his satisfied moan when she fluttered around him again, the praise never failing to send even more pleasure sparking across her nerves.

She couldn't help but sink down against him, releasing some of the weight from her knees and rocking her hips instead to keep his cock buried deep. It hit parts of her that she couldn't reach on her own—ones that he alone owned.

"Please, please, please..." Her pleas became a steady chant, timed with every thrust of his cock and every brush of his fingers.

But he never faltered, or pulled back. He allowed her to move on top of him, to meet his hips with her own frantic pace, rocking and writhing as she spun out toward the edge.

"Fuck," Draco cursed, his own tempo beginning to grow unsteady. "Gods, do you know how much it took for me not to tell you that I loved you? Every single time?"

His words spurred her farther, higher, growing wetter with every admission.

"When?" she asked, breathless. She had to know.

"Does it matter?"

"It always matters."

If she were anyone else, if *they* were anyone else, she would laugh at the idea of arguing during sex, especially when she was trying so desperately to hold on. Her nipples were so tight they ached, but she didn't dare ask for his mouth or tongue. Not when she wanted the knowledge more.

"You first."

She laughed, the sound more than a little strained. "You said I couldn't."

Draco's answering growl was enough to have her thighs tightening against his, the drag of her hips across his fingers turning frantic.

"Maybe I'll show you one day," he bartered.

"You're a prat."

"You love it."

"No, I love *you*," she corrected. It was taking every bit of energy, every fibre of her being, to remain focused, but the admission fell easily from her lungs. Despite her arguments, she wasn't quite sure she could pinpoint the moment when she fell for him. It was well before the day in the Department of Mysteries, that much she knew. Probably even before he gave her the bracelet she now wore around her wrist, and the same one that was currently branding her skin with the imprint of the stones. She had only been too afraid to acknowledge it at that point—why else would she have felt so guilty for so long?

It didn't matter, though. None of it mattered. The only thing that did was that they'd both survived. Not just Adelaide, or Cordelia, either. But all of it. They had both clawed and fought their way to each other, and they finally made it.

"Draco..." His name was little more than a warning falling from her lips.

"I know," he answered roughly. "I feel it too."

“Please,” she begged. “Please come. Let me come.”

When she ground down against him, her walls tightening in anticipation, he finally nodded.

“Together.”

She wasn’t sure who said it, but it was enough. Her orgasm broke free at the same moment, flooding through her with blinding intensity. Had she not known better, she could have sworn it was magic. It overtook her senses, roaring in her ears and drowning everything else out. The sound of his own orgasm was lost, but she still felt it. She felt him go still beneath her, his cock pulsing deep inside of her, and his hand pressing even harder around the delicate bones in her wrist.

It only added to it. It sent her higher, sparking across her nerves and sparkling in her veins until it felt like she was floating. Every muscle in her body went tight and she curled into him, against him, and held the air in her lungs until it burned.

She finally came to when she felt his lips against her face, pressing kisses against her skin. Her cheeks. Her lips. Her jaw. Her eyes. Her forehead. No place left untouched, his hands held her face close while he praised her.

“I love you so much, darling,” he told her between kisses. “And I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for everything.”

Slowly, she found the strength to open her eyes. Staring back at her was the purest, most unadulterated form of love she’d ever seen. There was no doubt in her mind or her heart just how genuine Draco was, or how much he meant what he was saying.

And unlike the first time, when her orgasm was ruined by the cold shock of horror at who was staring back at her, she leaned into his kiss. Raising her hand to press against his at her cheek, she basked in the warmth and strength of his naked body against hers.

“I love you too, Draco. But no more apologies. I think we’ve had enough of those.”

He pressed one last kiss to her neck, his hands slipping from her face and down to her waist where he hugged her close.

“I think you might regret saying that one day. I’m sure I can find plenty to apologise for.”

“So can I,” she sighed against his chest. It was a bet she wouldn’t lose.

By the time Hermione extracted herself from his lap, their bodies had long since cooled. With stiff limbs and sore muscles she lifted herself and dropped at his side, her legs draped across his and her shoulders tucked beneath his arms.

They didn’t speak, instead revelling in the silence as they settled into what she hoped—no, *knew*—would be their new normal.

Draco found his wand and raised it towards the chest against the wall, summoning a blanket quickly to cover both of their bodies. He smoothed it out over her legs, and she felt the tremor in his hands before she saw it.

“Your magic,” she said, sitting up to grab his hand. “I didn’t even think to ask—”

"It's fine," he cut her off, tightening his grip around hers and bringing her fingers to his lips. He gave each knuckle a chaste kiss. "I'm fine."

"You're not," she argued. "You were attacked and we didn't even discuss how you were feeling—"

Emotion threatened to overtake her, overwhelming any lingering satisfaction from the sex and her orgasms. Her body went tense, muscles stiffening, but he silenced her with a hard look.

"We don't need to. It was horrifying for us both, and maybe one day we can. But for right now, it doesn't matter. It might take a few months, but my magic is coming back. I'll need to see a healer once a week for progress evaluations, but I'm fine otherwise."

Hermione stayed silent, a renewed sense of anger taking hold.

"*It matters,*" she assured him. Had their situations been reversed, he would be sick with worry—there was no doubt in her mind. "*You* matter, Draco."

He cast her a light smile, so much softer than his usual smirk, and raised his hand to stroke his thumb across her jaw.

"I know. But I don't want it, or them, to taint what we have any more than what has already been done. There's no changing it now."

She caught his hand with her own, her fingers tracing across his knuckles and rings. He let her hold his hand, and when she pulled it into his lap, he allowed it.

"So what now?" she asked instead, burying the hundreds of questions she would have rather asked.

Draco was silent, and licked his lips as he looked toward the wall in thought.

"Anything we want, I suppose."

Hermione almost rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, if memory serves correctly, I already told you what I wanted. What do *you* want?"

"To follow you to the ends of the earth," Draco answered easily, his lips sharpening into a knowing smirk. "Or perhaps to my bed."

So much for softness, she thought with a slight laugh.

"Now that my work with Robards is nearly complete, I'm not sure," he continued, sobering. "I haven't given much thought to my life outside of that for several years. You were...you were the first thing to take me by surprise in a long time. The first thing I've cared about outside of my work with the Ministry."

When her fingers grazed the surface of his signet ring, the one emblazoned with the *M* that he had imprinted into her skin so long ago, she paused.

Draco looked at her, watching with close attention as she began to pull it free from his knuckle.

Once in her fingers, she held it up to the light. It was a simple design of silver or platinum, but surprisingly heavy. She took a moment to examine it in the silence, but her next move felt as natural as the day she took hold of her first wand in the middle of Ollivander's.

She let it slide down her ring finger, plenty loose enough that it would fall off easily, but she admired it for a long moment before looking back at Draco.

“Then I guess we’ll figure it out together, won’t we?”

His gaze was torn, flitting between her face and his signet ring on her ring finger.

“...*Granger*. ”

This time, her name wasn’t a question, falling from his lips in shock. It wasn’t a douse of cold water, washing across her senses. It wasn’t a symbol of their pasts, or a horrified reminder of who they each were. It wasn’t an end to the things that they’d just done.

It was a beginning, instead.

It was a promise.

And when Draco pulled her closer, easily lifting her weight back onto his lap, she didn’t fight him. Instead she latched on, wrapping her arms around his neck as her legs slid around his hips. He seemed to know it just as soon as she did, intent filling his tone. No longer running, no longer in denial. There was no question who, or what, she wanted.

With his hands around her waist, she Apparated them home.

To *her* home. Together.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello on [tumblr](#) or [twitter](#). I can also be found lurking about in the Room of Requirement and Dragon Heart-String discord servers, too.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

One year later, Draco and Hermione return to The Scarlet Order.

Chapter Notes

One year ago today I finished Contradictions. In honor of that occasion, it only felt right that today be the day I finally say goodbye to this story with the final epilogue. Over the last twelve months I've received plenty of questions about what their epilogue or continuation might look like, and I never could pin it down. I wrote out two other drafts that got scrapped because they didn't feel like they were good enough, but then last week this little idea fell into my lap. It all came together in a way that reminded me so much of how it felt when I was writing the original chapters, and with the timing there was no doubt that this was supposed to be the epilogue all along.

Thank you to everyone who has read and supported this story in the last year. This epilogue is dedicated to all of you.

And as always, thank you to my beta Brit, who didn't hesitate to take my hand and jump back into this little universe with me.

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

ONE YEAR LATER

Darling,

Meet me at our room. Tonight at seven. Wear this and your bracelet only.

Don't make me wait.

Love,

Draco

The sleek black owl dropped a small package alongside the note, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to uncurl her fingers from the parchment. Draco had been gone for a week—consulting with the French ministry on a favour—and any regular correspondence she had been hoping for while he was gone turned out to be painfully absent due to his busy schedule.

Until this. Until now.

Her heart kicked up, the steady thump turning to a hard gallop. *Our room* meant The Scarlet Order, which they hadn't visited in almost six weeks. Their relationship had been evolving over the last year—once openly together, they had few reasons to continue to meet on neutral ground. It was easier and more comfortable to spend their nights at his place or hers, where they could fully relax into their roles.

Or, rather truthfully, so Draco could keep her cuffed to the bed until dawn and tease her with light kisses and heavy touches until she was nearly sobbing with want. Then, he would fuck her until his name was little more than a rasp in her throat.

He would still take her to the club whenever she requested, and had recently planned an elaborate visit to the viewing room for her birthday, but this...this was something else entirely. This was a clear directive from her dominant, not her love. More often than not, they were one in the same in their desires and expectations. But there were still a few occasions when he surprised her with something harder. *Sharper*.

While they had softer moments together as their relationship progressed, he always held the same edge, the one he had when they'd first started meeting, and he kept careful to remind her of it when he knew she needed it most.

It appeared this would be one of those times.

She could feel it rooted deep in her abdomen, cemented by the assurance that she had grown to know and love Draco Malfoy in equal measure. It was as thrilling as it was ominous, and she carefully folded and tucked the letter in her nightstand where she could look at it again if and when she might need.

The owl was long gone by the time she worked up the courage to see what else he'd sent her, the small parcel laying flat and untouched on the wide window sill. It was criminally small, and couldn't hold more than a scrap of fabric. Which, she assumed, was exactly the point.

Too unsure to allow herself to be annoyed, Hermione slowly reached for it, making sure to shut the window and move over towards the bed before peeling back the glossy ribbons that tied it closed. All it took was one tug for it to unravel and fold open on its own, and as soon as she registered what she was looking at, her breath left her lungs in a heavy rush.

It was *the* lingerie. Or at least, a replica of it.

Soft green lace, so dark it was almost black, with delicate scalloped edges and matching elastic. She let her fingers drift across the material, taking stock of the minimal coverage it would allow. Months and months ago, when he'd gifted this to her the first time, it had been a test. She had no doubt this was round two.

But this time she only briefly considered charming it red.

"Better not," she murmured to herself, picking up the garter to examine it closer.

The light overhead illuminated the details, and that's when she saw it. It wasn't the same set, though it looked nearly identical. This one had one minor difference—an almost invisible addition.

His name, embroidered onto the inside of the band of the garter in that same midnight green shade, and just raised enough to leave her with no doubt of what the purpose was. The same as he often did with his ring when he gripped her hips or pressed into her shoulders or wrapped his hand around the base of her throat, this would ensure the lasting imprint of his name on the inside of her thigh.

Cheeky. Though she could feel her lips edging into a smile, there was still an undercurrent of uncertainty that bloomed in her abdomen and stopped it from growing any larger. Next to it, tendrils of anticipation snaked around her ribs, and she took a shaky breath. It had been a long time since she'd felt this nervous for a meeting with him, but as she released the air from her lungs, she allowed herself to sink into it, knowing this was an essential part of the process.

She embraced the nerves as she set to the bathroom to take a shower, preparing herself for what was to come. The ritual of the motions soothed her—the steam relaxed her muscles, and the scent of his expensive conditioner as she combed it through her curls made her longing grow more prominent. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine him there with her, watching as water ran down her body and her fingers softly followed its trail.

Scrubbing at her skin, she avoided giving in to the temptation to circle her nipples or indulge in a few strokes between her thighs. A slight ache had grown in her core from the moment she saw the lingerie, which seemed to double over every time she thought about how he had made it into something more.

Soon, she was wrapping an oversized towel around her body and reaching for her wand to charm her hair dry. He hadn't instructed her on anything besides her outfit for the evening, so she stuck to what she knew. Loose, soft curls that fell down her shoulders that he wouldn't be able to resist touching. Just enough makeup to become smudged and smoky when he inevitably brought her to the edge over and over again. A slight tint for her lips that he had once admitted haunted him when they weren't together—ones he imagined wrapped around his cock, or when she left a path of it tracked across his neck and chest.

By the time she was finished and dressed, she still had a half an hour to pace through her flat. Her bracelet was already locked around her wrist—once repaired from its initial break, Draco admitted that he'd had it reforged. It was no longer held together by a simple clasp, but unbreakable goblin metal and enough spells that it would be nearly indestructible, making it even more irreplaceable than it already was. It wasn't until even later that he'd revealed the additional features it now held. Features she knew would be employed tonight.

She added the ruby necklace last, and shivered as the cool metal settled against her throat. Draco had offered on several occasions to have the magical gemstone reset into a different necklace, but she had steadfastly refused. Yes, it was simple, and it was likely the standard for all new members into The Scarlet Order, but it was *hers*. It was the one that brought them together, and that was worth more to her than having something expensive or lavish.

Barefoot and clad only in the bra, knickers, and garter he'd sent, she closed her eyes and took one final breath. She shoved away the instincts to grab a coat or a robe to cover herself; she knew better. This is how he wanted her to arrive, knowing and trusting and *expecting* that she do as instructed when it came to this. That it would pay off if she did, and any resistance would only hinder them both.

And since she had spent so long working against him, she now understood just how important it could be.

Since everything had occurred at the Ministry, it had taken them some time to recover. Trust wasn't built overnight with the swish of a wand but rather in small increments laid by hand. Brick by brick, choice by choice, touch by touch, they had come together and were stronger for it.

They spent hours talking and exploring, committing each other to memory without the veil of secrets between them.

He learned that she was ticklish behind her knees, and she learned that a single, soft kiss to the column of his neck could make him grow hard in an instant.

They fought over books, bickered over potion brewing techniques, quarrelled over who stole the blankets in the middle of the night.

But it wasn't just about Hermione's needs or desires, or what she was willing to do for him when he expected it. It was about what they could do for each other.

She would hold him close and stroke his hair when he admitted his deepest, darkest fears to her. That he might never be free of the shadows that haunt his life. That his past would catch up to him again, over and over, and that eventually there would be nothing any of them could do. That his staunch need for control would finally crack and crumble beneath the pressure he exerted on himself.

He whispered apologies against her skin night after night, and she did the same. They shared their thoughts for the future, hidden by the safe cover of lust and love, and agreed that one day they would figure it out.

They grew together, tangling into each other until their roots were knotted and firm. Unshakable. Unmovable. And no matter how nervous she might be, *that's* what she reminded herself of as she Apparated into their room at The Scarlet Order.

Her eyes opened to find him waiting for her, despite knowing she still had plenty of time to spare before the clock on the bookshelf struck seven. He wasn't usually this early, but then again, neither was she. Not to this degree, at least.

It wouldn't have piqued her attention if not for his stance. He wasn't waiting casually for her by the bookshelf, keeping himself busy, nor was he stationed in the armchair that they preferred to use so frequently. Instead, he stood in the middle of the room, feet set apart, shoulders back, chin held high.

“Darling.” He addressed her with a slight nod. His hair was carefully combed back, not a strand out of place, and his grey eyes were sharp as he took her in.

The uncertainty in her stomach notched higher. Then again when she registered how he was dressed.

Over the months, he'd grown more casual with her. Looser, freer, less tightly wound and perfectly put together. But tonight it appeared he had returned to his roots—wearing what appeared to be a brand new suit, he was dressed in a way that spoke to his wealth *and* his attention to detail. Classic black with a crisp white shirt, it was sleek and tailored to a hair's-width of his proportions. Platinum

adornments glinted in the light: cufflinks, tie clip, ring. Even his shoes were gleaming—all shined and spotless. Untouched.

This was, in fact, no ordinary night.

He was planning something special. Something big.

“Draco.” Her voice sounded unsteady, even to her own ears. If he took notice, he made no sign of it. She wanted to walk over to him, to wrap her arms around his waist and burrow her nose against his chest. But she didn’t. She held back, knowing that as soon as she’d received his letter, the rules that she had agreed to were firmly in place. “I’ve missed you.”

He held her gaze for a long moment, his grey eyes growing warmer. Finally, he approached.

“And I, you. You were on my mind every waking moment this last week.” He stopped just in front of her. A whisper of a touch lifted her chin. “You look lovely. Thank you for wearing my gift. And for not adding any special flourishes this time.”

Heat filtered through her cheeks. She’d forgotten for a few brief moments just how exposed she really was.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

His grin was slow to unravel, and it was one of her favourite of his smiles—the dangerous one, the one that reminded her of all the ways he could make her wild—and she felt her stomach swoop low in response.

“Lying already?” He made a slight *tsk* noise against his teeth, his finger drifting down her neck, across her chest, stopping between her breasts. The gentle touch made her shiver. “I’m not sure that’s a wise choice tonight.”

Some nights she enjoyed freely giving in, doing her best to be his *good girl* and earning every bit of praise that came with it. But others, likely more often than not, it was like this. A cat and mouse game where Draco liked to hunt and she liked to be hunted. To give them both an opportunity to work for it, and it made the payoff that much sweeter.

She blinked up at him, eyes wide. “It’s not a lie. Your letter didn’t say I couldn’t *consider* it.”

Tilting his head back, he let out a breathless laugh, but any softness that might have lifted his features vanished just as fast as it appeared. “Please go stand in the middle of the room, hands behind your back.”

He watched her walk, his gaze heavy on her skin, and didn’t approach until she was in place. Then, he began to circle with slow, predatory steps. His eyes never landed in one place too long, taking stock of her hair, her makeup, her body and the lace that adorned it.

All the while, she kept her eyes forward, focusing on every breath that entered and exited her lungs. It steadied her, keeping her from shrinking under the intensity of his attention.

It was clear that he had a mission tonight, but now so did she. Curiosity plucked at the threads of uncertainty and desire that were tangled up in her chest, adding a new edge to her awareness.

She loved puzzles, and tonight—this surprise—immediately became her newest fascination.

His letter. His uncharacteristic distance. The gift from their past, and his clothing choice for the evening. The way he didn't sweep her up in his arms as he usually did, and was instead indulging in a level of restraint that she hadn't seen from him in many, many months.

What was he planning?

She would figure it out soon enough.

Finally, he came to a stop in front of her.

"Tell me, darling," he said, unbuttoning his jacket slowly. "Did you think of me this week?"

"I did," she admitted freely. "I was hoping to hear from you more. It hurt to go to bed every night alone, wondering and not knowing what you might be up to."

At another time, in another life, it would have taken Veritaserum to get her to admit such a thing so easily.

"I know, and for that I apologise. My schedule was busier than I intended, and I needed to ensure a few things were in place before I returned home." He slipped his jacket off while he spoke, then slowly folded it to hang across the arm of the couch beside them.

Hermione couldn't deny the small kernel of hurt that shoved its way into her sternum. On a logical level, she understood that there would be instances in which it was best she not know *everything*. But that didn't mean she had to like it.

Still, he read her emotions clearly. "It will all come apparent in due time, darling. You've been very patient with me this week."

That had her lifting her chin. "Yes, I think I have."

"You've earned everything I have planned for tonight, but only if you behave." He rewarded her with a knowing look as he started on his cuffs, dropping his cufflinks into his palm and rolling up his sleeves with meticulous care. Though she didn't move physically, her eyes couldn't help but wander, watching the motion of his fingers as if transfixed. "Speaking of—*did* you behave while I was gone?"

Deep in her abdomen, arousal swirled.

"I did," she confirmed, though it was almost more difficult to admit than how much she'd missed him.

"Not once?" His tone took on a slight tilt, sharpening into a teasing edge.

"Not once," she echoed. But she'd thought about it. She'd thought about it a lot. She'd gone to bed thinking about it, and woken up with a mixture of memories and dreams that left her flustered and wanting all week. He'd only asked that she refrain from touching herself while he was gone, not that she couldn't fantasise about him at all.

"Tell me about your week?" He changed the subject, finishing with his sleeves. He didn't look back at her, but instead moved to his tie. Fingers dancing across the fabric, he slowly tugged the knot loose. By the time he slid it from his collar, it felt like her tongue was swollen and stuck in her throat.

Gods, she had missed him.

When she didn't speak, he finally looked up. His expression was patient yet expecting, and it only took one blink to have her snapped back into focus.

"I—" She paused just long enough to wet her lips when his motions resumed, unbuttoning his collar. "I had a few meetings with the Minister over the German centaur treatises."

Was she just supposed to stand here and watch him undress? The swirling had sped up to a veritable whirlpool at the exposed lines of his throat.

"Surely that can't be it?" he prompted.

His hands rested on his belt, meaning clear. He would not be continuing until she did.

Her response came out in a rush. "I saw Robards once, in the lift. He says hi. Ginny and I met up for lunch on Wednesday. I took off early this afternoon."

Draco's features cracked into a small, infinitesimal smile. "So efficient, my girl."

The praise was lovely, but she wanted more. His belt, specifically. When she dropped her eyes towards it, his grip tightened on the silver buckle.

"You seem to be in a hurry tonight," he observed.

Her nostrils flared on a frustrated huff, but she rolled her lips inward.

Draco waited several long moments, the silence growing around them like a vine. Within it, she began to come back to herself: feeling the slight quiver in her thighs, the chill of air on her exposed skin, the soft brush of her hair against her shoulders. She focused on the feel of the carpet beneath her toes and the slight scent of his cologne, grounding her senses into the scene instead of her frustration.

He watched her silently as her shoulders relaxed and she blinked slowly, holding his gaze. This was good. This is what she needed. Draco wanted her attentive for the scene and not clouded by her own frustration, and she needed to keep her wits to try to figure out what he was up to.

She couldn't do that if she got them both off track.

Finally, with a satisfied nod, he continued. Slowly pulling the belt from his trousers, he paused with it wrapped around his fist. The leather next to the metal of his rings sent a renewed shiver down her spine, remembering well enough all the times he'd used them both to break down her resolve and bring her back up again. He watched the way she trembled, then slowly lifted his attention back to her face.

"This will be your only choice tonight, darling—you may be bound by my tie, my belt, or your bracelet. Choose whichever will be most comfortable for you."

Her ruby bracelet, the one she rarely took off, had been charmed for this very experience. Not just a pair of cuffs, but *his*. All she had to do was to twist one of the stones and it would magically duplicate itself, snaking around her wrists until she was bound by rubies and a thin platinum chain.

Though she could bind herself, only Draco's wand was keyed to transform it back into a simple bracelet. Unlike the first time he'd bound her with his belt, leaving just enough slack that she could pull through if she needed, there was no escaping her bracelet when it was tight around her wrists.

Her heart felt too big for her chest—thumping loudly beneath her breastbone at the mere reminder of her voluntary captivity—and she felt each pulse in her fingertips. Anxiety and anticipation bubbled in her veins and fluttered deep in her core. It didn't matter how long it had been, or many times they did this, and she hoped it never changed.

"My bracelet." Instead of doing it herself, she brought her wrists forward and lifted them in offering. In *trust*.

He dropped his belt and hummed lightly, a warm sound that was accompanied by an even warmer touch once his hands wrapped around her wrist. "Good choice."

Though her bracelet was made to be able to transition quickly, Draco took his time dragging his fingers across the sensitive underside of her wrist, circling the delicate bone with his thumb and middle finger, holding her still as he found the correct stone, flipped it over, and settled it back into place.

With his hands binding her, they both watched as the bracelet took the place of his hold. Duplicating and winding around her skin, twisting and pulling until it connected back on itself. The first time she watched it happen, she'd held her breath so hard she'd become lightheaded. She'd expected it to look like a vine or a root, but it hadn't—there was a certain serpentine movement to the metal in the way it rolled and moved, tracking across her wrist.

And though this was far from the first time, she still felt a heady spike of panic strike through her stomach once she tested the hold. But instead of running from it or shrinking back in self-defence, she embraced the way it elevated her senses and made every other sensation that much stronger.

The air she drew into her lungs felt cooler, reaching spaces deeper inside her chest than before. Goosebumps raised on her skin, and the gentle callouses of his fingers as he drew away felt rougher and more prominent. When he stepped closer, drawing his hand up to pull the strap of her bra down her shoulder, Hermione had to hold back her moan.

The small attempt at self-control was short lived, because the moment his lips brushed the tender, sensitive spot at the base of her throat, a wounded noise broke past her lips. She tried hard not to lean into it, into him, but if he noticed the way her weight swayed forward against his chest, he didn't chastise her for it.

Instead he focused his attention on mapping her skin with his lips—moving down her collarbone and across her shoulder, then back. He stepped around her while he worked, his strong hands holding her in place while he made up for a week of lost touches and affection.

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed, fighting a losing battle against the softness of it all. Her mind was still clutching and scrambling towards order and reason, but with every pass of his lips the burn of curiosity was almost snuffed out completely.

By the time he made it to the back of her neck, holding her hair up to draw his nose across her nape, she had concluded at least one thing.

He wasn't mad at her, at least. He rarely got angry with her to begin with, his frustration mostly stemming from the ways she purposefully riled him or left books in front of the couch that he would often trip over, but it was clear this wasn't that.

Though the chance of that being the reason for his distance this last week was infinitesimal, it was still something to check off the list.

"Using my conditioner again?" He spoke between kisses, and she could feel the slight curve of his smile against her skin.

"Oops." She wasn't sorry, and he knew it. "I like smelling like you."

His hands tightened on her, his voice turned rough. "I like you smelling like me too."

By the time he finished, the straps of her bra were hanging loose around her upper arms, and every breath expanded at her chest and pulled tighter at the lace across her breasts. All it would take is one quick tug and they would fall free, but no matter how much she hoped—or arched her back in a cheap attempt at enticement—he ignored her chest completely.

Instead he did quite the opposite.

He slowly lowered himself to his knees, dragging his hands along the sides of her ribs, her waist, her hips, then finally stopping on her thighs. His thumb toyed with the edge of her garter, and his gaze turned molten when he looked up at her. A man at his shrine. Adoring, reverent, yet still commanding of the room around him and the woman above.

The world came to a standstill, a moment frozen in time.

Only once before had he knelt for her. After the first night in his bed and a morning where he'd shared so much and she hadn't shared nearly enough, he had sunk to the tile floor of his shower to worship and wash her in equal measure. She couldn't forget the guilt that wracked her while he took care of her so gently, giving her a soft place to land after taking her to heights she'd never known possible.

The sensation of him dragging his lips across the skin just below the lace had her weaving forward just slightly, memories of that night fading into the present moment.

"We're going to do something different tonight," he said, squeezing her thighs and drawing her attention to the firmness of his grip. "Until I give you permission, you are not to make any noise tonight. You are not to touch me. You will take what I give you, and follow my instructions without question. If you disobey, I stop and we go home."

The possible consequence made her stomach twist, feeding into the growing knots that were already firmly in place. Confusion tightened and tugged at them. Ideas were left half-formed at the back of her mind, an unintelligible mix of observations and thoughts and assumptions that were leading her nowhere. Yet. But she knew the potential possibility of what was to come was equally as terrifying as it was exhilarating.

She opened her mouth to answer but caught herself just in time—snapping her lips closed, she gave him a shaky nod instead.

Yes, Draco, her unspoken thoughts echoed. It was more important than ever that she not screw this up, despite her nature to press back or toe the line. The instinct to ask a thousand questions was thick in her throat, but she swallowed it back when his hands moved upward, fingers hooking into the waistband of her knickers to pull them down her thighs. Warmth pooled in her core as she stood above him.

After removing the lace from around her ankles, he nudged her feet apart. With just enough space for him to resume his soft kisses along the inside of her thighs, he kept his grip strong—the press of his fingers kneaded the muscles just below her arse while he lightly kissed and nipped up towards her cunt. The closer he got, the more she began to shake.

Somehow, it felt like the first time all over again. And she now realised this was why he had asked her not to touch herself in his absence—he hadn’t just been teasing or coy about missing her, but he wanted her already on the edge when he returned. Had he been planning this even before leaving for France?

By the time he dragged his teeth across the inner crease of her thigh, she was already regretting agreeing to be quiet. It was taking every bit of self-control to keep her breathing from bleeding into moans, and with every expansion of her chest the lace of her bra rubbed across her pebbled nipples.

Instead of continuing on his path, or giving her any momentary relief, he passed over her cunt completely. His mouth began a new endeavour along her other thigh, renewing his attentions until he kissed around the garter. With methodical precision he dipped down to her knee, then turned back up. She fought the urge to writhe or rock forward, and when he reached the apex of her thighs...he did it again.

Hermione’s fingers curled into fists above his head, careful not to touch him. The bite of pain from her nails against her palms grounded her as he kissed and sucked small love marks against her skin. Each one sent a new shock of want through her core, the nerves below her waist beginning to buzz, and by his fourth time across she was certain that he was out to kill her.

Maybe that’s what this was about. It was a game. A long con. Revenge via sexual teasing. Her earlier theory that he wasn’t angry with her now seemed paper-thin. He had only just begun their night, but she hadn’t experienced this level of intensity and control since the very beginning.

It was second nature to want to touch him, and every time his head dipped close to her cunt the urge grew nearly undeniable. When he finally looked up at her, his mouth a mere whisper away from where she wanted him most, she almost broke.

Her fingers should be burrowed in his hair, pulling and tugging and making him just as messy as she felt.

When his eyes darkened, there was no doubt that he knew what she was thinking. Still she kept her hands fisted, wrists still bound, and tucked her elbows close to her sides to keep from moving.

At least she could control *that* urge. The more prominent one, the one that was slowly creeping through her muscles, was the desire to tilt her hips forward towards his face.

His hands moved higher, gripping her arse and covering it easily. At the move she held her breath and began to count.

One... two... three... four...

It was the only thing that saved her from crying out when he finally rewarded her with his mouth, licking up to her swollen, aching clit. Sensation burst across her nerves, and she choked back a whine when he did it again.

She could feel how wet she was, how sticky she must be, and knew if and when he pulled away his lips would be swollen and evidence of her would be left glistening all over his chin. It made her arousal even worse, even more all-consuming, because that was *her* mark. He could press his name into her skin, and she would leave him wrecked in return.

When his licks turned harder, his fingers pulling her thighs wider, his name turned into a silent chant on her lips.

Draco. Draco. Draco.

She was so close to the edge already. He worked her mercilessly, having learned exactly what it took to get her to break and just how long it would take. Some nights he made it into a game, seeing just how fast he could make her come and how many times it could happen before she was a boneless, overstimulated mess.

His tongue swirled and dipped, his fingers edging closer to her center as he opened his mouth wider. He used the tip of his tongue to toy with her clit, flicking and circling it in alternating strokes that gave her just enough friction before pulling back, then did it all over again.

When he moaned, pressing his tongue flat so she could feel the vibrations, her knees buckled. Thankfully his grip was hard enough that she righted herself quickly, but it still earned her a hard slap on the arse. The small prick of pain lit up her nerves, and her inner muscles clenched.

Shoving his shoulder between and under her thigh, he used his lower position to leverage her leg up and over his shoulder, widening his access and making it even more difficult to fight off the onslaught of pleasure from his mouth as he resumed his motions.

If she were allowed to speak, she would have been begging and bartering for his mercy. But she didn't need it, because mere moments later, he closed his lips around her clit and suckled ever so lightly, and she was thrust towards the precipice of orgasm.

She bit down on her bottom lip and looked down at him, meeting his eyes. He didn't request her to ask for permission to come nearly as often as he used to, but there was no denying this was one of those times. Thankfully, there was no doubt in her mind that Draco knew how to read her—he knew that the shaking of her thighs meant she was close, or the subtle shift of her hips that became instinctual right before she broke completely. He didn't let up as he watched her from below, keeping his mouth firm and adding the smallest, softest flicks of his tongue to the suction that kept her right on the verge.

In answer, he pressed the tip of his middle finger into her core, slowly pushing just far enough to ease the ache that had built from his efforts. Somehow, out of all of the ways he was conducting her body, she still shattered from the lightest touch.

Hermione barely had time to slap her hands over her mouth to muffle the cry that broke free from her throat, too overwhelmed by the pleasure that filled her veins. It wasn't a huge explosion but rather a slow flood; her pleasure crested the walls of her restraint and ran through every corner of

her body, filling and building with every continued stroke of his tongue and the subtle thrust of his finger.

By the time it receded, she was shaking even harder. Trembling from the effort it took to keep quiet and controlled rather than the overwhelming stimulation that had built and built. But before she could relax into his touch or try to clear her mind to figure out what he might have planned next, Draco's touches intensified.

Adding a second finger to her center, he pressed in deeper, stretching and filling her until he could curl his fingers and stroke her inner walls. All the while he continued tracing and licking and sucking her clit, never relenting.

Oh no—oh gods—

Somehow, she was already at the edge again. Or maybe it was just a continuation of the first orgasm, brought back to life and reanimated by his skill and persistence. In moments like this, it felt like her body was little more than an instrument and he was the maestro, plucking and pulling and playing her like no one else could, or had even cared to learn. And again, she came.

She had to stick her fingers between her lips to keep from crying out again or reaching down to touch him, the pleasure contorting her upper body until she was curled over. It was only through the last dredges of her determination that she was still standing, with shockwaves of pleasure building with every curl and press of his fingers.

On and on it went, her vision turning blurry. It was impossible to tell if she was simply breathing heavy or if she was whimpering with every hard breath from her lungs since the roar of blood was too loud in her ears, but Draco made no notion to stop her if she was.

Her body was twitching by the time he pulled away, the shaking turning into involuntary muscle contractions from the way he so easily overwhelmed her nervous system. She could barely remember the days when *one* orgasm seemed so out of reach.

With her boneless and distracted, Draco stood and easily redirected her to the chair, settling her down against the soft leather. Instead of joining her, however, he leaned over her—peppering kisses across her face, her nose, her cheeks, her lips. Holding her face in his hands, turning her just so to make sure no bit of her was left untouched. Everything felt too heavy, too blurry, to be able to properly respond, and she made a weak attempt at lifting her arms to touch his chest before his earlier directive registered in her pleasure-addled mind.

They dropped back to her lap like a stone, and Draco's slight laugh was only evident in the brush air from his nose as he kissed his way down her neck.

He worshipped her with them. Earlier, she'd thought he might be making up for a week of lost affection. Now, it seemed he was backfilling a lifetime.

His path took him farther south, tugging the lace of her bra down until her breasts were finally exposed. He showered them with the same attention, circling one nipple lightly with the tip of his finger while he traced the other with his tongue. The combination of light touches and his warm mouth brought her back slowly, but what little energy she had went towards keeping her body still and quiet.

When he switched his focus to her other breast, Hermione struggled to remember what it was she was thinking about before they had begun. Keeping quiet took so much focus and energy that it was usually one of her favourite ways to be dominated, but afterwards, her mind felt a bit like toffee pudding.

Cool air brushed across her nipples as he continued on, and she distantly registered the movement of his lips against her stomach, then her wrists, then on each of her fingers. Not just kisses, but more.

What was he saying?

Another swirling question, momentarily lost to the depths of her pleasure as soon as he reached her hips. Renewed arousal began to tighten her core, her body knowing what was coming just as well as her mind did.

“Hermione,” he prompted. Her eyes fluttered open. He waited until her eyes were focused before he continued, slowly kneeling between her parted thighs. “We’re going to try something new now. You may only speak if you need to say your safe word. Otherwise, the rules continue. Nod if you agree.”

She nodded, head heavy against the plush back of the chair.

Whatever he had planned, she knew he would take care of her. They’d spent so long building up the trust it took to do this that, though the instinct to fight for control would always be present, the awareness and certainty that he was in full control was just as prominent.

Once he had her permission, his hands landed on her hips, fingers digging in to grip her and pull her forward. With her arse perched on the edge, he placed each of her feet on his thighs. It angled her knees open, her cunt open and on display for him.

Despite the fact that she’d just come on his face or that he’d seen her naked and exposed countless times, a blush still took root beneath her skin and bloomed across her chest and neck. Turning her head, she pressed her cheek against the back of the chair, feeling her body heat even more under his perusal.

Fingers skated up and down the length of her thigh, tracing indecipherable patterns from her hip to knee. He used every bit of his hands, pressing his palms flat until his fingers hooked on the edge of the garter, playfully tugging and teasing at it until it snapped lightly against her leg.

“There’s something about this,” he mused, almost to himself. “I just can’t deny. Something about it makes you feel like a gift, and this is the last bit of the wrapping that I get to peel back.”

Hermione wetted her lips, turning back to face him. She knew how he felt, knew exactly what he meant. She’d felt the same undercurrent when he kept himself clothed while she was naked, and when he finally rewarded her by lowering his defences enough to let her close to his own skin.

Even if she had permission to speak, she wasn’t sure she could have found the words, so instead she simply watched as he finally tugged down the garter. His eyes never strayed from her leg, and though she couldn’t see it herself, she knew exactly what he was looking at. Could feel the imprint of the embroidery when he pressed his thumb against the spot, then took a deep, drawing breath.

He continued. “It’s funny, looking back. Knowing how I was for so long, and the things I prioritised. The things I thought I desired. Even as an adult I expected to continue along the same path. I thought that my past, and my family, would be the thing that kept my attention for the rest of my life. The one thing that I would never be free of. Until you. Until I walked into this room, and found you on my lap.”

The seriousness that settled over his features when he looked back at her face made her grow still.

“This is it,” he told her. “You’re it for me, Hermione. I could give up every birthday or holiday, knowing that you’re the only gift I need. That *you’re* my priority. The one thing that occupies my waking thoughts. It’s not for me any more—everything I do has become for you and you alone.”

Not darling. Hermione.

Her heart expanded, pressing against the crevices beneath her ribcage. It squeezed against her lungs, and behind it, a dawning awareness grew.

Why he had requested she not speak or touch him. Why he’d made this entire night about her. Why he was so stiff when she’d walked in.

This *was* different.

“I want you to give me one more, darling. Even if you don’t want to.” He said it like a warning.

What—what did that mean? Her mind began to trip and tumble over itself. With him, she would always want to. What made this so different?

What about all of the things he’d just said? All of the things he’d been alluding to?

Her hesitation made her body cool just slightly, self-preservation kicking in. But before it could take hold, Draco leaned forward to place a kiss against her core, then another. He used his hands to hold her in place while kisses turned to licks, and touches turned to strokes. He fought back against her desire to stay coherent with his attentions, ramping back up to the same level of intensity that they’d been at before he had lowered her into the chair.

Within moments, her energy was redirected from trying to figure him out to actively working against the urge to rock her cunt against his mouth.

By the time he pressed his middle and ring fingers back into her, she was almost ready to break. He kept his lips and tongue on her clit, settling into a methodical pace that was better than most of the magical and muggle vibrators they’d tried together.

Push, curl, pull. He timed his fingers with the strokes of his tongue, and when she found the energy and focus to look down at him, she felt herself clench around his fingers.

His shoulder, and the free arm he wasn’t currently using, was rocking in time with the ones touching her. Except even through her haze she knew it wasn’t *her* he was touching, but rather himself.

It made it even better, knowing she’d broken his own restraint in such a way. That even without her touching or seducing him in return, he couldn’t deny himself when it came to indulging in her.

When he caught her looking, his arm stilled. One eyebrow piqued higher, a blatant challenge to her satisfaction, and it only took a moment to feel it.

Pressure.

But he hadn't added an extra finger to her core, nor had he changed the pace of his tongue as he flicked at her clit. The pressure pulsed slowly—once, holding, then followed by a short release. Again it repeated, and she was quickly overwhelmed by that flat, full feeling that made the stretch of his fingers feel even deeper.

Oh—oh—Gods—

Her eyes fluttered closed and her chest arched when Draco curled his fingers but didn't pull them back out. He stroked and stroked and stroked her inner walls, light touches that played off the hard flicks of his tongue.

It was too much. Her senses were overridden, one by one. She writhed against the chair, only careful enough not to speak or touch him, but barely held on. Strangled noises grew in her chest, and she couldn't tell if she loved it or hated it or couldn't live without whatever he was doing to her.

This felt like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

He held on to her while she bucked and shook beneath him, but he didn't let up. When she shuddered and her hips began to tremble, his touches became that much more firm.

On and on it went, waves of arousal twisting within her core and around his fingers until she wasn't sure where she stopped and he began. Through her haze she could only recognize things in passing moments—the feel of her now-sweaty skin against the leather of the chair, the growing wetness between her legs that softened the feel of his tongue, the bite of pain as she dug her teeth into her cheek to keep from crying out over and over again.

She couldn't be sure how long it went on for. Time blurred around her, the constant barrage of sensations were more than her system could handle.

Through it all, the pressure stayed steady. Pulsing against her, increasing the pleasure in a strange, almost foreign way. It was too much, and she alternated pushing against it and trying to draw away. With it, a pressure grew in her abdomen. Every stroke stoked it higher, added to it, but it felt like too much—it was too big, too ominous, too different from what she was used to.

"Even if you don't want to." Draco's voice floated through her mind, as soft and smooth as velvet.

She shook her head, her curls beginning to stick to her temple and neck. No, she couldn't. Not like this. Gods, it felt good, *so good*, but it wasn't—she couldn't—

Draco groaned against her, letting out a frustrated sound that she could feel reverberating deep in her core. When she didn't let up or give in, he did it again.

They were at the precipice, balanced and about to break, yet she was stuck. Rooted until Draco pushed her over, sending her tumbling headlong into pleasure.

The pressure expanded at the same time he increased the thrusts of his fingers, and she registered the difference in the sensations at the same time her orgasm shattered.

It was unlike any orgasm she'd ever had before in her life. It exploded across her nerves like a burst of light, blinding everything it came into contact with. If her first orgasm had been a slow crawl, this was obliteration.

She shrieked as it crested, her entire body curling forward as it rushed from and through her body. There was nothing else but it, and him—she could feel his hand still curled and coaxing her through the pulsing shocks. The overwhelming pressure had abated, but it felt like she was soaring from the sheer force of it.

Reaching for him, she scrambled to hold on to something, anything, that would keep her grounded when she crashed.

“Gods, Draco—Please—Please—” She moaned his name, her words turning to slurred incoherency the longer it went on. It came in harsh waves, crashing over her one by one, leaving her flung against the shore of his chest when she finally came to.

“That’s it. That’s it, darling. Gods, look at you. You did so well.”

By the end, it felt like she’d run a marathon. Breathing took every bit of strength she had, her awareness drifting somewhere between foggy consciousness and black, blissful sleep.

Her hands were clutching his bare shoulders when she finally found the ability to open her eyes, somehow having made it to his lap on the floor while she recovered. Her bracelet had been reset to normal, and she dimly registered he was still hard beneath her.

“W-What happened?” Her mouth felt dry, her tongue thick and heavy as she tried to get her bearings. His shirt lay in a pile beside them, not folded like the rest of his clothes. There was a distinct difference in the material, the collar a crisp white in comparison to the—

It was wet. From *her*.

Hermione gasped so hard she almost choked. Embarrassment was a cold shock to her system. “I didn’t mean to—”

His kiss cut her off, his hands coming to hold her face as he assured her through his touch. When she tried to pull away, he pulled her back. He kissed her until she opened for him, coaxing her lips with his, and only then did he allow an explanation.

“You will *never* apologise for your reactions, darling. You did just as I hoped.”

Still, her hesitation grew. “I’ve never done that before. I didn’t know I could. I wouldn’t have...”

His lips lifted. “Do you really think me such an amateur that you think I didn’t know what I was doing to you? Have I been *that* bumbling through the rest of our exploration together?”

Heat suffused her cheeks.

“My, Granger, you still know how to put a man in his place,” he quipped.

She let out a choked laugh, struck between embarrassment and understanding. Her head dropped to his chest, and she inhaled slowly. “I was just surprised, is all. A little warning would have been nice.”

He pinched her lightly. “And I gave you one, did I not? You’re lucky you got even that, because knowing you, you would have fought me tooth and nail if you *had* known.”

Well. He wasn’t *entirely* wrong, but she wasn’t about to admit that to him.

Draco cleared his throat before she could think of what to say next, and she lifted her chin to see a brief flash of uncertainty pass over his own features. Before she could open her mouth, however, it disappeared.

“I wanted tonight to be different, darling. I wanted it to be something new for the both of us.”

Awareness came back like light flooding a dark room. Everything tonight, the way he’d been touching her, praising her—his *plan*. This was it.

“We’ve had two new beginnings in this room,” he continued, shifting her in his lap to reach towards his trouser pocket. “And I hope you’ll be willing to make it a third.”

With the hand that wasn’t wrapped around her waist, he lifted a small velvet box between them. Her throat grew tight, sinuses tingling with a rush of emotion, and she watched, frozen, as he flicked open the lid.

Inside sat a platinum ring, with three brilliantly sparkling diamonds nestled side by side on the band. All emerald cut, the one in the center was bigger than the two that flanked it—a bold, yet still classic design.

Her lips trembled, her voice mysteriously vanished. All she could do was nod, tears beginning to track down her cheeks.

“I’d been considering asking you for a few months now, but the timing never felt quite right. Then, while I was in France, my mother asked me to visit our estate there to clean a few things out. There was an old jewellery chest, and I found a necklace with one of these side stones.” Draco lightly tapped the one on the left. “As soon as I saw it, I had an idea. But unfortunately I needed Potter’s help.”

Glancing back up at him, she saw his own smile beginning to tremble as he continued. “I had Ginny distract you with lunch so he could stop by your flat. He was already keyed into your wards, so he was the only one I could ask. Please know that I had to make a very deep personal sacrifice in order to get him to betray you for the sake of my proposal.”

Her laugh was incredulous, a bubbly sound that broke the tension in his shoulders. “What did you do?”

“I had him send me your grandmother’s ring.”

Tenderness spread through her veins like fiendfyre. She’d taken a few keepsakes from her parents’ home before obliterating their memories, and one of the items had been a ring that had belonged to her grandmother. It had always been several sizes too small to wear—while on the run she’d worn it around her neck as a reminder of home and pressed it to her lips at night with the hope that she

wouldn't have to sell it for money—but for years since it had been relegated to the back of her jewellery box, almost forgotten completely.

“You—” If the smaller stone on the left was his, then the one on the right was hers.

Draco kissed her softly.

“I did. If you don’t like it, I still have the original setting we can return it to. Thankfully Potter’s morals are still firmly grey, so he had no problem committing a number of crimes and then abusing his position to secure an emergency portkey to get it to France.”

Hermione let out a weak, wavering laugh. Of course. “No, no, I love it.” She shook her head, trying to clear her vision.

“Once I had them both, I took the stones to a jeweller and bought the center stone to match. Something new and untouched for our future, together, surrounded by something from each of our pasts. Once I saw it, there was no question. It took everything in me not to write to you this week because I knew if I did, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself from telling you. It would have ruined everything.”

“Draco,” she sobbed, taking his face in her hands. She kissed him repeatedly, uncaring if it tasted like the salt of her tears or if she was a sweaty, blubbering mess. It was perfect, he was perfect. “Yes, yes, always yes.”

He didn’t break the kiss as he slid the ring on her finger, and for as much as she wanted to look at it, to study it, to memorise the differences between each of the stones so she could see both of themselves reflected back in the facets, she knew there was time.

They had their entire lives.

Instead, she kissed him. She threaded her fingers through his hair, shifting in his lap until her thighs bracketed his hips. She touched him the way she’d wanted to all night, and for every day that they’d lost while he was gone. Her hands roamed across his shoulders, down his arms, fingers dipping into the spaces where muscle met bone and veins thrummed just beneath the surface of his skin.

He held her close, his grip so tight there was no doubt she might be left with bruises in the morning. But she didn’t mind—if anything, it would be a reminder of tonight, and she’d trace over them until they faded into nothingness.

His hips lifted against hers, the zip of his trousers aligned against her center as they moved with and against each other.

The ring felt heavy on her finger as she reached down to release his cock, twisting open the button of his trousers and pulling him out with practised ease. Draco twitched when she palmed his erection, her fingers brushing the soft, sensitive underside.

“I need you like this,” she begged. Though she’d had her fill of orgasms, this was less about her own pleasure and more about the closeness she needed from him. He was right, they’d had so many new beginnings in this room that it only felt right to consummate it correctly, the way they always had.

And always would.

Lifting herself just enough to align his cock to her entrance, she let out a deep breath and sank down completely.

As she began to move, she embraced the emotions that pushed a fresh wave of tears to her eyes.

It was slow at first, their bodies rolling against one another, sliding and pushing and pulling in perfect harmony.

Dropping her forehead to his, she watched as the control slipped from his features, unguarded pleasure filling every plane. No magic, no glamours, no secrets.

This was where they found each other.

Draco lifted his hips faster, meeting her with messy, hurried thrusts.

His thumb found her clit, circling it as she moved on top of him, but she almost didn't need it.

She snapped her hips forward, her fingers digging into his shoulders, leaving marks that she knew he, in turn, wouldn't be in a hurry to remove.

Their momentum grew until it felt unstoppable.

This was where they came together.

Her name was a breathless moan on his lips, his head dropping to capture her nipple in his mouth.

“Darling,” he chanted with every thrust. “Gods, Hermione. I love you. I love you.”

“I love you,” she echoed, feeling her core grow tighter around him. Pulsing with pleasure, but she didn't slow. One pass, then another, and she felt him stiffen and cry out, following her into oblivion.

When their lips met on a slow, languid kiss, she knew.

This was where they began.

Chapter End Notes

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