

~*~

Thursday, August 25, 1994

"Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"
I lift my chin at Granger, and I turn in time to see a flash of fear in her eyes. A spell goes off from the campsite. And she's silhouetted by green.

Potter and Weasley jump, but her gaze is on me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Why, thank you for asking.

"Granger, they're after Muggles," I condescend. I roll my eyes. "D'you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around... They're moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh."

She crosses her arms in front of herself, pulling her coat tight, and I wonder what the prude has hiding under there. I look her up and down in a way to make her uncomfortable.

"Hermione's a witch," Potter hisses at me.

"Have it your own way, Potter." I say, taking my eyes off Granger's calves, and rolling my back against the tree trunk I'm against. "If you think they can't spot a Mudblood, stay where you are."

Weasley tries to pipe in. Tries to defend her, but he's useless. She steps in front of him and glares at me. I smile back.

A loud explosion, closer. The three of them jump and turn. They don't see me jump as well. I relax back as screaming fills the trees.

"Scare easily, don't they?" I say. "I suppose your daddy told you all to hide?" I say to Weasley. "What's he up to - trying to rescue the Muggles?"

"Where're your parents?" Potter snarls at me. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"
I turn to him, a pleasant grin. "Well...if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?"

"Oh, come on," Granger says. "Let's go and find the others." She shoots a glare at me.

I let them walk past until I can yell after them: "Keep that big bushy head down, Granger." I see her spine straighten, and she grabs Weasley by his scruff to keep him from coming after me. I'm smiling to myself, watching the fire through the trees, and wondering what kind of knickers Granger wears.

Probably cotton, something so sexless. Perfunctory.

I've caught sight of Tracey Davis changing after she spilled potions all over herself. A purple lace. Barely a scrap of cloth.

Blaise has brought dirty magazines into the dorms, so I know there's a few types of knickers and bras.

But Granger... probably pale and muted colors, probably a sports bra.

I watch as a tent explodes.

~*~

Wednesday, December 15, 1999

Quentin Margolis has let me talk for half an hour. He's not said a word. His fingers steepled in front of his chin. I'm at the edge of the North Forest, sitting on a fucking log, trying to make a good impression on him.

I try to wrap up my presentation. He stares at me when I'm finished and says, "I thought Miss Granger would be with you."

I blink at him. "She's an associate of mine, but she's not working directly on this case."

He nods. He sits back.

"I'll consider it, Mr. Malfoy. It's not something I truly think we need, but I'll talk it over with them." He stands and I try to mask my disappointment. I hold my hand out to shake, and he examines it. "If Miss Granger was working directly on this, I'd be more inclined."

He walks away, without taking my hand.

~*~

Friday, December 17, 1999

I sit down with Mockridge, have him look at the financials. He asks me if I'm truly comfortable investing my entire inheritance in this project, and I confirm.

"I'm thinking of a Non-Wizard Relations branch," I say toward the end of the meeting. He raises his brows at me. "Like house elves? Goblins?"

"Werewolves, yes."

He opens the portfolio back up. He twists his lips together for a few minutes, running maths in his head.

"For what purpose," he finally asks, looking up at me and taking his glasses off.

"Publicity," I say. It's not a lie. It's just not the whole truth.

He nods. "Yes, I can see how that would help, but..." He flips a page, finger running down the projected revenue. "Who would be paying for this branch? Do you know werewolves who would pay for representation?"

I breathe deep. "No."

He gives me an expression that says, *Well, that's that.*

"I think it might be imperative. For the image of the company," I say.

He nods, sighing. "Do you have enough time to split your focus like that? That's a full-time commitment. Or is that an entire other salary?" He winces, like another salary at this point would be hazardous.

"I was thinking Hermione Granger."

He pauses, staring down at the projected expenditures page. "Hm." He flips a few pages. He pulls a quill, jotting a few numbers down. I wait, not knowing what this discovery will mean.

He looks out the window, grey eyebrows twitching. "She will have to pull in capital just from her name alone."

"That's what I'm counting on."

~*~

Saturday, December 25, 1999

There is only one obstacle standing in the way of Hermione Granger working at Malfoy Consulting.

Well, two, if you count Granger's acceptance. Which I didn't. That was so far beyond the problem.

I dip the comb into the gel, and plaster my hair to my head, like he taught me.

I need a guarantee that the inheritance will be in my accounts on January 1st. That is my primary focus. Once I have the money, he will never need to know that Granger will be working under me—

A series of images of her under me—with me. It's not like I've disobeyed him. There is no ring on her finger. He said I could have the inheritance if I stayed away from her. I am at the point where *I need* the inheritance.

I have a pain in my gut as I sign in at Azkaban. I put her out of my mind. I build a wall, and close the lid on her box.

The guard opens the door and I find him standing behind the two-person table, back to the door. Completely uninterested in me.

"Good morning, Father."

He turns, and takes me in. "Miss Granger is *much* prettier in person than in the papers," he says. "And a good deal prettier than she was at school!"

My eye twitches, and he's looking me over. I have nothing to say to that, so I move forward with directness.

"I would have been here on December 1st, but you refused to meet with me or answer my letters."

"Your mother and I had several things to discuss." He raises his brows. "But Happy Christmas, Draco. I'm so glad to see you today."

I carefully pull the chair away from the table, and take a seat. He watches me. I look back up at him. "Happy Christmas, Father."

He smirks, and takes his chair.

"Is there?" She lifts her brows. "Perhaps it's more of a celebration of you leaving."

"That must be it."

I wish it had been like this all the time. This casual flirting, letting our hips touch in tight spaces, waiting to see her eyes darken.

I'm looking down but I can feel her eyes on me. The lift slows for Level 4 just as I look up, catching her. She swallows, and her gaze moves away. She brushes a curl back and says, "Have a good day, Malfoy."

I nod as she darts off the lift. I grin at my shoes.

On Friday, Katie Bell, Potter, Goldstein and I head over to the same pub we went to that first time, where she'd gotten a bit sloshed and had let me talk to her, let me look at her. Where I'd called her golden.

Potter buys the first round, and I take my Firewhisky quickly, enjoying the burn.

Robards stops by, thanking me for my time and expertise, and I almost remind him that it was a court ordered assignment, but I just shake his hand.

A few of the Aurors show up, the ones who didn't give me any trouble in the office. I'm on my second Firewhisky, keeping a careful eye on the door.

I'll get her to talk to me about the consulting firm, mention the possibility of working with giants next, and drop hints to my five-year plan for the house elves. Tell her I'm looking for someone to bounce ideas off of, and would it be alright if I invited her to lunch once in a while.

And we might even have a whole branch for magical creature rights, do you know anyone who might be interested?

It's getting closer to seven, and several people head out to their Friday night plans. Goldstein buys me another drink, clearly in it for the long haul tonight. I look toward the door again.

"She's ill."

I look up to find Katie Bell watching me.

"Sorry?"

"Hermione left work early today. Ill."

A cold weight in my stomach. "Oh. Hope she feels better."

"I should have told you earlier," Katie says, eyeing me over the top of her water glass. "So you wouldn't have been waiting on her."

I keep her eyes. I think about denying it. Or sneering at her. Or coming up with something quippy. Or even turning my charm on her, something like, *But the crowd here is just as lovely*. With a wink.

But I did curse her three years ago with dark magic. So, I decide to let her see through me. It doesn't truly sink in until the following morning that she missed my party. The party she insisted on. The party she planned.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Fourteen

The Rights and Wrongs Series

I continue, "One week from today is January 1st. That is the day you agreed you would sign the inheritance paperwork." I clench my jaw. "Are we still on schedule?"

He looks curiously over my left ear, taking control. "You know, Draco," he says. "I have so many questions about her. But the primary of which is... how was it that Miss Granger already knew about that Auction business?"

He chuckles. Like a toddler has just said something terribly funny.

So, they *had* talked about the Auction. I curl my fingers against my pant legs, physically restraining myself from asking him about their conversation.

"Seeing as Mother is hosting a launch party in six days, I would like to discuss Malfoy Consulting Group –"

"And I would like to discuss her..."

Her face swims in through my mind.

Anything you need.

I sit back and clasp my hands in my lap, giving him control. He grins at me, without teeth.

He crosses his legs, leaning back.

"How are things progressing with you two?" he says.

"They're not." I focus on painting her into a corner.

"That's not what I've heard."

I blink at him. What could he possibly...

He reaches into an interior pocket and pulls two pieces of paper. No. Photographs. He lays them on the table in front of me, and I am assaulted by the image of her wild hair and wild hands as they grapple to pull me close, her lips caressing my neck and my fingers gripping her hips. A cursory glance at the other one shows me stepping into her, ready to take her against the brick wall as she bruises my wrist—

I tear my eyes away and press my lids closed. "What is this? Why do you have this?"

"You know, Draco. It's such a strange juxtaposition. The way she grips you closer here, and the way she bolted from this room at the mere suggestion of marrying you."

My eyes snap to his, and I can see her throwing herself against me just at the bottom edge of my vision.

"And *why* would that be a topic of conversation for the two of you." I can barely grit out the words.

My mother's voice rings in my ears – *And she made it clear that you never will be.* Consulting. *We could affect true change together.* Granger; *do you really want to work at the D.M.L.E.?* Tell me what you want and I'll give it to you.

A portly man in yellow joins the lift. I'll have to refine this a bit before speaking with her next.

"I hear there's a party for me at a pub on Friday night." I pout and look to her.

He lifts a brow. He's caught off guard.

"Flint? Gabriel's boy?" He tilts his head. "How is he involved?"

Innocence. Confusion from him. I need to change the subject before he thinks on that further.

"So, you're just... having me followed?" I hiss.

"Of course not, Draco." He pouts. "I'm having *her* followed."

I see red on the edges of my vision, so I start to build a hut on the beach. Branches and sticks and I shove her inside.

"I've been having her watched since the moment she left Hogwarts," he continues. "She's a very boring person when she's not seducing you, I'm afraid." He sighs. "Not at all suited for the position of Lady Malfoy."

I stand. The chair scrapes backwards.

"She is not in the running any longer." I lean on the table. "This"—and I shove the pictures towards him—"was an isolated incident that you have no business knowing the truth of."

He eyes the photographs fluttering back to the table. "I have copies. You can take those with you. Place them in the bottom drawer of your closet with the others."

My eyes widen. I turn away from him, embarrassment like a wave of heat rolling through me. I stare at the stone door, wondering what would happen if I just ran.

"What is it you want, Father?" I say, and my voice fights against my closing throat. "I need that inheritance. What would you ask of me."

"I want to know what your plan is for her," he lilt, and I can tell without looking that he's crossed his legs, casual and calm. "You obviously can't stay away from each other—"

"We can," I jump him. I turn back. "We will. Like I said, this was isolated." I gesture to the pictures. "Our relationship is purely platonic." I push the words out, and dissolve the image of her smiling at me in the lifts, the way her eyes burned with the passion for the werewolves.

Anything you need.

I'm digging through my brain, trying to find support for this platonic relationship. Something to prove that we're not together—

And you never will be—

And he's asked for my "plan for her" and I can hear the words tumbling before I've decided if it's smart or not. "I'm going to convince her to join Malfoy Consulting."

He blinks slowly, grinning at the table. "Are you now?" He chuckles. "And how will that help your... current situation."

I snarl at him, "My 'current situation' is that the wizarding world still does not trust me, thanks to you and your *Lord*. My 'current situation' is that the only clients that have signed on with Malfoy Consulting Group are the wealthy or pure-blood or family friends."

"That's the other thing," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Why seven novels? Can't

I suck oxygen into my body.

He presses his lips together. He looks at the wall over my shoulder. “And what... position will you be offering Miss Granger?”

Ignore his quip and say, “Senior Consultant. Managing a new branch for magical creatures.” His lips twitch. He takes a breath and stares down at his thumbs. “You know, Draco, there are other Mudbloods out there that are fully capable of the position, and will clean up your act just as nicely. Ones you don’t have such a scattered history with.”

“Name me one that will give me half as much publicity and good opinion as Hermione Granger.” Her name is acrid against my tongue as I use it in the way he wants me to.

He taps a knuckle on the table, mind working. “Office romance can be so... tawdry, you know. One bad sexual harassment case in this day and age could set you just as off course—”

“That won’t be an issue. The Ministry has regulations on new businesses regarding sexual harassment and employee conduct—”

“Oh, yes, and I’m positive inter-office dating and screwing has been abolished by that.” He chuckles again.

“I will draft up the Office Romance stipulations and send them to you for approval.” I sigh.

I stand in front of him, helpless. “What else do you want?”

He studies me. “And you think these... guidelines and signed documents will help? You seem to have a problem with restraint when it comes to her.” His hands drift over the photographs, and I see my body connect with hers, hands going to her hips—

“It won’t be a problem,” I say. He stares into me, and to prove a point, I feel his mind against my own. I slam my wall up. It cracked at some point in the past ten minutes. Probably when he showed me the pictures, or when I stepped into the room. “I am in complete control of myself.” He brushes against my mind again, and then tears his eyes from me, moving this thumbs in circles. He can’t dismiss me. Not yet. I need his word.

“The Consulting Group needs her. I need her.” My voice shakes and I want to electrocute myself. “And I need the inheritance. What do I need to give you?”

His lips twist, something difficult in his expression. “Alright.”

I feel a spring bounce in my chest.

“You can have your Mudblood,” he says. My eye doesn’t twitch at the word. He says, “But I want ten weeks.”

“Ten weeks of what?”

“Every Tuesday for ten weeks, you will receive a tenth of the inheritance transferred into your accounts at 9PM,” he purrs.

I calculate in my head and find that a tenth in the first week is sufficient, and a second tenth in the second week is also sufficient. These demands are oddly specific.

“What is this contingent upon?” I ask.

“Nothing, Draco,” he waves his hand, and I see the ghost of where his wand would twirl between his fingers. “But I do want you to visit. In January and in February.”

My eyes dart about the room, considering.

“Every Tuesday? The first deposit will be on January 4th?”

“That is correct.”

He looks resigned. He looks like he’s exhausted from compromise. I am not sure what it is he has lost, but he seems he has lost a great deal.

I nod. I wonder if I should shake his hand. *I absolutely should make him sign to it, but that would be an insult I can’t afford.*

I turn from the table. We both know this visit was a business meeting, not a Christmas reunion.

“Be sure to secure her a corner office, Draco.”

I look to him, questioning. He’s examining his nails.

“And the proper support staff,” he says. “You can’t just sit her down in a cubicle and expect the clients to pour in.”

He says it like he’s told me a thousand times, like he’s reminding me how to care for my Nimbus 2001.

“Yes, Father,” I say, my hand on the door. I wish I could just leave and be done with it, but

I hear myself asking, “Anything else?”

He swivels to face me, like I’m leaving his office.

“Don’t botch the proposal, Draco.” His eyes glimmer at his private joke.

~*~

Friday, December 31, 1999

Mother’s outdone herself.

It’s the first time I’ve stepped into the drawing room since the renovation. I don’t recognize the place. The pathway to the ballroom is still there, but even the fireplace has moved. Four chandeliers instead of the one large one.

“Narcissa, darling! This place is gorgeous!”

I turn to see Blaise escorting Mother in, her hand wrapped around his arm.

“It was Draco’s idea to redecorate,” Mother says, pointing to one of the new tapestries. “I just managed the work, really.”

They meet me in the middle of the room, near one of the ice sculptures. Mother says, “Now, not too much Firewhisky before the guests arrive, you two. I’m headed up to change.”

She glides away, and I kick Blaise’s knee out when I see him follow her with his eyes.

“Ow! What? She’s going by Black, isn’t she? Draco, I could be your new Papa.”

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The Rights and Wrongs Series

I roll my eyes and pull a bottle of champagne from the bar. One of the hired elves produces glasses and I thank her.

Blaise knocks my glass with his. "To Malfoy-Zabini Consulting." He tips it back, and drains the whole thing.

I shake my head at him. "Dream on."

He pours himself another. "So, what's the plan tonight. Who do you want me to focus on?"

I watch as a different elf starts the charms for indoor falling snow. "Mr. Bradley will be here. I'd like a meeting with him next week."

"Done."

"If Mr. Huddles brings his wife, you can focus on her and her clothing line."

"Love focusing on wives. Great."

"And Daphne will be here. So, you can focus on keeping things civil." I raise a brow at him

and sip.

He takes a deep breath, eye on the snowfall. "Civil is my middle name."

"Pansy couldn't make it. She's in Spain."

"That's fine. She hasn't spoken to me anyway," Blaise says, and I see his lips twist. "You still haven't contacted Greg?"

I drain my glass. "I... just don't see the point."

Blaise fiddles with a bar napkin. "But your new best friend Harry Potter is coming tonight, yes?"

"I wouldn't call him a *best friend*," I say. "He pushed me down some stairs last month." I move away from the bar as Blaise spits his champagne.

I lead him into the ballroom, watching a few of the musicians set up. A house elf in a black bonnet lets us know that we have about half an hour before the guests start to arrive.

"And Granger?" Blaise prods. "She's on the list, I saw."

"Yes." Maybe that's all I need to say.

"I also saw her on the roster for M.C.G." Blaise lifts a brow.

"Yes." I scratch my jaw. "That will be my focus for the night."

He blinks at me. "You haven't secured her?"

"I haven't asked her."

He leans back against a pillar. "... You..." He shakes his head. "Several people already think she's involved."

"Yes."

"Wentworth mentioned it to me last week actually. And that new client you threw me said she was quite thrilled to possibly work with her."

"Yes."

The Right Thing To Do All The Wrong Things

First published in 2017. Completed in 2019

Part 1 & 2 of Rights and Wrongs

Based on Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship is Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy

TYPESET BY SENNA SLYTHERIN 2024

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S. SLYTHERIN
BINDING

"And she hasn't even put in her two weeks' notice yet?"

Blaise stares at me with wide eyes. I down my second champagne glass.

"Just make sure I'm ready for my speech at ten minutes to midnight, Blaise."

I walk away from him and start running through what I'll say at midnight until Mippy

announces that the first guests will be arriving shortly.

Once I've shaken enough hands to exhaust me, Blaise finds me again when Mr. Bradley arrives. We chat with him and set up a dinner date for next week to talk about his business.

The Greengrass sisters say hello, Daphne's eyes never landing on Blaise, and we're whispering about Pansy's wild success when Blaise leans into me.

"She's here," Blaise says, his eyes tripping over the entryway.

I nod.

"Fuck, she looks good."

I swallow my champagne. Blaise looks at me, watching my face.

"Well, if you're not going to go flirt with her, I will."

I turn to roll my eyes at him and he's gone. I watch him strut, picking up two champagne glasses from a passing tray.

My eyes are glued to them, but Daphne steps in to me and whispers, "Is he seeing anyone?" I turn to her, trying to get the image of Granger's bright smile out of my head. She might have been in white... "Daphne. I am not Pansy. Please don't mistake me for someone who cares."

Daphne's blue eyes stare innocently back at me. "Oh, I only ask because he's currently salivating over Hermione Granger." My eye twitches, but I refrain from looking back at them. Restraint. "But she'd never fall for that boozy charm, would she?"

Daphne lifts a haughty brow and struts away. I let myself look over at them once more just as Blaise leans in and whispers something against her ear.

"Astoria." And the girl appears in front of me. Like magic. "Can you get Blaise for me?"

She disappears, and I smile cordially at several of Mother's friends.

When Blaise returns he jostles my shoulder and says, "How deep is this attachment, Draco? Because I think I have a chance."

I glare at him over my third glass of champagne and he smiles back.

Granger is swept into the crowd for the next few hours. I see glimpses of her, like a melody you can't quite place. Mother finds me trying to slip behind a portrait a bit before midnight to run through my speech.

"Are you prepared?" she asks.

"Not really."

"Are you sober?"

The Right Thing To Do & All The Wrong Things

L o v e s B i t c a 8



"Not really."

She huffs and rolls her eyes. "Why don't you get some fresh air? Take a moment to yourself." She leads me to one of the side balconies overlooking the gardens. "I'll make sure someone gets you before midnight."

I nod and duck through the curtains, waiting for the cold air to slap against my body. But instead, a flash of heat, shivering upwards.

She's on the balcony. Her dress is white. Someone's done something grand to her hair, falling like snow against her shoulders. And beneath her tangles her back dips low, low. Tight skin across her ribs, expanding and twisting to look at me. Her lips open and I struggle to keep my eyes on her face when presented with the rest of her.

Restraint.

I push through the thick air, coming to stand next to her while she looks out over the gardens. Again, I wonder if she likes it.

"You know, Draco, it's a Black and White party. Your silver accents are truly throwing off the whole aesthetic." She tosses the words out over the grounds, a small smile drifting through her lips.

"Ah, but I am the host. I must distinguish myself from the rest of the rabble," I say, smiling. She looks away towards the gazebo.

"It's a beautiful party. I've never been to a Narcissa Malfoy New Year's Eve Bash. Is it always this grand?"

I step closer to the stone ledge, trying to see what she sees.

"Just about. Twice as many people."

"All clamoring to be nearer to the winner of Most Charming Smile, December 1999," she says. Merlin, I hope she didn't read that drivel.

"I heard you were drawing quite a crowd yourself, Granger."

I trace her jaw with my eyes, drinking in the angle where her chin comes to a point. She turns her head to me, and she's got makeup on again, darkening her eyes and staining her lips, and drawing me towards her shapes.

Restraint.

I cast my eyes on the gazebo. I place her inside of it, and seal the structure shut with ivy. "Where is Katya tonight?" she asks, and I hear her voice trip over the name. How strange that there is still Katya between us.

I want to tell her about the lie, about the arrangement, but my focus needs to be on getting her to trust me. "She's in Bulgaria for the holidays." It's not a lie. "She is still desperate to sit down with you."

"Well, I would be open to that. She's lovely." She pauses for a moment. "How's the inheritance transfer coming along?"

I search her with wary eyes. I'd love to never discuss this money with her again.

She says, "I remember you saying that your father would release it on January 1st. Is everything... falling into place?"

But there's also an opening here... if I can navigate it.

"My father is..." I hesitate. What exactly is my father? "...being slightly difficult, of course." I let my eyes drift, like Lucius Malfoy is just paperwork to complete. "He says he'll transfer portions of it over the next months. The first portion will transfer this Tuesday."

Four days of financially faking it. My shoulders inch to my ears.

"But enough about that," I say. I twist around delicately, leaning my back against the stone railing, turning my head to her. Like we're strangers who met at a bar. And I'm just getting to know her before taking her home. I blink away the dreams, focusing on a series of stone railings that can hold her in place, tucking her away until I can concentrate. "Will you be taking the analyst position with Robards?"

She pauses before saying, "It's a possibility."

There's a blush at her neck, and I let her out of her box for just a moment to imagine her pink skin dipping lower under her modest neckline.

Restraint.

I can almost feel the champagne glass crack between my tight fingers.

"There are a few positions open, that I'm interested in. I had two interviews this week."

"They didn't truly make you interview?" I say, and she twists her long neck to watch me curiously. "So you sent in the wrong resume again? I've told you before, it just needs to say Golden Girl across the top." I bring my glass to my lips before I say something else. She smiles. "Where else? What other positions?"

Who do I have to buy off if this proposal fails?

"House-Elf Relocation." She shifts her glass around, and I love that she holds it like a cup, her full hand around it, and I think of the charms teachers who would hiss at her for it.

"You don't want to work in House-Elf Relocation, Granger." I smile down at the stones. This is going to be easy.

She straightens, turning her chest to me. "Oh, I don't?"

"You don't want to sit in an office, filing reports on Elf beatings and misuse, only to pull them from their current homes and place them with a different set of masters to beat them. You don't want to work under the current legislations."

A pause, and I can feel her gravitating toward me. "And what is it I do want to do?"

Looking back up at her face, I can see that she's waiting. Holding her breath for me.

The Rights and Wrongs Series

Tandem

Volume Two

"You want to create the law. You want to change the world. You can't change the Ministry from within. And you can't do anything from your cubicle in the Beast Division, Special Concentration in Dragon Research and Restraint."

Her eyes move over my face.

"So you think I should take the position in the Auror Office?"

Perfect. Right where I want her.

"Until they offer you Minister of Magic, that would be the best choice between the two. Upward mobility at least."

She turns back toward the lake, thinking. Always thinking.

"You have a speech at midnight?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, just now remembering. "Thanks for coming, best millennium ever, all that rot."

"You came out here to practice, didn't you?" she teases. I nod. "What else are you going to say?"

Yes, I suppose I should figure this out. Should I have written something down, really.

"Well, a bit about recruitment," I shift on my feet, shifting gears. "Mother invited a lot of Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons recent graduates. Young witches and wizards who are looking for careers," I say. "Some elite members of society, too. We're either looking to hire senior positions or take their companies on as clients."

Her eyes smile at me, and I think about how we could do this always – discuss strategy and attack, she and I.

"You're going to steal people away from their high-ranking government and private industry jobs tonight? With one midnight speech?" she demands, voice laughing. I watch as she teases me, not knowing she's talking about herself. Her lips twist into a grim and she asks me how. How I plan to take her. How I plan to keep her.

"Anyone can be seduced, Granger."

And something happens to her eyes. And she looks at my mouth. And before I can process that what it means, what she wants from me, she looks away, eyes dragging over the gardens. I've done it somehow. She wants me. She desires me. I feel the air spinning between us, my feet gliding closer, and she licks her lips and I almost reach for her.

I can't even remember the word I've been hissing to myself all night, can't envision a brass-lined jewelry box.

She's warm. She's almost panting and I think I can have it all if I do this right.

She wants me, but she won't be mine.

She won't stay forever.

Something changed when she met with my father, and I have been desperate to know.

My eyes drift down her bare arm, tracing the fabric of her backless dress, and my hand has a mind of its own, reaching up to soothe the fabric through my fingers.

“What did my father say to you?” My lips almost touch her ear.

She gasps, and I realize my fingers have slithered to her ribs.

Tell me. Tell me please how to fix his lies.

“Draco?”

I drop my arm, heart thumping, but the air is cold again.

Blaise saunters toward us, hands in his pockets. “You gave me one job tonight, mate. ‘Make sure I’m ready for my speech at ten minutes to midnight.’”

Fuck. I’m out of time. I glance at her and Blaise steps in.

“I’ll take care of her, Draco.” He fucking winks at me. “She can stand with me.”

I watch as she takes his arm, still looking at me with thick lashes.

I jerk my head at them in goodbye, and I run into the ballroom, trying to gather my thoughts as I weave through the guests. I pass Astoria as Mother catches my eye, stepping up to the platform.

“Astoria, could you grab Blaise for me?”

She nods and glides away.

I turn to Mother as they begin tapping their wands against their glasses.

“Did you have enough time?” Mother whispers, smiling at her enemies.

“I don’t know.”

She nods, pressing her lips together, and steps onstage, graciously accepting her applause. What would have happened if Blaise hadn’t found us? My fingers would have wandered, skipping over her ribs, dipping down her spine. She would have leaned into me? Let me touch her?

And suddenly Mother is introducing me and I’m Draco Malfoy again, only not. I smirk. I wave. I make jokes and nod at Harry Potter in solidarity. I find a way to throw off the fourteen months I spent in a damp cell, doing more damage to myself than Dementors ever could. And I see her, glowing white against the marble in the back of the room, her eyes deeper than the sea of black fabric between us.

“We at Malfoy Consulting Group want to create the law. To change the world.” She hears the echo, and I see her chest move deeply. “And if like me, you find your cubicle becoming too small for you...” I look at the rest of them, pretending with a smile that any of this - this whole night- is for their benefit. “... We’re hiring.”

A chuckle through the room. I check my timepiece. I’ve done it. Just over ten seconds to spare.

Couch.

It's a couch in the common room.

My eyes snap open to the ceiling, the ghost of a whisper bounces around the walls, like a kite you can't catch in the wind.

My lungs heave for air, and I feel Pansy at my feet.

I hear her cast a teeth-cleansing charm.

I feel her body against my calf, tense.

And I don't know if I've actually said it. Don't know what happened outside of my mind in the past ten minutes.

My heart is thundering, and it's painful in my chest, like it wants out.

Then Pansy is tucking me away, buttoning me up. She buttons my shirt too. When she gets to the top, I tilt my head up to face her.

There's a tension in her face, but she's smiling at me.

"Better?"

I nod. I kiss her.

And I blame Bella and her worthless tricks. I meditate that night, finding a box I hadn't truly used for several weeks now.

~*~

Wednesday, January 12, 2000

A memo flies under my door and lands on my desk. From Dorothea.

Mr. Wentworth and Miss Granger have arrived.

I plant my hands on my desk, stopping myself from heading to her office. I wanted to see her reaction to her furniture, but I didn't want to be waiting for her; too eager...

So I sit. I hear Wentworth opening his office door, starting to organize a few things.

I sit for five minutes. Watching the clock. I count down the second hand and stand as it hits the 12. I button my robes, and head out of my office. Something catches my eye before I've gone too far.

Blaise's name plate is gone. I frown. I scan the doors, finding him standing in Granger's doorway. Just to the left, in the empty office, I see a few of Blaise's belongings, and his name plate on the door.

I sigh. I check in on Wentworth, shake his hand, offer him some tea.

I make my way around, stopping smile at Dorothea.

And finally, I head to Blaise.

"Blaise."

He turns with a saucy look in his eyes. "My liege." He fucking bows.

"When you are assigned an office, I expect you to stay in it." I purposefully cannot see Granger from my position in the doorway.

Blaise sends me a smirk, the one that tells me he knows exactly what he's doing. "But I much prefer the view on this side of the building."

"As Senior Consultant on Marketing and P.R., I need you closer to me. Clear out of that office."

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy." He salutes me. Winks at her. And leaves.

I watch him head into the vacant office, smirking.

I turn on my heel to stomp away, but I haven't said anything to her yet. I twist back around, poke my head through the door to find her seated at her desk, staring at her bookshelves.

"Evening, Granger." My voice croaks.

"Oh, yes, hi."

I step away, wondering if I should have said more. Asked how she liked her office. Asked how her day was. Asked if she was happy.

I shake my head and roll my shoulders, heading back to my office to scowl at my desk for the next hour or so.

~*~

Monday, January 17, 2000

I've had about five Howlers per day since Skeeter printed that Granger would be joining me. Dorothea, Melody, and Carrie have all offered to review them for me when they come in so I don't have to, but I don't want anything incriminating slipping out.

After the third one this morning, I realize that maybe I need the torture to remind myself that she's not mine.

"—FILTHY FAMILY OF YOURS AWAY FROM MISS GRANGER. SHE'S WORKED SO HARD TO BE A SOURCE OF GOOD IN THIS WORLD. I DON'T KNOW WHAT DIRT YOU HAVE ON HER THAT CONNED HER INTO JOINING YOUR TEAM, BUT I WILL MAKE IT MY LIFE'S MISSION TO PROTECT THAT GIRL."

I half expect it to be signed M. McGonagall.

That's the last of them. I stand from my desk, ready to make the rounds. It's still a few hours before most will be coming in, but I've been here since six, anxious.

Melody, bless her, arrived forty-five minutes early simply because "the first day is sooo important!" She's been sending me a memo every time someone walks in the door.

I grab up Quentin Margolis's letter, so I have some kind of excuse for checking on Granger. I chat with Carrie, I check on Mockridge.

I knock on her doorframe. "Granger."

I brace myself to take her in, and find Blaise. Sitting on her desk. Her Cherrywood desk that cost almost 500 galleons. He smiles at me.

I look to her. She's placing books on her shelves. They're so comfortable.

"Quentin Margolis wants to schedule a meeting with us next week. I'll make myself available whenever, so please respond and let me know." She takes the letter from me, and I turn Blaise as she reads it. "Blaise, are you prepared for your meeting with Dogberd this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Brilliant. Gather your notes and I'll meet you in my office in five minutes." Get the fuck out of here.

Blaise feigns heartache and asks, "Mr. Malfoy, you don't trust me?"

I answer several meanings of the question when I say, "No."

He laughs and bids her goodbye. I wait until he's completely gone before turning back to her.

Alone now.

She starts placing books on her shelves, asking me about Blaise's meeting. I take the opportunity to move closer.

She points to where Blaise just left. "Is he any good? Does he have any idea what he's doing?"

I smirk, part of me pleased that she sees right through him. Even though *of course* she would. "Unfortunately, he's the best."

"Glad to hear he's worth the effort," she says.

She looks at me as she places books on her shelf. And it's almost domestic, the way she's setting up a home, nesting. And the way I stand taking her in.

"You like your office?"
She turns to face me. "I love it." And I can see she means it.
Do you tip office decorators?

"Good."

Her eyes flutter for a moment, and I can pretend that it will be this easy. That I'll be able to just stare at her like this forever. That she'll let me.

She's the first to look away. She grabs more items from the box on her desk, and I can hear her asking me something, but my eyes are stuck on a piece of paper.

Office Relationship Disclosure.

I blink at Blaise's name. And the space for someone else to sign. And I can't figure out what this piece of paper is doing in here, on her desk, until I do figure it out and I stare at it a moment longer, brain catching up.

She'd asked about the meeting.

"Er, yes. Just a meet-and-greet, really." I pull at my buttons, feeling too tight, and say, "See you at nine."

like as she came, thought of how quickly I could get her to peak and then how I would take my time with her for the next few hours. Thought of her breasts against my lips as I traveled down her body, pressing her legs open and holding her hips still as I tried my mouth on her, as I tasted her and sucked at her until she screamed for me to let her come—

Pansy starts bobbing her head on me, and I open my eyes to the ceiling to realize I'm fully hard, and she must think that I like what she's doing.

I may throw up later.

But the thought of losing my erection now... Pansy would never forgive me. I hook down at her, finding her light eyes watching my face, her lips pulled tight around my cock as it slips through her mouth. I run my fingers through her thin strands in thanks, and she sucks me hard.

I guess that's nice.

Her lips pop off me, and she takes a deep breath. "Relax, Draco." Raspy. I remember the first time I heard her talk after having my cock in her mouth. I had fucked her immediately. I close my eyes again as she licks at me. Just get through this.

I slip into her mouth again, and I imagine *her* mouth. I gasp.

Pansy does again... whatever she did.

It's *her* lips around the head of my cock, and I can watch as I slip into *her* mouth. She bats her eyes prettily up at me, asking if I like what she's doing.

"Yes," I whisper into the void.

Pansy hums around me.

Only it's *her* voice, cut off by my cock. *Her* voice struggling to tell me the correct answer to the equations and *her* consonants clicking around the correct way to store a Grindylow, and *her* teeth peppering her words with pearls as she tells me how to fuck her.

A hand at the base of me, and it's *hers* with her short nails and firm grip like I'm a quill and she's ready for the exam.

Hair tickles my thigh as a tongue slips down, down, taking all of me to the back of a throat.

It's *her* curls dancing around her face.

Her hair, sweeping back from *her* face as I reach for it.

Her throat moving around me, begging me to come.

Her breath on me.

Hermione.

I shout, gagging on my voice, and I come down *her* throat as she swallows every drop, like

I'm precious to her. Like she wants me to make love to her mouth every day.

A wet *plop*.

I'm boneless on the bed.

She pauses, her fingers on my shirt buttons. I've botched it. She's going to tell everyone that I'm gay or that I'm cheating on her. We're going to argue and she's going to break up with me. She looks into my eyes, and I'm wondering if I can fake a dizzy spell and pass out. After all, I haven't eaten since dinner last night.

"Just relax then," she whispers. The look she gives me is *sinful* and I'm so glad we aren't going to spend the next half hour fighting that I kiss her back when she presses her lips to mine again. She moves to my neck, kissing my jaw, my pulse, unbuttoning my shirt, hands sliding across my ribs. I keep my hands on her waist. It feels nice, but there's still not a lot happening in my trousers, and when I realize that's her next destination, I run my hands up to her chest, trying to find some inspiration.

Push-up bra. The damn thing has no give to it. Her fingers are at my waist now, and I try to

figure out how to tell her I'm not in the mood again before she can feel it for herself. Maybe I'll just tell her about my mission. That seems easier than explaining this.

She doesn't even bat an eye when she presses against my crotch and finds nothing to work with. I can feel a blush spreading up my chest, but her fingers continue to unbutton my trousers. She leans into my ear and whispers, "Relax, Draco. Close your eyes."

I swallow, and she kisses my throat. I close my eyes, and lean my head on the back of the couch. She slides down my body, kissing my chest on the way down, and I purse my lips together when I realize she's going to try to suck me off when I'm not even half-hard yet.

Her hand wraps around me and I feel her climb onto the floor between my knees. This is going to be arduous. So, I press my eyes tight and try. I think of last year, when she did this for the first time and I only lasted three minutes between her lips. I think of the time she and I shared a hot tub together in Italy this summer, before everything started getting more complicated and before the ink sank into the skin of my arm. Her body had glistened with the water and the moonlight, and she'd straddled me in the tub, her face next to mine, and I'd closed my eyes when she lowered herself onto me, and I'd thought of a different pair of thighs—

I take a deep breath. Pansy rubs my hip, and I realize her mouth is already on me. I'm getting harder at least. This will be over soon, and maybe I'll even sleep tonight. Yes, this could be helpful. I think of flying in my bed for the past few months, staring at the ceiling. Only a few nights did I reach below my pajamas and find release. I feel my cock slipping into her mouth again, and I think of the last time I'd properly made a mess of my sheets. I'd slept so well that night.

I had tucked everything away in my mind and focused only on things that made me hard. Things that heated me. I'd thought of *her*, of course. Thought of her hands around my shoulders, thought of her seated in my lap, moaning against my ear. Thought of what her face would look

I walk back to my office.

Blaise is laying on my couch, his notes on his chest.

"So, Dogberd is going to want a sort of Do Not Compete Agreement," he says. "He doesn't want us representing other teams that compete against them, but I'm going to argue for a Non-Compete in the British and Irish League only."

I listen. I turn to my desk. He goes on, rattling off his suggestions and notes. I watch him as he talks. His long fingers, and full lips. I crack my neck.

"—might be a bit of a deal-breaker, but I'm going to broker that when we get there..." I run through the Love Contract in my head. I didn't think of Blaise. I didn't think he'd... I thought he knew.

"—full run-around—"

I thought he understood how it would break me.

"Draco?"

I look up from the floor. He's sat up at some point.

"Draco?"

"Do you want her?"

This is stupid. This is pointless and obnoxious, and nothing to focus on today of all days. He blinks at me. "Who?"

My eyes narrow at him, and black spots pop at the edge of my vision. "Granger."

He chuckles. "Who doesn't?"

I turn. I pace back to my desk. My buttons are too tight.

I can deal with this. It is unexpected, but not improbable.

"Draco?"

The worst that can happen is watching the two of them greet each other in the mornings. His hand on her waist as he hands her coffee. He'll need to know how to make it right for her. I guess I can tell him how—

"What's wrong?"

If they show affection in the office, I can have Hartford take care of that. No PDA allowed in the workspace and all that. I would just have to approve their time off for vacations, knowing the days would be spent together.

"Draco, I didn't mean—"

Unless it's less than that. Unless it's only a matter of him sliding inside of her first. Listening to her moan.

A hand on my shoulder, and I spin shoving him away from me. He stumbles back, knocking into the wall, and I can't see anything. The spots...

I blink and it clears, wet on my cheeks.

He's staring at me, eyes wide, hands up. "It was a joke, Draco. I'm not pursuing her."

I can't understand the words fully, too focused on why I'm fucking crying and I push my hands into my eyes.

"It was a joke." His hands on my shoulders again and I don't want them there. "You have to see how much she wants you, Draco."

I breathe a shuddering breath. "This is fucking stupid," I mutter into my hands.

"I thought things were settled between you," he says. "On the balcony, it looked like..."

"It fucking could have been, but my nutter of a best friend interrupted us thirty seconds too soon."

He chuckles. "If you missed your speech, you wouldn't have been able to eye-fuck her from across the room."

I bark a laugh. I finish wiping my face. He steps back.

"You don't have to worry about me," he says, and I can't meet his eyes so I'm staring at his waistcoat buttons. "But I do intend on shagging the shit out of Melody, so you're going to need to lighten up on this whole 'Love Contract' thing."

I frown at him. He smirks. I say, "Daphne wants you back. You could always focus on that."

His smile fades and he says, "Not all of us can wait as patiently as you."

I feel my breath coming back. I conjure a mirror and see that my face is still splotchy. Fucking stupid. My hand shakes when I vanish the mirror.

"I thought you were more prepared for today," he says. "Thought you were ready."

I stare at my desk. "Me too."

"Do you need me to try it?"

I lift a brow at him. "Have you improved in the past two years?"

"Probably not."

I shake out my shoulders, and turn to face him. I concentrate on a series of 'bricks while he pulls his wand.

"Legilimens."

I don't know how long he spends pushing at me. But eventually he pulls away, sweat on his brow.

"It's cold in there," he says.

He frowns.

I nod. "Good."

We head to the conference room. She walks in with Walter just before the meeting starts and I try not to watch her as she tries to find her seat.

I shift. "The slop the elves call 'food' here doesn't always appease my appetite." I trace my fingers over her wrist so she can't say I won't touch her, and I move to stand.

"Is it your mission?"

I stop, awkwardly halfway between sitting up and standing, and glance around the common room. It's empty.

"Watch it, Pansy."

"The room is clear. I already checked," she says. "I just want you to know that you can talk to me. No details. Just your feelings."

I laugh. It's harsh against the stone walls, and I bite back the sound. I look to her and her expression turns to a scowl. If she only knew. It would be safer for me to talk about my assassination attempts than to talk about my *feelings*.

This is where Bella's Occlumency fails. I wouldn't have laughed if I had meditated this morning. If I had packed my feelings away.

Pansy swallows and frowns at her fingernails.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I don't think there's anything I can talk about."

She looks up at me, through long, dark lashes and says, "I want to help you."

I have a fleeting moment where I wonder what she would do if I asked her to Avada Albus Dumbledore for me... and then I vow to meditate tomorrow morning. Refocus.

"There's nothing you can do," I say.

I cup her cheek with my palm, and before I can stand and say goodnight, she holds my wrist, tangling our fingers, and says, "I can think of something. To help."

She trails her hand down my arm. Her other hand touches my thigh, moving slow circles. I look up at her and her eyes are dark.

I don't have the energy for this.

"Not here, Pans—"

"I've locked out any stragglers," she says, triumph in her eyes. "And kicked out everyone who was down here earlier."

I look around and realize that yes, there were several other people down here half an hour ago. I run through a few other excuses, but she's twisting, throwing her leg over my hips, cupping my face and kissing me.

A sixteen-year-old boy who doesn't want to have sex with a willing witch. What would the gossips say then.

She nips at my lips, slides her tongue into my mouth, rolls her hips. All the things I like.

She pulls back to breathe and I say, "I don't mean to disappoint you, love, but I may be too tired for this."

"She's going to be the most discussed witch in wizarding Britain. She's going to be tearing the Wizengamot a new asshole on a daily basis, photographed, interviewed, appearing at galas and Ministry functions." Pansy tilts her head. "I want to be there."

I nod. "Just don't think she'll want all of that."

Pansy smiles. "That's why you need to set up the meeting, indicate that at least for the *Prophet*, this is the route."

I open my mouth to argue, to tell her I have no power over her, to suggest a different approach. She cuts me off with the one thing that could silence me.

"I think you owe me. When it comes to her."

I look up at her blue eyes. Still warm. But insistent. And if I'd ever studied Legilimency, I feel like I could find something else under that warmth.

Saturday, October 12, 1996

They tell me Katie Bell is in the hospital wing. She's being transferred tomorrow to St. Mungo's.

I tuck that away, ignoring the gossip, ignoring the empty feeling in my chest. I focus on a solid line in front of my eyes.

Bella taught me a different technique for Occlumency. It's rudimentary. I know why Severus looks down upon it. It's strong, but basic. No finesse.

And it's only built for the mind. Severus's technique is built for much more.

But Bella's walls are easier. And so, they've been up for weeks, while I ignore Severus's summons to his office. I'd seen him the first week back from term, trying to start our training again, but all he wanted to talk about were my plans for my mission.

If he wanted the Headmaster dead that badly, why doesn't he just kill him himself.

"Did you hear about Bell?"

I blink, and Pansy is dropping onto the couch next to me. I knew I should have chosen the wingback chair instead.

"Yes. Who's got it out for her, I wonder?" I say, closing my book, hopefully giving the hint that this conversation will be short.

"Gryffindors," Pansy huffs. "Probably got in the way somehow."

I swallow, and send a dead stare to her as she plays with the cuff of my sleeve.

"Draco," she continues softly, "are you eating?"

I want to pull my arm away. Pull my skin away.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Because you're not eating." She lifts a brow at me.

I welcome everyone. I ask them to introduce herself and I smile as she stands, giving a speech. She blushes when she realizes no one else is introducing themselves with a monologue, and I grin at her until Blaise kicks me under the table.

I run the Senior Consultant meeting, explaining the financials without looking at her, answering Mockridge's questions without focusing on her fidgeting hands. I mention the *Prophet*, remember my part to play in Pansy's charade, and when the meeting is over I carry her back to her office, telling her there's a 10AM waiting for her.

She jumps into action, asking questions, demanding explanations.

"Calm down, Granger," I say. "It's just a preliminary appointment."

I open the door and watch as she freezes up when Pansy walks to her. I give Pansy a look that says, "please don't kill her," and shut the door.

When I get back to my office, I have five more Howlers. I run my hands down my face, silence the room, and sit.

I open the first one.

"*DRACO MALFOY IS A GOD AMONG MEN. HE'S GOT HAIR LIKE ADONIS.*"

Blaise's screeching voice assaults my ears. I stare at the red envelope as it dissolves into ashes. I open the next.

"*DRACO MALFOY IS THE ONLY MAN I'D TURN GAY FOR.*"

I rub my face and open the next.

"*I LIKE HIS HANDS.*"

Monday, October 13, 1997

Walking the Hogwarts corridors is a different experience now. I don't need Crabbe and Goyle behind me to encourage the first years to move out of my way anymore. I am the young Death Eater. Complicit in the murder of Albus Dumbledore.

But, the corridors don't feel the same. The whispers aren't the type I want to hear. And there's a light gone out for everyone since Potter did not return. And for me, since she did not.

I'm rounding the corner, heading back to the Slytherin dormitories when I hear: "Mr. Malfoy! Perfect timing!"

I stop, take a deep breath, set my features, and turn to see Amycus Carrow smirking at me. "Professor Carrow." I tuck my hands behind my back when I feel them shake. "I apologize. I'm awfully close to curfew."

He waves a hand. "Oh, not to worry. You're in need, actually."

He gestures for me to follow. I duck into the Dark Arts classroom after him, and find Neville Longbottom, Hannah Abbott, and Luna Lovegood across the room, wandless. To my right, Blaise stands with Harper and Astoria Greengrass.

Longbottom sneers. He's got a black eye that never seems to go away. Blaise shifts and looks away from me. He's not been as friendly since before. Before he saw the Mark on my arm.

"Hello, Draco," Lovegood says, like she's hosting tea.

"We're having a little after-hours tutoring," Amycus says, teeth gleaming. "These three"—he points at Longbottom, Abbott, and Lovegood—"were found wandering too close to curfew. And as you know, Longbottom and Lovegood attempted to break into the Headmaster's office last week—"

"We completed our detentions for that already," Longbottom snarls. "Snape sent us into the forest—"

"*Silencio*!"

Longbottom's voice disappears. I feel the silence in my bones.

"So," Amycus continues, "Mr. Zabini, Miss Greengrass, and Mr. Harper are assisting me with detention while reviewing this week's lesson. They were all unsuccessful in their practice on the spider in class."

The Cruciatus Curse.

My eyes flip to my Slytherins. Astoria's bottom lip trembles.

"Y ou, on the other hand..." Amycus paces the room in wide circles. "You showed quite a bit of promise in class yesterday. Mr. Malfoy."

I let my eyes drift along the walls, hoping...

There, a portrait of a milkmaid stopping by a creek. She wipes sweat from her brow and looks over at me. I hold her eyes and she nods once, before setting down her pails and walking down stream, out of the portrait.

"My aunt has been teaching me," I reply in a lazy way. I think of the mice in our dungeons, the way they screamed and squeaked. The house elf, Boppy, who always let me sneak out at night when I was young – the way he cried for himself. And then Rowle. Who I wish I could do again.

"Perhaps you could give a demonstration."

I look to Carrow. He's teeth glint from between his lips.

"Of course, Professor."

I draw my wand, turning to Longbottom first. The history makes it easy. I focus on the end of my wand, the dark smoke twisting inside of me.

"*Crucio*."

He crumples. The silencing charm is a blessing. But his mouth is open wide. I release him. He pants on the floor.

He sent me a note on Saturday morning, asking how it went. I sent him a detailed report of the evening – the food, the orchestra, the press – and in the last line I included the names of the people who'd joined.

I'd just decided to organize my paperwork for the third time when I hear the click-clacking of designer heels cutting sharply across the office floor. I give myself one guess as to who it is before my door swings open without so much as a knock and Pansy is there, hands proudly on her hips.

"Hello, Pans." I turn back to the contract I'm reviewing again.

"I want Granger," she says.

What a coincidence. So do I.

I look up at her with a bored expression.

"For what kind of torture?"

"For my fashion line." She sends me a blazing smile.

I blink at her, and straighten in my chair. "Granger... doesn't *do* fashion."

"Which is why she'll be perfect." Pansy takes the chair in front of me, dipping into a

comfortable position with legs crossed. "I can mold her into what I need." She waves a hand and a portfolio book appears in front of me, over my paperwork. I sigh and flip open the cover.

Parkinson

The Modern Business Witch

"What's this?"

"My new fashion line." She folds her hands in her lap and waits for me to flip through. I don't.

"Alright," I say. I close the portfolio. "You can write to her and make the proposal—"

"Orr..." She grins. "You can schedule the meeting. I doubt she'd meet with me just from a letter." She flips her hair over her shoulder. "I know the *Prophet* will be doing a write up next week – probably front page. I want to dress her for the shoot."

I sigh. "Well, that's easy enough—"

"And I want a contract with her. All public appearances. Monday through Friday apparel."

I laugh. She maintains her easy grin.

"And how in Merlin's name do you think you'll be able to con her into that?" I chuckle.

"I can be very persuasive." She lifts a brow at me.

"I remember." I lift one back.

Something softens in her eyes, something that's been flinty and sharp for several years now. She winks at me and it's gone.

He grins big.

Talkative.

"Well, I did say "tell me about yourself."

"Isn't there a Weasley that works at the Sanctuary?" I say.

He lifts his brows. "Yes! Charlie and I are great friends. Are you acquainted with him?"

"No."

"Oh."

"But Miss Granger is. She'd probably love to... talk about him." I wave my hand, trying to brush the Weasleys away.

His eyes go round. "Hermione Granger?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Is that a problem?"

"Oh! No! My wife is... a huge fan."

Well, we should all double-date sometime. I try not to roll my eyes. I kind of hate him. But she'll love him.

"Well, Walter, the position is the Associate under the Senior Consultant for Non-Wizard Relations. This could mean taking cases on dragons and other magical creatures, but really it is an assistant to the Senior Consultant, watching her mail, responding to her messages, proofing her reports..." And the idea that she even *needs* a person to do this for her is ridiculous but everyone else gets an Associate, so... "First day is Monday the seventeenth. Salary for the position is 20,000 galleons a year..."

I let my voice drone on, listing the benefits. His eyes widen every so often in a way he thinks he's hiding.

~*~

Friday, January 7, 2010

The office space is shaping up nicely. My furniture arrived today, and Granger's arrived yesterday. The shopkeeper did a wonderful job on the design of her space, so I hired him to do the entire floor, paying double if he could get the furniture delivered by this Monday.

I gave Mother a walk-through last night. She spent quite a bit of time in Granger's office, placing the drapes and adding a few plants.

And for the first time all week, I have nothing to do.

I'm sitting at my desk, running my fingers over the obsidian stone, trying to think of what else needs to be done before people start dropping in. I'm waiting for the response on two letters. One to Granger to figure out what day next week works for everyone to come to the office, and one to my father to have him approve the Love Contract.

I turn to Carrow. "What's so difficult about that?"

He cackles. Astoria looks faint.

Carrow gestures to the other two. Hannah Abbott is next. I hardly know her. Too quiet in class, and never caught anyone's interest. She screams. I see Blaise turn away from the corner of my eye.

There's an acid eating my insides, rotting through me. It makes its way up my throat, heading for my mind where I lock it all away.

I release Abbott, and she shakes, moaning.

I turn to Lovegood. She smiles at me. My hand shakes, and before Carrow sees, I flick my wrist, silencing Abbott. Like it's what I meant to do.

I crack my neck, feeling emptied. I raise my wand to Lovegood. I focus on the tip, smoking from electricity.

Her pale eyes shine back. And I wonder why she isn't afraid.

"It's alright, Draco."

I blink. Lovegood said it. Like giving me permission. Like I asked.

The door opens with a *smack* and Severus is barreling in. He takes one look around the room, and I see the milkmaid resettle at her stream.

"Professor Carrow," Severus hisses. "Whatever do we have going on here?"

"Detention, Headmaster." Carrow grins, like he's about to be given a treat. "Caught these three wandering at curfew. Thought we'd give the others some practice at the Cruciatius Curse."

Severus raises a brow. "A bit extreme for curfew, don't you think, Professor? Whatever will we do to them when they commit a more serious offense?"

Carrow laughs. Like he and Severus have a private joke.

Severus glances at the room. "To bed."

Luna helps Hannah off the ground. Harper runs out the door. Blaise squeezes Astoria's hand.

I stay. I know I stay.

"Professor Carrow, please escort Mr. Longbottom and Miss Lovegood back to their towers. Miss Greengrass, please ensure Miss Abbott goes straight to her dormitories. Mr. Zabini. Please stay."

Blaise frowns at Snape. Carrow drags Longbottom up by the collar and takes him out. I see Astoria throw Hannah's arm over her shoulder as soon as they're out the door, out of view.

The door shuts. Blaise scowls at me. Like I've electrocuted him too. He's stopped asking me questions about the Dark Lord after Dumbledore died. Stopped envying me.

I feel a cauldron bubbling inside of me. A foul potion, thick and viscous. I can hear Abbott screaming still. And maybe I do know her. Maybe she and I were partners in Charms class for third year. I think she gave me a Valentine that year.

Severus is talking to Blaise. I turn away, heave, and the acid pours out of me, splashing on the stone floors, spitting and swirling until I can't breathe with it. I gasp in air, gurgling.

Severus's hand on my shoulder. He vanishes my sick. He's speaking to me lowly. So low I

can't hear over my air, over the screaming. I think I can hear Longbottom screaming too now.

I heave again, on my knees now. Once it's out of me I'm jerked upright, and Severus holds my face, sinking deep into my mind, viewing the memory, physically *pushing* it away.

It shrinks back.

For good measure, he searches for her. He finds a jewelry box and rattles it, but all that falls out are a few shallow thoughts, like trinkets.

He leaves my mind, releasing me, and I stumble when his hands are no longer on my face.

He conjures a glass of water and I drink it all, sloshing down my chin.

"Mr. Zabini," Severus says. I forgot Blaise was there. And now he's seen. "Escort Mr. Malfoy back to the dungeons."

Severus sweeps from the room. When I can finally meet Blaise's gaze, he's ashen, eyes wet. His arms are crossed over his chest protectively.

"What was that? That thing he did?"

I blink at him, vision doubling. "Who?"

"Snape. When he... You were sick and he healed you."

I frown at him. "He didn't *heal* me. It was Legilimency." And then I add, "I'm an Occlumens."

Like it explains anything.

"Since when?" he hisses.

I stare at him, trying to figure out if there's any danger in him knowing. "Fifth year. He's been training me."

Blaise studies me, like I just told him I'm a werewolf.

He holds the door open for me and we head back. He hands me a slab of chocolate after the second time we stop to rest. Like me, he doesn't have a Patronus to keep the Dementors from haunting him.

I listen to our footsteps and wonder why Severus had him hang back. Did he have something to attend to, making him unable to walk me himself?

When we arrive at the common room, all eyes turn on us. Harper is talking quickly with Daphne and Pansy. They quiet.

"Is it true?" Vincent humbers toward us, a gleam in his eye. "You Crucio'd another student?" He grins. He's the only one besides me who could curse the spider on the first try yesterday in class.

"Yeah, you wanna see?" I snark at him. He pulls back from me.

Daphne stomps over to us. "Where is Astoria?" she demands.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Fifteen

"She should be along—" Blaise tries.

Daphne pushes me. "You stay away from her, Draco. I don't want her learning anything from you. No more *tutoring*—"

Blaise steps into her, pressing his hand against her hip. "That's not how it happened—" She pushes me again, and I keep my mind centered on getting to bed. "Harper says you can do it without *blinking*. Says it comes natural to you." She heaves in air, and I watch as Pansy stands in the corner, looking away. "Astoria's not like you, Draco. You're sick. Been hanging out with your Death Eater pals too long and now you're just like them—"

"Back the fuck off!" Blaise snarls. I watch as he shoves his girlfriend back, and guides me to the stairs, down into the dormitories, his hand on my shoulder. He shuts the door. I take off my shoes, starting to dress for bed.

"Are you alright?"

I turn and he's watching me.

He's expecting me to be angry. To feel betrayed. Feel upset. Feel anything.

"Sure."

I take a cold shower. All my showers are cold. When I return to my four-poster, Blaise has brought up some leftovers from dinner. He sits with me on my bed as I pick at the food.

"Who are you hiding secrets from?" he asks once I've had enough.

I look up at him. He's too close to it all. He already knows, if my suspicions have been right over the past three years, but who knows where he'll end up once the war starts.

"You," I say. "I started having erotic dreams about you in third year. Snape's been helping me control my urges." I lift my brow at him.

He grins. "I knew it."

He winks at me.

And as he flips open a Quidditch catalogue with me, talking about the Irish this year, I realize why Snape had him stay behind. For me.

"So, now that I'm leaving the Dragon Sanctuary, I'll be looking for more of an office job. My wife heard about your shindig on Friday night – had a friend that was there – and told me you'll be having a Magical Creatures division, or something of that sort. So, I mailed in my resume."

"I must admit, I don't know much about the position Mr. Malfoy. I just know that my wife wants me away from the flames, but maybe Malfoy Consulting could keep me close to the creatures."

Tuesday, January 3, 2000

"So, now that I'm leaving the Dragon Sanctuary, I'll be looking for more of an office job. My wife heard about your shindig on Friday night – had a friend that was there – and told me you'll be having a Magical Creatures division, or something of that sort. So, I mailed in my resume."

"I must admit, I don't know much about the position Mr. Malfoy. I just know that my wife wants me away from the flames, but maybe Malfoy Consulting could keep me close to the creatures."

~*~

I feel my lips turn, pulling up and away and I blink a few times before I realize I'm laughing, giddy with it all.



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Five

Hermione ran through her Charms homework in her mind as she walked the corridors. O.W.L.s were approaching and although no one else seemed inclined to study or care about them at all, she knew it was best to start early.

She used her time on Prefect rounds to review. There was so much silence around the castle by this time in the evening – now that Umbridge had begun with her “decrees” – that she would go insane if she didn’t have something else to occupy herself. She’d asked Ron if he wanted to patrol with her, but of course, since his day for rounds was Tuesday, he’d abruptly declined.

“Why would I go twice?” he’d mumbled around pudding at the dinner table.

To keep her company? She rolled her eyes and continued listing the spells created in the 1920s. She turned a corner towards the History of Magic classroom and stopped mid-step.

Draco Malfoy had Pansy Parkinson pinned against the stone wall. He was kissing her. She was gripping at his arms.

Hermione blinked, feeling her breath leave her.

Her back was against the wall and her hands were tightening on his shoulders, twisting into his hair as he attacked her mouth with his. His right hand on her hip, and his left bracing against the wall.

She swallowed.

These were... These were **Prefects** for Merlin’s sake! And members of Umbridge’s delightful little squad. They knew better than to be out, *camouflaging* at 9PM on a Thursday! Leave it for your common room, dammit!

Pansy smiled against his lips.

Hermione opened her mouth, ready to march over to them and forcibly separate them – because it was her Prefect duty, of course.

Then she watched as Draco pulled his mouth away from hers, panting, puffing air across her neck, and reattached to the place just below her ear. Pansy squeaked a small sound, biting her lip.

Hermione didn't understand what the big deal was. Anytime Viktor tried kissing her neck, he either tickled her or hurt her.

~~~~~
Hermione realized that she was standing in the middle of a corridor, watching Draco Malfoy devour his girlfriend... or lover... or whatever she was to him, she grumbled. She either needed to leave or to do her job and separate them.

She stepped forward just as Draco shifted his body, moving a knee between Pansy's knees. He leaned forward, letting his thigh disappear between hers, inching higher, and the moment his leg reached the top of hers, Pansy groaned, gasping and grabbing his hair.

"Draco..."

"Alright. That was enough. Hermione narrowed her eyes at the two Slytherins.

"Excuse me," she said loudly. Pansy's eyes snapped open and Draco removed his lips from her neck, but didn't turn to face her. "I'd hate to interrupt whatever is about to happen here, but it is now 9:08. As Prefects, you know that students should be in their common rooms."

Draco dropped his knee, but kept his hand on the wall, panting. Pansy glared at her and stepped around him, straightening her skirt.

"Oh, like you have **any** idea about what was about to happen, you prissy little Mudblood." Pansy sneered at her.

"I have a few guesses," Hermione deadpanned. "Please return to your common room –"

"Or what?" Pansy smiled. "You'll take house points away? You know you can't. In fact, as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad, I'd say you're being unnecessarily rude, Mudblood."

Hermione bit back her comment, and watched as Draco straightened, stepping away from the wall, and turned to glare at her with hot eyes.

"I'd say, you're right, Pansy."

Hermione huffed.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for questioning the authority of two Inquisitorial Squad members," Pansy declared.

"Ten points per Squad member; I'd say, Pans."

Twenty points for doing her job?

"You're both ridiculous." She stepped around Pansy and continued down the hall, completing her patrol path. She turned to them. "If I find you in the corridors after curfew again, I'll be giving detentions."

Pansy sneered at her, and Draco, with his hair out of place and his tie twisted, smirked and said, "Can't wait, Granger."

She glared and turned on her heel, walking the long corridor to the left turn, knowing they were watching her the entire way.

"You did what?"

She stares at me, half-naked and half-drunk.

"Well?" she says.

The Rights and Wrongs Series

I count down. The room joins me. And I look back at her, hoping she heard me. Hoping she understands.

Thinking. Always thinking.

Fireworks and cheers and clinking glasses, and I toast her. She drinks her champagne and holds me under her spell.

Someone hugs me. Blaise tried to kiss me. A new client shakes my hand. And I can't find her. She whispers through the crowd, haunting the room for the next hour. Every time I find her she slips away, smiling with Potter and Ginny Weasley.

By the end of the night, when Blaise is the only one on the dance floor, I realize it wasn't enough.

I say goodnight, thanking the staff, complimenting Mother, letting Blaise know where the Hangover Potions are.

Perhaps I scared her. Perhaps she scared herself.

I climb the stairs, passing several doors I know not to open.

Maybe she saw through me. Saw that it was all for her. Maybe whatever Father said to her about me still eats at her.

The way she bolted from this room at the mere suggestion of marrying you.

I pace my room, slowly taking off my suit.

What do I do now? How do I salvage this? Do I double down? Go to Cornerstone tomorrow?

I stare at my carpets, tracing the patterns and try to think big picture, try to think of the business first.

There's a pounding in my head, possibly the champagne, possibly the stress, tapping at my skull, scratching behind my eyes.

What do I do now?

The tapping is outside of me. My window. An owl scratches the pane.

I jump to it, and he swoops, dropping a thin envelope. I rip the seal and find just her name. And her "title."

The only resume I ever asked her for.

I'm in my socks and trunks, running to my study, passing stray guests to find the paperwork I drew up for tomorrow's influx of applications. A special folder - one that I hoped I would open - for the Senior Consultant, Non-Wizard Relations.

I scribble a cover letter, calling her the Golden Girl again, and send it all off with my owl. I'm leaving my study, eyes glazed, trying to recover, and Mother turns down the hall, pulling her earrings out.

She stares at me, half-naked and half-drunk.

Hermione decided to take a breath and *get her shit together*. She was a working professional and she needed to start behaving like one.

She stood from her desk, intent on looking through her filing cabinets when she heard a knock on her door frame. My, it was busy around here.

She turned to see a thin man with stylish specs leaning into her office.

"Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Yes? Hello?"

"I'm Corban Hartford. Malfoy Consulting's solicitor." He stepped fully into her office and she took in his spiffy robes.

"The solicitor for the group of solicitors?" Hermione smiled. "You must be the best then."

She shook his hand and he tapped his glasses up, grinning.

"I'm holding private meetings with all Senior Consultants on the contract and paperwork today. Is now a good time?"

"Yes, absolutely." Hermione turned to her bag and began pulling out the packet Draco mailed to her on New Year's Eve with the contract and guidelines. "Sit down."

She turned and Corban Hartford was gently closing her office door. How odd to have an office with a door instead of a cubicle. How odd to be in a closed-door meeting.

Corban took his seat and opened up the binder he'd carried in.

"Alright, so you have the original contract." His eyes flipped up to her fingers where she held it. "We have added addendums which I will be happy to discuss with you, if clarification is needed or if you'd like to negotiate anything." His voice lifted at the end, like this was his tenth time doing this spiel today. Maybe it was.

He continued in a slightly lazy voice, "Now, Miss Granger, keep in mind that although I am beholden to M.C.G., and Mr. Malfoy himself, you now fall under the umbrella of M.C.G. I am your solicitor now, as well. You can come to me with any questions or if you need legal advice for yourself not only as an employee, but also as a person. The only time I will not be able to represent you is if you file *against* Malfoy Consulting Group or Mr. Malfoy. But it's my job here today," and he tapped the contracts and addendums, "to make sure there will be no reason to find myself on the other side of the court from you." He gave a small smile.

Her brain buzzed with all the different ideas flying through her head. All the different possible ways she could find herself battling M.C.G. in court. Battling Draco.

"Alright, yes."

He flipped a page in the binder. "So, we have the Workplace Guidelines, Non-Disclosure Agreement, Conflict of Interest Policy, Sexual Harassment documents including the Love Contract, Do Not Compete Clause, and of course your Duty Statement."

Hermione blinked.

"Er.. There are a couple of terms in there that will need to be explained to me."

"Of course," Corban said, taking his glasses off to clean them. Corban then launched into a discourse to define the Workplace Guidelines. Then he fully defined the Non-Disclosure Agreement. By the time he started on the Conflict of Interest Policy, Hermione's knee was bouncing under the table, itching to speed him along. She knew what a fucking Conflict of Interest Policy was.

"With the Sexual Harassment documents, you'll find the normal business," he said, scratching his temple. "Any complaints can be directed to me, or to Mrs. Bulstrode in Admin" – Hermione realized this must be Dorothea, and she thought what an unfortunate pool of genetics there – "or you can complete an anonymous complaint, and submit it directly to the Ministry, to be examined by an outside source."

Hermione blinked. "Yes, alright. And what is it you said about a Love Contract?" he said in the past ten minutes. "The Love Contract Policy helps to establish some workplace guidelines for coworkers who become romantically involved. We're asking all employees to disclose any current or past romantic relationships with another employee, and if two employees do become involved, to disclose it immediately."

"Oh, of course." That wasn't really too bad...

"All relationships between managers and reporting staff members are forbidden, of course, as it would affect working relationships. If a manager and a reporting staff member choose to become involved, it is the manager who would need to excuse themselves from their position, and find employment elsewhere."

Hermione's face was tight. His eyes examined hers, and she watched as he assumed she was confused.

"Like for instance," he continued, pushing his glasses up, "if you were to become involved with a bloke who was one of your associate consultants under Non-Wizard Relations – or a woman! Don't mean to assume! –"

He smiled. He was quite cute and she quite wanted to kill him.

"—If you entered into a relationship with someone one tier beneath you, once it was disclosed, you would need to excuse yourself as Senior Consultant to continue seeing that person." He crossed his leg. "Does that make sense?"

She stared at herself in the reflection of his glasses, hearing that Draco would have to be the one to leave *Malfoy Consulting Group*, should the two of them ever find their way to each other.

She swallowed. "Perfect sense."

The carpet was plush beneath her feet, and Hermione stood in her doorway for several moments, looking at the warm seats in front of her desk, and the warm color on the walls, thinking of how unimposing she would be behind this desk. She would be warm, and open.

She walked to the far corner, taking in the view from her desk. She gazed down at the Cherrywood and it finally hit her. Gryffindor dormitories. That's what this reminded her of. She smiled and took a seat at *her* desk, running her fingers over it.

"Hermione Granger: Corporate Sell-out."

She looked up to see Blaise Zabini leaning against her door frame. He held a mug of tea and crossed his right ankle over his left.

He smirked at her.

"Corporate sell-out?"

"Sure. You've got the corner office, the high-paying salary, the private sector. Sold your soul to the devil, you did."

She raised a brow at him. "And if your office is just next door to *mine*, what does that make you?"

He lifted his tea to his dark lips. "Lucky." He winked at her as he took a sip.

She frowned at him even as she felt a blush creeping up her neck.

"Blaise," Draco's voice. Hermione sat tall and tried to look busy, even though she was clearly in the middle of a conversation with Blaise, with nothing on her desk.

"My liege," Blaise said, turning from his spot in the doorway and executing a deep bow. Hermione could just make out Draco's shoulder.

"When you are assigned an office, I expect you to stay in it."

"But I much prefer the view on this side of the building," Blaise said, his smile was a little too devilish for Hermione's liking.

"As Senior Consultant on Marketing and P.R., I need you closer to me. Clear out of that office." Voice firm.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy." Blaise saluted him, turned a wink on her, and exited her door completely.

So Blaise was assigned an office on the other side of the floor, but had moved his belongings and nameplate to the one next to hers? She shook her head at the empty bookshelves. *Her* empty bookshelves.

Movement from the doorway caught her eye and she lifted her head to see Draco poke his head in.

"Evening, Granger."

"Oh, yes, hi."

He disappeared. She slapped her hand against her forehead.

private offices lining all four walls. Windows for natural sunlight stood proudly between the offices, and there were plants in corners. The room was alive.

"After you, Miss Granger," Wentworth said. And Hermione remembered herself and stepped out of the lift.

A plump black-haired woman rose from behind the reception desk.

"Mr. Wentworth, Miss Granger. Welcome." She did not smile. "I'm Dorothea.

Administration Manager. Once we have our receptionists next week, I will be in my office over there." She pointed a thick finger to the office over Hermione's left shoulder, just right of the elevators. Hermione was secretly quite glad that this grumpy little woman would not be the one greeting visitors...

"You can see me for any administration issues, like paychecks, scheduling portkeys, those things. I'm available for everything you need." Dorothea's voice did not quite match her friendly, helpful words. "As you can see, our researchers, analysts and associate consultants will take up the majority of the center space." Dorothea gestured to the cubicles in the center of the floor. "Mr. Wentworth, your office is this way, near Mr. Malfoy's."

Hermione followed Dorothea's finger as it pointed to the left corner, opposite of the elevators. Mr. Malfoy's office.

"And Miss Granger," Dorothea turned around, pointing to the right, just behind her. "Your office is just here."

A corner office. A corner office that was as distant from Draco's office as physically possible. Hermione supposed that was for the best.

Dorothea seemed to dismiss them as she sat back at her desk, thumbing through a binder. Wentworth sent her a smile and bid her goodbye, heading toward his office. Hermione turned, taking in her office door. In between the elevators and her office was a couch, a little waiting area. Hermione smiled, thinking of clients waiting for an appointment with her. Maybe she'd have walk-ins. People who would wait all day for a moment of her free time.

She approached her office and saw the name plate on the office door just to the left of hers.

Blaise Zabini

Marketing and Public Relations

Hermione sighed, wondering how she'd get any work done around here.

She opened the door and found an office twice the size of her apartment's bedroom. Her brows lifted and her lips parted as she took in the Cherrywood desk, with matching cabinets behind, and an entire wall of empty book shelves to her right. There were two huge windows overlooking Whitehall, one on each exterior wall of the corner office.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty six



Hermione spent the rest of the week cleaning out her cubicle at the Ministry, saying goodbye to her coworkers and friends, and taking beatings from her pure-blood teachers.

It had already gotten out that she was joining M.C.G. by Thursday. Skeeter wrote a quick blurb on Draco in the *Prophet* detailing his current social outings and his relationship status – surprisingly, Katya was not mentioned – and she managed to list the Senior Consultants that had signed on. Hermione recognized a few names, like Cuthbert Mockridge who had retired from the Goblin Liaison Office. She remembered Draco mentioning him.

On Friday, she received two anonymous Howlers at the Ministry. One from a pure-blood fanatic who was disgusted to hear that she would be tainting the Malfoy name with her dirty blood and Muggle ways, and one that chastised her for leaving her future behind and following a Death Eater blindly. It took her thirty minutes to leave the closed office that she'd silenced. Her mood on her last day was essentially ruined until they brought out a cake and threw a little party for her.

She took home her last box, and gave Aiden a hug. He smiled at her and told her maybe he'd swing by the bookstore once in a while. Hermione felt badly that they had never had a second date, even though she honestly had no interest in a second date, but it was really the principle of the thing.

She'd gotten through her weekend classes, learning gothic architecture and how to create a cheese plate, and on Monday she was battling her nerves starting at four in the morning. When she heard Ginny leave at five for practice, she decided to simply get up, and get over to the office. She had one more box of things to pack up and bring.

She stood in the lifts to M.C.G. at 7:30AM, holding a medium sized box that she'd cast a feather-light charm on. The doors opened and she was relieved that Dorothea was no longer stationed up front, but instead a button-nosed redhead beamed up at her.

"Hi, I'm Melody!" She stood from the reception desk and held out her hand to shake.

Hermione shifted the box around and held out her hand. Damn handshake.

"Hello, Melody." Hermione brushed hair out of her face with one hand. "Are you our receptionist?"

"One of them!" She had wide teeth, but all-in-all, she was quite attractive. "Oh! I'm supposed to let everyone know that there's an all-staff meeting at 9AM, then just Senior Consultants at 9:30AM. There's also a memo on your desk about it."

"Brilliant. Thank you, Melody."

Hermione shuffled her way over to her office door, managed to open it with one hand, and found Blaise Zabini in her office chair, legs up on the desk.

"Ah! The early bird catches the worm," Blaise said. His fingers were playing with a quill. Probably her quill.

She shook her head at him, and slugged her box to her guest chair; plopping it down. How early did he have to be to beat her?

"So, in this situation, am I the bird? Or the worm?" She frowned at him and placed her hands on her hips.

He smirked at her.

"You're too smart for your own good, Granger."

She grinned and plucked three books from her box. "Yes, I've been told." She walked to the bookshelves near her door and began filing them. "What can I do for you, Blaise?"

"Just wanted to bring this by." He stood from her chair and pulled a piece of paper from his inside pocket. He unfolded it and set it down on her desk just as she was returning to grab more books.

It read *Office Relationship Disclosure*. She blinked at it. She scanned down the document to see the Partner #1 line had his signature and his printed name. Partner #2 was blank.

"I thought it best to get a jump on this, Granger." She looked up at him and his face was playfully serious. "Before the inevitable happens." His lips twitched.

Hermione felt her jaw drop and a blush spreading, but she couldn't help the way her mouth wanted to smile. He was the most *obnoxious* cad she'd ever known!

She cleared her throat and turned her expression as earnest as possible.

"Oh, Blaise, darling," she began, "you know how sticky this Love Contract is. It would never work between us, love." She bit back her grin as she took more books to the shelves.

Hermione felt ridiculous. She felt ridiculous for most of the night. Madame Michele instructed Hermione to please serve the tea. Hermione blinked at her and went to the corner of the room, fumbling around with the service cart. She knew Madame Michele was watching her and she knew the Quick Quotes Quill was scribbling furiously in the next room.

She tried to remember everything Madame Michele had done the previous week, knowing that *that* was the test.

Her list of notes that evening was twice the length.

She needed new robes. She almost screamed in frustration on Wednesday evening when nothing in her closet suited her. She was about to meet her new co-workers, the people she would be working closely with and she had nothing to wear. She had Muggle outfits, Muggle business attire, but did she want to meet everyone screaming "I am Muggle-born!?"

She settled on her blue robes. They were the most comfortable and she loved the color the most.

The M.C.G. office was in Westminster, quite close to the Ministry headquarters. Guests were to enter using a door labeled "Deliveries" which would open to a lobby with a lift taking them straight to the top floor. Hermione called for the lifts, and stared down at her feet, taking deep breaths.

She at least needed new shoes.

"Hermione Granger?"

She turned to see a middle-aged gentleman with a briefcase entering the "Deliveries" door. She didn't recognize him.

"Yes, hello?"

"I heard you would be joining Malfoy Consulting." He had a warm smile. "Wendell Wentworth. Management Consultant." He held out his hand and Hermione completely forgot last night's instruction from Madame Michele as she took his hand. "I'll be working closely with Mr. Malfoy on cases for H.R., Financials, all that."

Hermione's heart beat again once she realized that "Mr. Malfoy" was Draco, not Lucius. Relations. Magical creatures. Muggle relations... "

"My, what a splendid idea!" Wentworth beamed. "What a perfect witch for the job!" She liked him already. The lift arrived and they stepped in. "You know, Miss Granger, I do believe you and I are the only Gryffindors so far, so we must stick together!"

Hermione smiled, wondering if she was, in fact, taking a lift to the Snake Pit.

The doors split open to reveal a wide and open penthouse floor. There was a reception desk immediately in front of them, cubicles scattering the center of the floor, and doors leading to

Miss Truesdale made it very clear to Hermione that she would need *much* more than ten weeks to catch up, and took absolutely no pleasure in watching her move throughout the night. It wasn't until Miss Truesdale took her to a ballet bar and began taking her through a Muggle ballet warmup, that she looked at her with anything but distaste. Hermione's two years of Muggle ballet as a six-year-old came flooding back to her, and she was at least able to remember the positions.

She received a letter on Friday – as she nursed her aching legs – addressed to Miss Granger. It was on M.C.G letterhead and it was Draco's handwriting, but it seemed quite... generic.

It detailed a bit more information that the original contract and paperwork did not cover. First day for all staff was to be Monday January 17th, with true operations beginning the following week. It also invited all Senior Consultants to begin setting up their offices as early as the coming Monday. He proposed a casual meet-and-greet on Tuesday or Wednesday evening, so that all Senior Consultants could interact.

Hermione wrote back to him immediately, letting him know that Tuesday was no good for her, but Wednesday evening she could do. She frowned, thinking of her next Madame Michele lesson, having nine more to go. An owl got back later. Draco said Wednesday evening was the best option for most.

Her interior decorating lesson on Saturday afternoon and her hosting class Sunday morning were both adequate. Her instructors didn't seem to like her very much, and Monsieur DuBois made her feel like she was wasting his time. Her second lesson with Madame Michele was much like the first. Madame Michele greeted her the same way. At 8PM on the dot, the office door opened, and Madame Michele asked her if she had any questions.

"I—well ..." Hermione took a breath and closed her eyes.

Do not stutter.

"Yes, Madame Michele. I was hoping you would explain to me the proper greeting, if handshaking is not allowed."

The corner of Madame Michele's mouth twitched, and she said, "You do take hands, Mz Granger, but you should do so *az a lady*. Not *az a gentleman*."

This was far too vague. The charms mistress saw her confusion and said, "Mz Granger, 'ow do you do?" She lifted her hand, but her palm didn't face out, like a normal handshake gesture. Her palm angled downward, her fingers delicately loose – like how Miss Truesdale had wanted – and she stepped toward Hermione.

Hermione's only choice was to take her hand with her own palm facing upward, like she was about to kiss her ring. "How do you do, Madame Michele?" Madame Michele's fingers gripped her own, so only their fingers touched, not their palms.

"Ah, but I do believe you're forgetting something, darling," Blaise said. Hermione turned to him after she'd placed the first book. He sat on the edge of her desk. "We're on the same tier. You're not over me and I'm not over you – though I am open to both ways, I'll have you know..." His eyes sparkled and she looked down, twisting her lips to keep from grinning at his ridiculousness. "Senior Consultants dating Senior Consultants is really not as frowned upon."

She looked up at him. He sat so comfortably on her desk, smirking at her. He was joking, yes? He was... tilting her up. She shook her head at him and walked back for more books. "Unfortunately, Blaise, I already have one of these in place with Mockridge. We've been doing it like Flobberworms for months now..."

She looked at him innocently, infusing regret into her stare. She watched his eye twitch as the image of eighty-year-old Cuthbert Mockridge came to mind.

"Oh, what a pity." He said, grinning.

"Hm." She nodded.

His eyes glinted at her and she thought of how dangerous he would be to the young witches in the cubicles, like Melody.

A knock on her doorframe. "Granger?" And she turned to see Draco look up from a paper he was holding. Merlin, he was handsome today, dressed and pressed for his first day.

She watched as his eyes flickered between Blaise, still sitting comfortably on her desk, and herself.

He continued, "Quentin Margolis wants to schedule a meeting with us next week. I'll make myself available whenever, so please respond and let me know." He handed her the letter he was holding, and she skimmed it. There was silence. She looked up and Draco was frowning at Blaise. Blaise was grinning back at him.

"Blaise, are you prepared for your meeting with Dogberd this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir." Blaise's eyes danced.

"Brilliant. Gather your notes and I'll meet you in my office in five minutes."

Blaise brought his hand to his heart. "Mr. Malfoy, you don't trust me?"

Draco leveled his eyes on him. "No."

Blaise chuckled, jumped off of her desk and left with a "See you soon, Granger."

Draco watched him leave the room.

"Who's Dogberd?" she asked as she grabbed up more books.

"He's in charge of the Chudley Cannons," Draco turned back to her, watching her. "Blaise is bidding for us to work their Marketing and P.R."

"Oh." She looked up at him. "That's a pretty big deal, isn't it?" She took the books to her shelves. She gestured out the door, to where Blaise just exited. "Is he any good? Does he have any idea what he's doing?"

"Unfortunately, he's the best."

She looked over her shoulder at him, and he smiled, shaking his head.

"Glad to hear he's worth the effort." She chuckled.

"'Y ou like your office?'"

She placed the last book and turned around. "I love it." She leaned back on the shelves and smiled. He watched her.

"Good."

Her chest was warm, thinking of the last time they'd made eye contact like this. Across a drawing room glittering with champagne, and before that, just inches away on a balcony.

She looked at the floor, took a breath, and moved back to her box, passing him. "So, an all-staff meeting today at nine? Followed by a Senior Consultant meeting?"

She began pulling her trinkets out of her box – a framed picture of her and her parents, little baubles that sat on her desk at the Ministry. She looked up when he hadn't responded. His eyes were on her desk, where a piece of paper with Blaise's signature still sat.

Her heart stopped.

"Er, yes." He snapped out of it, and she opened her mouth to explain, to deny, to say anything. "Just a meet-and-greet, really." He straightened the front of his robes and nodded to her. "See you at nine."

She watched as his eyes turned off. And he left.

She threw her head back and growled. She grabbed the damn *Office Relationship Disclosure* and set it on fire.

She headed to the conference room on the opposite side of the floor at 8:50AM. She left her office and was surprised to see so many people filling up the cubicles. She closed her door, and the man in the cubicle closest to her office stood and waved.

"Miss Granger." He walked to her and held out his hand. Again, Madame Michele's lessons left her brain. "I'm Walter, your Associate."

"My...?"

"Associate Consultant," Walter grabbed his notepad and gestured for Hermione to continue towards the conference room. "Each Senior Consultant has one or two Associates and I'm yours!" He gave a bit of a "ta-daa!" gesture that had Hermione grinning.

He was... quite handsome... and married. She found the ring. He looked to be thirty-five or so, and suddenly Hermione felt very strange to be above this adult man.

"That's wonderful. Hello, Walter, good to meet you." She turned the corner around a set of cubicles and Walter followed. "And where did you work before this?"

"I was in Romania with the Dragon Sanctuary."

"Oh, absolutely not," Hermione snarled. "Please send the bill to my home address, and please return Mr. Malfoy's money to him. I won't be taking it."

Madame Michele smirked at her, and nodded. Hermione grabbed up her coat and purse, throwing powder into the fireplace and returned home.

Whatever fond feelings Hermione had found for Madame Michele at the end of their lesson were quickly squashed when she read through her notes. The Quick Quotes Quill had been writing the entire time it seemed.

Do not wander in another person's sitting room

Hand shaking?

Compliments?

Do not stare out the window like a fool

Do not choose the largest grandest table for only two people

Do not bounce your leg under the table

No need to stand when a woman stands

What in heavens name are your shoes?

Do not stutter – you know your own brain and you know what you mean to say

The list went on, filling the whole parchment. Hermione tossed it on the ground in exasperation. She picked it up again five minutes later.

She received the bill by owl shortly after she arrived home. Her jaw dropped. Perhaps she should have let Lucius handle it.

Then she remembered glossing over a figure for salary in Draco's contract that was three times her current Ministry pay, and she conceded that she would, in fact, be able to afford Madame Michele's fee once a week for ten weeks. Of course, she had no idea how much dance lessons, hosting classes and interior decorating lessons were going to be.

E will get what e wants, one way or ze other.

What was it that Lucius wanted?

Hermione bit her lip, and stared at the wall of her room that used to be *the Wall*. She thought he wanted her to stay away from Draco. That these classes were her punishment for disobeying him. But now she wasn't sure.

Miss Truesdale ended up being the most horrid person Hermione had ever had the displeasure of knowing.

At Thursday's dance lesson, she had her self-confidence so severely beaten by this withered ex-ballerina, that she ate a whole carton of ice-cream by herself.

Hermione frowned. "Miss...?"

"Truesdale. Your dance teacher."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh, no... I was only..." She stopped. "I am only taking manners classes from you, Madame Michele. I am not taking other courses at this time..."

"Mz Granger." Madame Michele removed her glasses and let them hang around her neck from a string of gems. Her eyes were tired, but direct. "The inheritance transfers tonight at 9PM."

She felt her chest grow cold.

"But only a tenth of it." Madame Michele pursed her lips. "Next Tuesday, at 9PM, another tenth will transfer. And so on and so on." She leveled her stare on her. "Providing you attend and absorb your lessons zis week. All of zem."

Hermione opened her mouth, an indignant sound popping out, and felt her blood boil. She clenched her fist around Madame Michele's notes, and turned her eyes on the ground, burning a hole into it. Her jaw was tight as she ran through the multiple ways she wished to slaughter Lucius Malfoy. A small hand lifted her chin.

As she met her eyes, Madame Michele placed her hand on Hermione's upper chest, just below her neck, two fingers resting lightly on her throat. Hermione's eyes popped, alarmed.

"Head up, Mz Granger. Do not 'ide your anger. Direct it. Control it." Black eyes pierced her, and Hermione couldn't breathe. "And most importantly, do not 'ide zis." Hermione felt a light tap on her throat. "It iz your only weapon."

She removed her hand from her neck, and Hermione felt a weight disappear, a breath enter her body as she stared back into the firm but kind eyes of Madame Michele.

What the fuck was that?

"I've known Lucius Malfoy for a very long time, Mz Granger." Madame Michele pursed her lips. "You are not ze first person to be blackmailied by 'im, and you will not be ze last. 'E will get what 'e wants, one way or ze other." She held out the second piece of paper to Hermione. "Choose ze easy way."

Blinking rapidly, Hermione looked down to find her schedule for the rest of the week. She had dance lessons on Thursday night, hosting classes on Saturday or Sunday morning, and she was to meet with an interior decorator on Saturday on her lunch break. This was to be her life for the next ten weeks.

She let out a shaky breath, trying to remember what Madame Michele just told her about directing her anger and not biting it back. She looked up at the tiny woman.

"Thank you, Madame Michele. How shall I pay you for tonight's class?"

"It 'as already been paid for, mademoiselle."

Hermione stopped in the middle of the aisle and turned to him with bright eyes. "Oh! So you must know _"

"—Charlie Weasley, yes!" Walter smiled. "One of my best mates."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Why did you leave the Sanctuary?" Hermione continued down the aisle when she saw that they were holding up quite a few people.

"My wife is pregnant," he said, smiling. "So, it was time to leave the dragon-wrangling behind. Or so she told me."

Hermione grinned. "I'm sure she's glad to have you safe."

Walter held the door open for her and she entered a conference room slightly bigger than the one she and Draco would use at the Ministry. Walter then held the door open for several more people, so Hermione was separated from him momentarily. Draco stood at the other side of the room, at the head of the conference table, speaking to Cuthbert Mockridge. There were ten or so chairs at the table, and about twenty lining the walls. Melody waved to her from the one near the door.

She was just about to take the chair next to Melody, slightly away from it all, when she noticed a pamphlet on the table with *Wendell Wentworth* on the cover. She looked to the right and saw that another Senior Consultant's name was on the pamphlet next to that. It seemed seats were assigned.

She wandered past Melody and to the other side of the table, passing Mockridge's name and passing Dorothea's name.

Just to Draco's left, there was *Hermione Granger – Non-Wizard Relations*. She pulled her chair and sat down, frowning. She had thought her branch was isolated, removed. It was a strange idea for a branch of a consulting group, and she'd assumed she would be more of the "kid-sister" to the company, coming and going and bringing good opinion. But she was seated at Draco's left, like she was important somehow. More important than Wentworth and Mockridge, who were apparently working closely with Draco in Financial Consulting.

She raised her eyes and found Blaise across from her, watching her. Oh, perfect. She started flipping through her pamphlet. It held the mission statement, the prose on company objectives, and charts on profitability.

At precisely nine o'clock, Mockridge took his seat and Draco called the meeting to attention. She looked around the room and found that the support staff and Associate Consultants were lining the walls. Several of the young witches in the room had their eyes raptly held on Draco. "Welcome. Welcome everyone," Draco began. "Thank you all for taking a chance on Malfoy. Consulting, and for taking a chance on yourselves." He tapped a knuckle on the pamphlet in front of him. "Dorothea has prepared some wonderful paperwork, that I trust you will go over

at your leisure. But I did want to spend this time letting everyone introduce themselves, tell us what you'll be doing here." He turned to her. "Granger?"

She almost jumped. Draco sat. Her heart beat quickly, thinking how she didn't really know the answer to that question herself. She stood from the table, and felt every eye on her.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Hermione Granger," she said. Several people lining the walls craned their neck around their colleagues, trying to get a look at her. "I'm the Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations, specifically magical creatures, and Muggle relations." She wasn't sure if she was supposed to say anything else, but the words were flowing out of her. "I came from the Department of Magical Creatures in the Ministry, and I've developed a strong relationship with several groups of species." She could feel heat on her neck. "Er, and being Muggle-born will assist with the other bits..." Some people chuckled, and a few young witches smiled at her.

"Er..." She looked to Draco. "Is that all I needed to say?"

He was leaned back in his chair; elbow resting on his knee, and hand covering his mouth. She could just make out the corner of his lips lifting. "More than enough, Granger." His eyes were teasing her.

She narrowed her gaze at him, thanked the room and sat back down. Dorothea stood and said, "Dorothea Bulstrode, Admin." And sat.

Hermione blushed. As people continued to introduce themselves with only their name and their title, less and less of them even bothered standing. She kept her eyes trained on her pamphlet, and finally looked up to see Blaise smiling at her, chuckling.

The rest of the support staff and Associates finished introducing themselves, and Hermione was tickled to note that Draco had only hired male employees under Blaise.

Draco said a few more things, empowering yet authoritative. Then he released the support staff and Associates. Draco thanked them all and asked them to turn to page fourteen of Dorothea's pamphlet.

"I don't wish to be cagey with you all about financials or operations. I'd like to think that we're all a team here." Draco cleared his throat. "And within each department, we will all be responsible for meeting financial goals, keeping to a budget, and so on." He tapped his wand on the wall and a large version of page fourteen appeared across the paint.

It was the current financial map of Malfoy Consulting Group. Hermione wasn't sure how many people in the room understood that the start-up cash was Draco's inheritance, but she recognized it once she saw it split into tenths, projected to enter the accounts every Tuesday.

Her eyes glazed over the numbers, for the first time understanding just how much Draco's inheritance was. She blinked, surprised and anxious. He hadn't needed to work at all. He hadn't needed to work a day in his life, and yet he started a company. He threw it all away to leave his mark on the world.

Hermione's heart dropped into her stomach as she wondered how many times Madame Michele had watched Draco spoon honey into his tea three times. She blushed and looked down. Madame Michele took the milk back, took her seat again, and fixed her tea. Hermione watched as her hands moved. She didn't have paint on her nails, but her nails were trimmed and squared. Hermione picked at one of her cuticles.

Madame Michele picked up her teacup, bringing her saucer with it, and said, "You are too well-known of a woman to be azked to provide trivial detailz. Anyone who azks you to 'tell zem about yourself' iz either teasing you or flirting with you, Mz Granger."

She frowned at her.

"Do not frown."

Hermione relaxed her face.

"Mz Granger, why are you 'ere?"

Hermione immediately guffawed. She looked down at her teacup, ashamed now of laughing out loud. She schooled her features and looked back up at Madame Michele. She tried to think of Lucius Malfoy's answer to this question.

"I am here to learn the social graces of pure-blood society that I missed out on as a child. I am here so that I may blend in better amongst my peers."

Madame Michele shook her head, looking down at her cup. "Blend in..." She sipped. She placed her teacup back on the table and stood from her chair. "Mz. Granger, our lezzon iz over for tonight."

What? When did it begin?

"I'm sorry?" Hermione stood. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, Mz Granger," Madame Michele waved her hand and two pieces of parchment zoomed from her office into her hands. "Never assume zat you are ze culprit." She stared down at the first parchment, reading through it. She nodded and folded the paper, handing it to Hermione.

"Study zis, and return improved."

"What is it?" Hermione said, not sure if she should open the paper here. "Your notes."

Notes? Madame Michele's eyes were on the second piece of paper in her hands.

"You work at a bookshop on ze weekendz?"

"Er, yes," Hermione said, wondering what was on the second piece of paper. Madame Michele glanced at her, raising a brow. Hermione corrected herself, "Yes, Madame Michele. I do."

"I will schedule you with Mz Truesdale for Thursday evenings zen," she said. "And Mister DuBois will owl you to schedule an appointment on either Saturday or Sunday morning."

She placed the tray on the table without magic, and took the seat across from Hermione. As it was six-person table, this meant they were quite far from each other.

"Tell me about youzself, Mz Granger."

Hermione blinked at her. Madame Michele had folded her hands in her lap, and studied her. "I – Well, my name is Hermione Granger" – she could have Avada'd herself right there – "and I grew up here in England. I am an only child. Both my parents are Muggles, but at the age of eleven I received my Hogwarts letter..."

Hermione glanced at the small woman in the turban. She said nothing, but continued to watch her.

"So... I went to Hogwarts, where I met Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, two of my closest friends. And despite some... hiccups... and wars... we got out of there alive." Hermione smiled, trying "wit" against Madame Michele. "I work for the Ministry now – or, er, I did work for the Ministry, but I just accepted a job with Malfoy Consulting Group."

Hermione paused, wondering how long she was supposed to talk about herself. As Madame Michele nodded her head, tapping her chin with her fingers, she wondered if she should now ask *her* to tell her about herself. Was this a back and forth?

"Thank you, Mz Granger," Madame Michele hummed. "You managed to gloss over every interesting detail about youzself, focusing only on the 'undrum.'"

Hermione's eyes widened. Humdrum?

Madame Michele stood, and swept up the top of the teapot. She dipped a stirring spoon in and stirred clockwise, three times, then took the pot over to Hermione's cup. Once she'd poured both cups, she said, "Milk, Mz Granger?"

"Yes, thank you."

Madame Michele hand delivered the milk to her, placing it just right of her teacup. "Sugar, Mz Granger?"

Hermione found that there was no honey on the table, so she looked up her and replied, "Er, yes, thank you."

Madame Michele lifted a brow at her. "You do not uz sugar, Mz Granger, so pleaz tell me what it iz you need."

Hermione swallowed. "Do you happen to have honey, Madame Michele?"

Madame Michele smirked. "I do." She waived her hand and honey appeared on the table. Madame Michele waited as Hermione slipped milk into her cup and dipped the spoon into the honey three times. Hermione was sweating by the time she finally stirred her cup, spoon clinking against the side only once, thankfully.

She looked up at Madame Michele, still standing next to her. She was smirking at the honey pot.

Draco had been talking and she wasn't listening, so she tried to tune back in. He was starting to discuss the projected revenue for the months of January and February.

Cuthbert Mockridge cut in. "These ten installments... Well, things are going to get quite tight at the end of January and possibly February once paychecks are cut."

"Yes," Draco said no more.

"Well," Mockridge sighed, "this investment..." Mockridge scratched his beard. "Do you have any worries about these transfers? Are there any... contingencies?" The way he asked, Hermione could tell that Mockridge understood that it was Draco's inheritance. And Mockridge understood it was coming from Lucius.

"Nothing like that." Draco shrugged. Hermione blinked. He had no idea... "But, yes, things are going to be tight if we don't work on our revenue stream immediately."

She wondered how the Magical Creature community was going to pay for her services. Her entire branch was practically a financial black hole.

"We are also looking for someone to fill our Wizengamot Relations position, so please spread the word," Draco said.

Hermione frowned. Wasn't that the position Tiberius Ogden was supposed to fill? Noelle's father?

Draco continued, "So I will be acting as Wizengamot Consultant for the time being, with the help of Corban Hartford, who you all met last week. Please use him as a resource for your own projects.

"On a higher note," Draco grinned. "We'll have the *Prophet* in tomorrow, along with a few other reporters. Rita Skeeter will be doing a write up for us, taking pictures, talking to staff. Hopefully getting some good publicity for M.C.G. So please dress your best, and I'll be sending a memo this afternoon with talking points if you need any assistance."

Dress your best. Brilliant. Hermione tapped her quill.

"Thank you all for being here today. Meeting dismissed." Draco closed the folder in front of him and stood from the chair. His grey robes were stylized much like a Muggle suit, so he closed his front buttons as he stood.

Hermione quickly put away her quill and tucked away her papers. The other senior staff members were shaking hands and chatting about their families.

"Granger."

Hermione looked up to see Draco poking his head back through the door.

"You have a 10AM in your office."

Her eyes widened. "I do?" She jumped from her chair and followed Draco out. He led her down the office floor, ignoring the secretarial pool batwing their lashes at him. "Do I need to have anything prepared? Who is the meeting with? Did I miss this memo?"

"Calm down, Granger." He stopped at her door. "It's just a preliminary appointment."

Draco opened her office door and stepped aside for her to enter first. A woman with crisp black hair turned in her visitor chair, and Hermione stopped in her doorway when Pansy Parkinson grinned at her.

"Granger," Pansy said. "Wonderful to see you."

Hermione watched as Pansy stood from her chair, her long legs carrying her across the room. She reached her hand out for Hermione's and she took it. She shook hands like a gentleman. If Hermione's brain was firing, she would have thought that to be interesting.

"I hope you've been well." Pansy's manicured hand released hers. She looked over Hermione's shoulder to Draco and said, "We're fine here, Draco."

Hermione's wide eyes met Draco's neutral greys. He looked back and forth between the two women, and then shut the door behind him.

Hermione looked at the door handle, begging it to turn again, before remembering that this was her office, not the Slytherin common rooms. She turned to Pansy and took control of the meeting as best she could.

"Pansy." She tried a smile at her, but Pansy was already grinning back, like they were old friends. "Please sit." Pansy sat again in the chair she had already claimed, and Hermione walked around her desk to face her. "Are you also on staff with M.C.G.? I apologize if I wasn't aware."

"Oh, no," Pansy said, waving the air. "I'm just hoping to create a working relationship with the firm."

"Wonderful," Hermione said as she straightened her pencils and tapped at her ink pot. "And what branch are you most interested in?"

"You."

Hermione looked up and Pansy was smirking. She suddenly felt like she was in the Great Hall again, and Pansy had figured out another way to tease her.

"Me." Hermione repeated.

"Granger," Pansy began, pulling a large book out of her bag. "I moved to France after the Final Battle and immediately began studying under Madame le Roux." She plopped the book onto Hermione's desk.

"Oh. That's... wonderful."

Pansy studied her face for a moment before clarifying, "Madame le Roux is the foremost designer of wizarding clothes in all of Wizarding Europe."

"Yes, of course." Hermione nodded her head like this was an accidental slip, instead of a lack of knowledge.

"She actually designed the wedding gown for your friend, Fleur Weasley," Pansy offered, as if this would help ring any bells. "Regardless, I have started my own fashion line for the 'Modern

The woman pursed her lips, looking at something on her desk. It was silent for several moments. Hermione didn't know where she was supposed to look, but she knew she was supposed to ignore the quill. There was a window behind Madame Michele, so as she waited for something to happen, she watched the clouds drift.

Madame Michele lifted the paper she was reading at her desk, and Hermione saw it was the *Daily Prophet* from Saturday morning. The front page stared at her while Madame Michele looked at the middle section of the paper, and Draco on the stage, holding his champagne glass up, glinted at her.

She had skimmed the article on Saturday, but Skeeter had been given practically the entire newspaper to gush about Narcissa Malfoy's New Year's Eve Gala. The picture of Harry, Ginny and herself toasting and drinking had made it on page 2, and another picture of her talking with the German Minister of Magic on page 4. Narcissa, Draco, Harry, and Blaise all had more photographs within as well. A pull-quote popped out, saying "Splendid evening!" – Hermione Granger. Well, she supposed that was half true.

Madame Michele held the paper in her fingers. "You are a stunning woman, Ms Granger."

"Oh, er... thank you."

"Oh, er... thank you." Madame Michele dropped the paper. "Zat is 'ow you respond to a compliment?"

Oh. Yes, she could now see what Fleur meant.

"Thank you, Madame Michele," she corrected herself.

"So you think you are a stunning woman?" Her black eyes pierced her from the top of her small glasses.

"... No?"

Madame Michele smiled a condescending smile at her. She stood from her desk. Hermione stood as well.

"Let's 'ave some tea. I want to get to know you better." She glided around her desk and lead Hermione out into the Tea Room. Hermione followed, watching the little woman walk in her short heels. Madame Michele stopped just outside the doorway to her office and reached for Hermione's coat and bag. She placed them on the coat rack. "Please, chooz whichever table you'd like."

Hermione looked at the twelve or so tables in the room and chose the large table in the center. She pulled the chair as quietly as possible and sat. Once she was sat, Madame Michele turned from her and went to the tea cart. She waved her wand and a cake and biscuit tray floated over to Hermione, landing in the middle of the table. The little woman heated the water with her wand and once it whistled, Madame Michele hand-carried the tray with the teapot, milk, and sweeteners.

She handed in her two weeks' notice to Mathilda on Monday morning. Mathilda wasn't as shocked as Harry and Ginny were. She nodded her head, smiling, and told her she would miss her very much.

Aiden was very... Aiden about it. He gave her a high-five.

On Tuesday, she came home from work and took another shower, preparing for her first lesson with Madame Michele. She had Ginny braid her hair so it wasn't a mess. She picked out her nicest robes and her terrible sensible heels. And at 7:45PM she stepped through the Flo to find herself in what seemed to be a little Tea Room.

She looked around the waiting area, glad to find it empty. She wandered through the tables, looking at the flower arrangements and fingering the little teacups. The pictures of teacups on the walls reminded her slightly of the cat pictures in Umbridge's office, but at least the teacups didn't meow at her.

She didn't dare sit. There wasn't a couch to sit on, and she would have to pull a chair to sit, so she continued walking around the room in her sensible heels.

At 8PM on the dot, the door to the side room opened. A short brunette woman with an elegant turban placed on her head and small glasses hanging off the end of her nose raised a brow at her.

"Mz 'Ermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello."

"I am Madame Michele."

This was the abominable woman Fleur told her about? She barely came up to Hermione's nose.

"Hello. Wonderful to meet you, Madame Michele." Hermione stepped forward, fumbling her coat and her purse to reach out her hand.

Madame Michele stared at her outstretched hand, then grasped it with her gloved one, lifting her chin.

Oh dear. Was shaking hands not allowed? Should she have cursteyed?

The tiny woman released her hand and smiled up at her. "Please come into my office."

Madame Michele stepped aside, gesturing for Hermione to enter.

Hermione took a seat in front of the desk in the corner. Another lovely airy room.

Madame Michele flowed into her chair, and Hermione was struck wondering how such a small body could move so elegantly. Madame Michele flicked her wand, and a Quick Quotes Quill sprung to life next to her.

"Do ignore ze quill, Mz Granger."

Hermione snapped her eyes back to the small woman, knowing she had guessed exactly where her eyes were.

Business Witch,' a woman who I believe is embodied by both her femininity and her dominance, her intelligence and wit, and her leadership in the wizarding business world."

Pansy looked at her expectantly.

"Wonderful!" Hermione felt like that was the only word she knew today.

Pansy flipped open the book. The first page was a print ad from *Witch Weekly* featuring a stunning twenty-something girl carrying a satchel bag. She wore what looked like a Muggle business suit, but on closer inspection, the suit was actually wizarding robes. It was a perfect combination of the two cultures. Hermione looked up at the former Slytherin blood purist, confused.

"The *Parkinson* line focuses on the juxtaposition of the Muggle and the Magical, creating a world where the two can coexist."

Pansy turned the page to show a fashion sketch of a woman in long Wizarding robes, but the robes were cinched at the waist, much like a Muggle dress. The next page had a take on the modern pant suit. Pansy continued explaining her designs, as she flipped pages, and Hermione found herself overwhelmed. The clothes looked beautiful and the models in the print ads were just as beautiful. Pansy seemed to be wrapping up her "presentation," or whatever it was she was doing, and Hermione was still confused.

"The *Parkinson* line hopes to be the foremost designer for today's working professionals." And with that, Pansy closed her book. "All we need now, is the right model. Someone who not only will wear our clothes in the professional world, but who also embodies the ideals of the 'Modern Business Witch.'"

Pansy looked into Hermione's eyes with a grin. Hermione blinked. "Of course," Hermione said. "I'm sure the secretarial pool would be thrilled to be introduced to this line—"

"Damn it all, Granger!" Pansy slammed her book on the desk. "Are you the Brightest Witch of Our Age or not?" Yowl!" Pansy rolled her eyes. "We want you to be the spokesperson."

Hermione was torn between relief that Pansy was finally acting like herself, and shock. "Me?"

"Yes. You are the highest-ranking woman in the freshest company in all of the Wizarding World. You are a war-heroine who is pictured daily by the tabloids. When you are on the cover of *Witch Weekly* or above the fold in *The Prophet*, we want you to be wearing the *Parkinson* line, embodying the ideals of the 'Modern Bus—'."

"Yes, yes. The 'Modern Business Witch.'" Hermione looked at the woodgrain on her desk. She felt a bit embarrassed, being singled out for something like this. She had never been interested in fashion or girly things, so to represent an entire group of people who did have those interests... But then she supposed that saying no was not an option. Draco clearly wanted

her to have this meeting. Did he not trust her to represent the firm properly in her daily clothes? Or was he simply helping an old friend with her new business?

"How would this work?" Hermione asked. "What would it mean to be the 'spokesperson' for the *Parkinson* line?"

Pansy smirked, and Hermione now recognized a glint in her eyes that she had seen on Draco.

It meant she was winning.

"Every Sunday evening you would receive that week's clothes by owl. On the following Sunday you can return them as the new outfits arrive. I will label them as Monday, Tuesday, etc., but if you have any questions or if anything is not fitting correctly, I will be available by Floo every morning from six to eight. And, generally all five outfits can be interchanged—"

"So, I would be getting five new outfits every week? How long will this go on?" Hermione thought of her blue robes in her closet that were her "go-to" robes. She usually wore those twice a week. She wasn't even sure she had five outfits right now to last all week without a repeat.

"We would start with a three-month contract and then take it from there."

"Three months?" Hermione gaped. "Three months of brand new clothes every week?"

"Well, you may repeat an outercoat or a skirt—"

"Pansy, this really sounds lovely," Hermione stopped her. "But it's slightly overwhelming. And, we haven't even talked cost. At this time I really don't have the funds for—"

"Granger," Pansy said. Her perfectly arched brow was raised. "You would be a spokesperson and a model. You would not be paying anything."

"What?" Hermione stared at Pansy's face, wondering just how she got her makeup to look like that.

"When someone asks you 'What are you wearing?' you reply, '*Parkinson*.' That is how you pay for these clothes. Besides. You're not keeping them. It's like you're renting them. It's all very easy."

Hermione was still torn, and Pansy must have sensed this.

"Let's do a trial run, yes? Just this week?" Pansy pulled a pen and a pad out of her bag. "Write your address on here, and tonight when you get home from the office, you will have four outfits for the rest of the week waiting for you. Besides, the photographer will be here tomorrow. You'll want to look your best."

Hermione was just wondering what she would be wearing tomorrow while the cameras were here, so really there was no harm in giving Pansy her address.

As she handed over the slip of paper with her flat number on it, Pansy smiled and said,

"Expect me at 6AM."

"At... oh. You'll be over tomorrow morning?"

Hermione winced. She tried to just say it from the kitchen, while making eggs. "... applied for Malfoy Consulting Group."

The slap of Ginny's bare feet against the ground and the scrape of Harry's chair: "When?"

She cracked an egg, back turned.

"At about 1AM last night." She tossed the egg shell in the sink and wiped her hands on a towel.

She'd been nervous all morning. She'd woken up terrified, questioning what she'd done, and now, just when she'd stopped questioning and started coming to terms with it, she told Ginny and Harry. So that they could question her.

"Why?" Harry's voice. She swallowed and turned around.

"He talked me into it. He reminded me that I want to save the world." She met Harry's eyes behind his glasses. His brows had disappeared under his messy hair.

"So you're leaving your position in the Ministry, and all the upward mobility options, to become Malfoy's lapdog?" Harry scowled at her.

"I won't be Malfoy's lapdog. I will be the Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations."

She placed her hands on her hips. And Harry's eyes widened.

"Senior Consultant?" Ginny whispered. "What does that even mean?"

Hermione had no fucking clue. *That's* what terrified her.

"I—I guess I'll figure that out." She brushed hair away from her face. "But I'll be representing magical creatures, like the werewolf case he brought to me. I guess I'll be arguing in front of the Wizengamot—"

"One of your favorite things," Ginny supplied helpfully.

"Yes," Hermione said. "I'll be able to seek out cases and causes that I want to focus on."

"While working under Malfoy," Harry supplied, unhelpfully.

"Yes," Hermione said.

The three of them stared at each other in the kitchen, eggs sizzling behind her.

"I think," Ginny said, "it's an excellent career move..." She said it in a strained voice, lifting at the end.

"But...?" Hermione prompted.

"Well," Ginny looked up at her. "You'll never be able to sleep with him now."

Hermione blinked at her, trying not to realign her priorities. Harry coughed and excused himself to the living room.

families that had hired M.C.G. to work on their finances, and Wentworth was pursuing a few businesses in Diagon Alley.

As he went on, and as the consultants engaged in conversation with him more, she realized she was hearing "Mr. Malfoy" quite a bit. It was strange. A bit too strange for her, but she guessed that calling him Malfoy was better than Draco. It wasn't as if they were friends, anyway. "And lastly, do be careful with your mail," Draco continued. "The *Prophet* article really put us on the map, but not all publicity is good. I've already dealt with four Howlers this morning."

He scratched his jaw. He looked tired already and the day had barely begun.

He dismissed them, and after she packed up she passed Corban on the way out.

"Did your father like the books? Have you given them to him yet?"

"He... Well, he said thank you." Corban laughed down at the table. "So, he liked them enough..." Hermione grinned. "That's wonderful. Well, I'm always available for more suggestions. Let me know!"

"Brilliant. Thank you, Hermione."

He smiled at her and began flipping through some notes instead of packing up, perhaps about to have a meeting with Draco – Malfoy. Malfoy.

She looked up and found him watching her and Corban. He looked away and began shuffling his notes as she left.

She turned out the door and straight into Blaise, who was leaning against the wall. He grinned at her.

"Yes, Blaise?" she bit out, continuing down the aisle towards her office.

"You and Hartford are friends. That's adorable." He followed. "You're like two little nerds who grew up to be attractive."

She coughed to hide her blush, hearing him behind her. "Blaise, if you're into that sort of thing, I'd be happy to introduce you!" she tossed over her shoulder, and caught him smirking. She rounded the corner and felt the eyes in the cubicles tracing them. Or maybe it was just Blaise, she thought, as Melody gave them a bright smile.

"Walter has your early morning mail, Miss Granger," Melody sang.

"Oh, wonderful. Thank you." She continued on, hoping Blaise would be caught up by Melody's cleavage...

"I'm loving this Modern Business Witch thing, Granger."

No luck. And it struck her that he was walking behind her, so the visual he was commenting on –

"Thank you, Blaise. Now go away!"

He laughed as she reached Walter's desk. Walter stood and heaved a bin up on the ledge of the cubicle.

"What is that?" she asked in horror.

"Your mail," Walter grimaced. He looked inside. "I've separated everything. To the left side of this bucket are the actual work-related letters and packages. I can go through some of that with you later, as I found a particularly interesting letter from the Snidget Society that I'd like to push with you." He tapped the right side of the bin. "But over here, are all your personal letters."

He grinnned.

"Personal letters? I shouldn't have personal mail delivered here."

Walter scrunched his nose. "I quite agree. I was very uncomfortable opening everything, so maybe we can try a better system if this continues."

"What kind of personal letters?" Blaise leaned against Walter's cube, looking into the bucket smirking. He'd procured a cup of tea from somewhere.

"Well, some fan mail, some hate mail, a letter from Witch Weekly – apparently you have been chosen to grace next week's cover – but also some proposals from eligible bachelors." Walter rolled his eyes.

"Proposals?" Hermione frowned.

"Really?" Blaise sent a greedy look into the bucket. He raised his mug to his lips.

"I assume if I get any of those in the afternoon mail, that I can chuck them?" Walter said.

Hermione blinked, still not fully understanding the purpose of a *proposal* to an absolute stranger through mail. She looked to Blaise, smirking around the mug, and turned to Walter, raising a brow. "Are there pictures?"

Blaise snorted his tea out.

Quentin Margolis had suggested they meet at a Muggle café instead of coming into the M.C.G. office on Wednesday, which Hermione thought was an odd choice for a werewolf recluse. The North Forest Pack was a peaceful bunch, but apparently so peaceful that they had declined Remus's invitation to fight at the Battle of Hogwarts.

She and Draco popped in to an Apparition point, and walked the several blocks. The silence was... comfortable. But Hermione still hated it.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she began, and she saw Draco twitch his head to her, "what happened to Tiberius Ogder? I was very surprised to hear that the Wizengamot relations position was open."

"He declined."

Hermione looked up at him. His eyes were scanning the street as they stopped at a crosswalk.

"Declined? But I thought things were going so well. I mean to say, from the way Noelle was talking about it."

She remembered a tipsy pixie girl sloshing around the news that Draco was only schmoozing her to get to her father.

Draco was silent. The signal turned, and he stepped off the curb, placing his hand on her back to guide her. She warmed, but focused.

"What did he say when you had lunch with him and Noelle?"

Something was unsaid. Hermione studied him as he grabbed a door handle, and let her enter the café before him. She stopped in the doorway.

"Do you want me to write to him?"

He looked down at her, and his eyes ran over her face. "No, we'll find someone else Granger."

She frowned and stepped through. Draco had also hoped Ogden would invest, if she remembered correctly. What a huge help that would have been.... She turned to him. "What about Noelle? I think I hit it off with her. I could see when she's home next—"

"No." His voice was firm, and his eyes were hard. "Do not contact Noelle. Do you hear me, Granger?"

She searched his eyes, trying to figure it out. "Alright."

He swallowed and looked away from her, searching the café to see if Margolis was already set up at a table. Hermione frowned at her shoes – kitten heels, Pansy called them – and tried to think...

Draco and Noelle were out on a Thursday, and they were to sit down with Tiberius on Saturday. So in those two days, he had canceled. What had Noelle said to daddy?

Draco led them over to a couch area where she could just see a large bearded man. Margolis stood as they approached and he gave him a tight smile as they shook hands. After he greeted Hermione warmly, he introduced a second man she had not seen behind him on the couch.

"This is Mason," the gravelly voice announced.

Where Quentin was dark and warm, Mason was fair and cool. He did not stand when he was introduced and made no effort to shake Draco's hand or acknowledge him. He looked to be about thirty, although it was always hard to tell a werewolf's age.

"Can I get anyone anything? Coffee, Granger?" Draco said.

"Yes, thank you."

Quentin asked for a tea and thanked him. Mason looked Draco up and down and asked for a tea, and a ham sandwich, with a side salad with steak. Hermione had the distinct feeling that Draco was being tested.

"I'm just shocked that he hadn't heard yet." Hermione rubbed her face. "It never came up between you two?"

"I wasn't going to tell him!" Ginny danced over to her, grabbing the letter and scanning it.

"Oh, nice, Ronald..." she grumbled.

"And Harry never told him? And he didn't read about it last week when Skeeter announced it? Couldn't he have just sent me a Howler with the others last week?" Hermione sat on the edge of her bed. A copy of the *Prophet* lay next to her, and her bedroom eyes stared up from the sheets.

Ginny tried to make her feel better for a bit longer, but all she saw was the picture on the bed of her in a green dress with smoky eyes, with Ron's words dancing in her head.

I guess you really are a Slytherin now, Hermione.

The *Daily Prophet* article must have done something wonderful for M.C.G., because the office was humming on Monday morning. Hermione barely had enough time to set down her coffee before a memo flew in, requesting all Senior Consultants for a meeting at nine.

She prepped her notes, conjured a full-length mirror to double check her work on her face and hair that morning, and headed to the conference room. Wentworth and Dorothea had taken their usual seats from last week's meeting, so she did the same.

Draco and Blaise walked in together, laughing about something. It was sweet, really, to see the two of them behaving as friends, Draco taking a break from his boss personae.

Blaise sat across from her and winked. She raised a brow at him.

Just as Draco began his "good mornings," Corban walked in. Hermione smiled and waved to him. He grinned at her and set his briefcase down at the end of the table at the empty seat facing Draco. She hadn't seen him in the office at all last week, and as she thought about it, perhaps he didn't actually have an office here. Perhaps he was just dropping in from time to time.

She looked up at Draco, prepared for him to start. He was watching Corban. Draco looked down at his notes, shifted his feet, and began.

"Excellent first week, everyone. I think people are settling in nicely. I want to instigate weekly Monday meetings for an opportunity to check in, set weekly goals if necessary, share successes." He turned to Blaise. "Blaise just landed the Chudley Cannons for us last week. Excellent news."

Hermione turned to see Blaise grinning proudly.

"You're making me blush, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco continued, outlining the week. Draco and she would meet with Quentin Margolis on Wednesday about the werewolf project, and then Thursday or Friday they would sit down with Corban to discuss the upcoming steps with the Wizengamot. Mockridge had a few pureblood

She took a moment to place him in her mind, finding it so difficult to see him outside of a discussion about office romance.

"Mr. Hartford! Hello!" She smiled as he waved to her.

"Miss Granger, I thought you worked here." He grimed as he stepped up to the counter. "I'm looking for a birthday present for my father, and I thought I'd pay you a visit." He pushed his glasses up and looked around the store.

"Well, it's my lucky day then." She pushed the paper away. "Anything in particular? Or just browsing?"

"I'd love suggestions, if you have any." He hitched a satchel bag higher on his shoulder. "He's not a fan of fiction, unfortunately, or else I'd have a few suggestions of my own."

Hermione walked around the counter. "You're a fiction fan, Mr. Hartford?" She led him towards the biographies and non-fiction.

"Yes, absolutely. It keeps my mind off all the law books I've memorized." He shot her a lazy smile. "And you can call me Corban. Don't worry about that Mr. Hartford stuff." He waved a hand away and looked to the stacks.

Hermione showed him to the Mattie McHandry books that she had initially showed to Narcissa. He bought two of them, and they chatted for a bit about how she was liking Malfoy Consulting.

"The article in the *Prophet* was lovely, by the way," he said.

"Oh, thanks." She blushed. She took Madame Michele's advice and took the compliment. "Being on the cover of the *Prophet* was never my favorite thing, but the article turned out nicely." She placed the books in a bag and handed them over. "I hope your father likes the books!"

"Me too!" He gave her a nervous face that she laughed at. "Good day, Miss Granger."

"You can call me Hermione."

He turned to her at the door. "Good day, Hermione." He smiled and pushed his glasses up. Hermione grinned a bit more after that.

When she got home from work, a letter from Ron was waiting for her. She put down her bag and as she picked it up, Ginny poked her head in.

"That arrived about an hour ago." Ginny hovered in the doorway.

"Mhm." Hermione read over the letter. Ron was questioning her decisions with wording like, "I thought you were taking a job in House-Elf Relocation or in the Auror's Office? I'm completely floored, Hermione."

Hermione read it through, frowning. She looked up at Ginny who was biting her lip.

"Well?"

To his credit, Draco didn't flinch. He nodded and went to the counter.

"How is young Teddy?" Quentin turned to her.

"Last I heard, he and his grandmother were visiting Ron Weasley in Ireland." Hermione smiled. Her eyes flickered to Mason, who was watching her lazily. "Mason, were you acquainted with Remus Lupin before he died?"

"I'd met him, yeah."

He said no more. And Hermione could hear Madame Michele's voice in her head regarding difficult guests.

"He was lovely. One of my favorite teachers at Hogwarts and a dear friend," she said. "I assume you are also a part of the North Forest Pack?"

"Yep."

Hermione looked at Quentin. He pressed his lips together and gave Hermione an apologetic look.

Draco returned with three teas and a coffee. Hermione suppressed a smile when she saw him juggling them without magic. He placed a plastic card with a number on it in the center of the table.

"Let's jump right in, shall we?" Quentin said, leaning forward on his elbows. Mason stayed reclined. Hermione reached into her bag to pull her presentation folder as Quentin continued.

"Mr. Malfoy and I had a very brief meeting in December. So I do understand the policy changes and the steps your group will take. I told Mr. Malfoy I would think it over, and discuss with my pack—" he gestured to Mason, who was watching Draco — "and we would reconvene."

"Excellent," Hermione said, finding the page she needed. "I've drafted a prospective timeline for the case." She grabbed a timeline for each of them, and handed them out. "I can begin interviews with members of the North Forest Pack as early as February. My Associate Consultant and I can come out to the North Forest, spend an entire week or two out there so that your pack and their routine is not disturbed—"

Mason chuckled. Hermione looked to him, but when he said no more, she continued.

"Once we have testimonials from the North Forest Pack, I can begin reaching out to donors who would fund the case. As Mr. Malfoy said in his previous meeting with Mr. Margolis, the North Forest Pack would not be paying for the services of Malfoy Consulting Group, but a few representatives are welcome at any fundraising parties. Once we —"

"So you'll raise money for Malfoy's business, based on our interviews." Mason stared at Hermione. It wasn't a question.

"We'll be raising money for the case, based on your interviews." Hermione pursed her lips.

"And tell me, Hermione Granger," Mason said. "How much does it cost to get a court date with the Wizengamot?"

She blinked at him. "I believe it is a ten galleon filing fee."

"Fundraising parties for ten galleons? My, my. Your business must be further in the hole than I'd thought, Malfoy." Mason leveled his cool eyes on Draco. Draco returned his stare and sat forward.

"The fundraising would cover the costs of research, the trip to the North Forest, the salaries of the staff working tirelessly, accommodations for the pack if they choose to come into London for the case –"

"So, I give you an interview, I tell you how difficult life has been for me as a werewolf and how much I wished I was like the other girls and boys, and you give me a Ministry job? Is that how this works?" Mason said, steering the subject back to the policy. Hermione looked at Quentin, who was sipping his tea silently.

"No," Hermione said, feeling her face heat. "With the testimonials from the North Forest Pack, we will give you the right to *earn* a Ministry job, should you ever be interested in one." She felt her breath coming quicker. "Should any werewolf want a stable form of employment, this policy will disallow any form of discrimination. We will also be arguing for government sponsored scholarships to assist any cubs in their expenses while at Hogwarts, and the school will be required to have arrangements made at the full moon."

Mason held her glare. Quentin cleared his throat.

"I appreciate all you have done, Miss Granger, in preparing for this project, and all the work you plan to do for the werewolf community, but we will need to decline."

Hermione opened her mouth, brow furrowed at Quentin. A small sound puffed from her throat, before she could voice "Why?"

"It might be a bit easier for *you*, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don't believe in being bought out for publicity," Quentin said. He turned his harsh eyes on Draco.

Easier for *her*? Hermione frowned at him. She turned to Draco to find he'd gone very still, but held Quentin's eyes.

"That's very unfortunate, Mr. Margolis," Draco said. "Is there anything we can do to change your mind?"

"Can you bring back Albus Dumbledore?" Mason quipped. He snirked at Draco, like he knew he'd just hit him in a soft place. Hermione watched as Draco's nostrils flared but he did nothing else. Mason continued, "Or perhaps you can go back in time and put down Fenrir Greypack, instead of playing house with him for a year."

Draco's jaw clenched, and she felt like she could see the red in his vision.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She leaned on the counter at Cornerstone, frowning at the title. It had... interesting connotations.

She scanned over the interviews of the other consultants, letting her eyes linger on the picture. She looked quite pretty. Pansy's dress was very complementary and the leather vest pulled her ribs in just so. The hair and makeup was spot on.

So it wasn't *her* in the picture that she didn't like. It was just so... sexy. Like a perfect little ménage à trois with the three of them. Just like she'd thought, Hermione's hips were awfully close to Draco's head, and Blaise had leaned forward just enough to bring his chest close to her shoulder.

This was a *consulting group*, not a *strip club* for Merlin's sake!

Hermione opened the paper to find an entire page dedicated to her. She gasped in the middle of the bookstore, and the hag looked at her like she had said Voldemort's name in vain.

The picture of her reading the book on Draco's desk took up almost the entire page. She opened and closed her mouth, wondering if Skeeter had played with the image at all. Her legs looked so long in the heels, and her lips looked so full. She watched her hand turn the page and her tips smirk.

On the accompanying page, Hermione saw a picture of her posing in front of Draco's window, and she recognized the moment when Draco had walked in the room and they had made eye contact.

Real-life Hermione blushed as she watched *Prophet* Hermione's eyes heat. "Oh, god..." She closed her eyes, blocking the image of herself watching Draco watch her. Was she really that obvious in person?

She sighed and read the article. The article completely about herself. Skeeter detailed the duties of the position, thankfully including bits from their interview about which magical creature groups they would be focusing on in the first quarter. Then apparently Skeeter had interviewed the others *about* her.

A pull-quote from Blaise Zabini: "She's as passionate as she is beautiful."

Hermione's eye widened. How ridiculously inappropriate. She scanned the page and found that a girl in the secretarial pool told Skeeter that Hermione was "kind of a hero to her! Everyone at Ilvermorny knew who she was!" Hermione frowned. She didn't recognize the girl's name at all and made a note to figure out which one she was.

At the end of the article, Draco Malfoy was quoted. "What drew me to her was her mind. She's very logical."

Hermione pulled her head back. Logical? Well, yes...

The door to Cornerstone opened and she closed the paper on the pictures of herself. She looked up and Corban Hartford was coming through the door.

"I know, I know. I just don't want to be wearing this *amazing* dress, if my hair and makeup don't match." She gestured down at the lovely burnt orange dress that Pansy had her in. She looked up at Pansy – whose makeup was perfection for this time in the morning – and begged her with her eyes.

"Take it all off!" Pansy frowned. "Take the dress off, take the makeup off, take that disastrous pony-tail out. Merlin, Granger, what were you trying to do?"

"I was trying to do the 'power-pony' thing that Tracey did yesterday!" she growled. "Granger, you can't wear your hair in the same style two days in a row!" Pansy pulled a face at her.

"You can't just give me a closet full of beautiful clothes and expect me to know these things, Pansy!"

Hermione groaned and stomped away to take everything off. When she returned in her bathrobe five minutes later, Tracy and Daphne were in her living room, looking barely awake.

"Oh," Hermione said. "I'm so sorry to be such a pain to you all."

Tracey shook her head, like she wasn't a pain. Daphne didn't disagree with her.

"Alright." Pansy appeared from the kitchen, having brewed them tea. "We are going to do this in front of a mirror for the next three days."

As the girls started in on her, and Pansy went to throw away anything she didn't like in Hermione's closet, she wondered if this was what growing up in Slytherin would have been like. She didn't regret her seven years with the boys, and it was nice to have Lavender and Parvati leave her alone most of the time...

But she felt like this was how a weekend morning in the Slytherin dormitories would have been.

The *Daily Prophet* came out on Sunday morning, sporting the picture of Draco, Blaise and her on Draco's couch above the fold. Perfect. It was her least favorite of all the pictures taken, but of course it was on the front page of the *Prophet*.

"NEW BLOOD ON THE HORIZON"

by Rita Skeeter

With poise and confidence, Draco Malfoy has started a revolution. He has hand-picked the team, he has secured the office space, he has arranged the furniture! The company that will bring forth major change in the wizarding world has opened.

A self-proclaimed "problem-solver," Draco Malfoy brushes his golden hair aside as he talks to yours truly about his major plans.

Hermione turned to Mason. "You have no idea what you're talking about." The image of Greyback invading her bedroom swam before her. "Malfoy had no business with Fenrir Greyback that was not forced upon him—"

"I truly don't understand you, Hermione Granger," Mason hissed at her. "He fought against you in battle just two years ago and now you've thrown in your lot with him." He snirked. "The pay must be *excellent* at Malfoy Consulting Group."

Her blood was humming.

"If memory serves, Mason, you did not fight in my war. At least Malfoy had the decency to choose a side."

The conversation stilled. Mason's jaw clicked. She heard Draco take a slow breath beside her. "You've severely misjudged Mr. Malfoy and myself," she said. "What I do here is not for publicity, it's because it's the right thing to do. When I find myself in a position to be of assistance to undervalued people, I do everything I can to help. It's not publicity."

"But it sure makes for an excellent photoshoot," Mason shot at her; then turned his eyes on Draco, "doesn't it, Malfoy?" He smirked. He fanned his hands out in front of his face, reading a headline. "What a team. The pure-blood and the Mudblood."

Her breath caught. And Draco sat forward. "Watch it," he growled, so low that Hermione wasn't sure which man was the werewolf.

"Alright. Let's not descend into dramatics," Quentin set his tea down. "Mason, are you quite done?"

"Oh, please, do stay." Hermione stood and grabbed her bag. "You have your salad and sandwich on the way," she hissed at him. She tossed the folder in her bag. "You know what, Quentin? I will continue on with this case because I care, not because I was paid to care. We will fight this injustice without you, and we will win, and we will celebrate, and you can thank Draco Malfoy when your children have equal rights as werewolves." She was too loud for a Muggle shop, she knew. "Come on, Malfoy."

She pivoted and stormed out.

She didn't wait. She continued down the street, heels clacking against the pavement. She was fuming.

They clearly had no intention of working with them and they still took the meeting. Hermione ignored the part of her brain that reminded her that Quentin may have been respectful by declining in person, because Mason had been so purposefully *disrespectful*.

It might be a bit easier for you, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don't believe in being bought out for publicity.

Bought out? She huffed, feeling her hair fall out of its clips. She heard Draco's shoes behind her, as his long legs caught up.

They strode in silence, every crosswalk opening for them. She chanced a look to Draco's face at a corner, and saw him frowning at the pavement.

"I'm sorry," she said. He looked up at her. "For them. I'm sorry they don't see you the way I do."

She continued down the street to the Apparition point. After five paces, she felt him lag behind her. She stopped and turned to him. He glared at her coolly, and she frowned, recognizing this look from his Wizengamot hearing months and months ago.

"I don't need your pity, Granger." She looked at him. His jaw was tight, his hands in fists at his hips. "You don't have my pity," she said. "You have my respect!"

She shook her head at him and turned, reaching the Apparition point first and leaving without him.

The werewolf lunch had soured her entire day. Walter tried to ask her how it went. She was confident that he would be the last person to ask her that question.

At four o'clock she finally just took a book off her shelf and began reading to quiet her mind.

Not quite what she was paid for, but apparently she was paid too much anyway.

A knock on her open door and she looked up to see Wentworth smiling shyly. "Bad meeting?"

"The worst." She closed her book. "They couldn't just decline. They needed to decline while insulting my integrity." She looked to her window. "They thought the entire case was a publicity stunt."

"Ah," Wentworth grimaced. "Well, it would have been incredible publicity. Hermione Granger Frees the Werewolves..."

That made her frown. "Don't you mean 'Malfoy Consulting Group Frees the Werewolves?'"

"Oh, no, no. It's all you." He grinned. She knew he was being quite kind but she disliked it after what Quentin and Mason had said. "I must admit, I had reservations about signing on with

Draco Malfoy, but once I heard that *you* were on board, it really did sway me."

"Oh, that's so kind," she said. "So, you joined quite late in the game as well?"

"Not too late. Around early December."

She blinked at him. "Early January, you mean?"

"No, it was in the beginning of December. Around my wife's birthday."

She felt a cold weight settle against her chest. "So Draco told you in early December that I'd be joining M.C.G.?" She kept her face light.

The Right Thing To Do



Madame Michele was quite taken aback to see her in Pansy's clothes that night.

She was even more taken aback when Hermione burst out, "I can't handle this handshake thing! I just really can't get around it. I'm at work in a professional environment with *men* who shake hands like *men* and they aren't trying to shake hands with a *lady*. I can't do it and I won't." She huffed. "I'm sorry."

She looked at her feet, embarrassed.

"Az long az you know ze difference, Mz Granger" was her cool reply. She looked her up and down. "You look quite lovely. What 'as 'appened to you."

Hermione reign'd herself in. "Thank you, Madame Michele." She added, "You're too kind."

She looked down at her dress. "I have become the spokesperson and model for the Parkinson line."

"Oh! Mz Parkinzon. What an enchanting girl."

Hermione kept from rolling her eyes. Of course she was.

That night Madame Michele took the opportunity to teach her how to walk in heels and how to treat expensive clothes.

Hermione thought it was the only lesson thus far that she'd found in the least bit helpful for everyday life.

The next morning, Hermione called Pansy in a panic at seven in the morning.

"I'm so, so sorry, Pansy," Hermione said as the tall girl stepped out of her fireplace. "But I tried to do what Daphne and Tracey did yesterday, and I don't think it worked."

Pansy looked at her. "It didn't."

"Yes, he said he understood any reservations I had, but here was what he wanted to do, and here was who had signed on to do it with." He smiled at her. "I'm sure you were the deciding factor for a lot of the people here, employees and clients."

She ran her tongue along her teeth to keep from speaking. She twitched her lips into a smile. "Well, thank you Wentworth. That's lovely to hear."

He nodded at her and left her alone.

She stood, buzzing. She paced to the bookshelf to put away her reading and went to shut the door so she could think.

Draco was on the floor, chatting with one of Mockridge's Associates.

How had he guessed she would sign on as soon as early December? Draco hadn't even brought up joining M.C.G. to her until December 31st. It hadn't even crossed her mind.

She watched him lean on the cubicle and roll his eyes at something, smiling.

But he brought by the werewolf portfolio earlier than that. In early December. He traded three books and a smile for a letter of recommendation and slid her a portfolio filled with his notes. Notes that swayed her, notes that piqued her curiosity...

Anyone can be seduced, Granger.

And suddenly she was on the Malfoy balcony again, in a white dress, watching as Draco leaned his long body against the railing and told her what it was she wanted to do with her life. He'd decided it all for her before she'd even thought of it herself.

He laughed at something one of the Associates said, and continued to his office, flipping through something. He felt her eyes on him and looked up at her, and nodded.

She stared back at him.

Quentin Margolis was right. Only it wasn't the money she had fallen for.

Hermione swallowed. She directed them to the couch. Hermione felt very stiff suddenly. They had her sit on the arm of the couch. She was being treated much like a prop, she realized. Pansy saw her frowning and approached her.

"What's happening in that brilliant head, Granger?"

"I'm not sure I like this, Pansy. This Modern Business Witch. I really don't think I'm cut out for it." She looked away from her and Blaise was watching them. "I don't like how I'm... being draped everywhere. Like a doll."

Pansy lifted a brow. "Well, that is the world of fashion, Hermione."

"Then I don't think it's *my* world."

Pansy nodded at her, thinking. "Get through this set up, and I'll fix it."

Hermione stared at her, then nodded.

They had Draco sit on the couch next to the arm she was on. They put Blaise behind the couch, leaning forward. She had to cross her legs awkwardly, knowing that Draco's shoulder was right near her hips, and after a few shots, they directed her to place her hand just behind Draco's other shoulder on the back of the couch and lean her body that way.

After that pose was done, Pansy redirected them to the desk. She had Hermione stand two steps in front of it. She placed Blaise and Draco behind her, leaning on the desk. Hermione suddenly regretted saying anything, as now she was front and center. Pansy had her place her hands on her hips, staring proudly down the lens. She felt a power flow through her as the bulbs flashed. Pansy had the boys step out and gave her a book. They took several shots of her leaning on Draco's desk, reading a book. She felt quite comfortable. She smiled up at Pansy.

"Miss Granger, I am *adoring* this style on you. Who are you wearing?" Rita's quill twitched behind her.

Hermione looked up at Pansy. Draco stood just behind her, eyes running over her.

"*Parkinson.*" Hermione snirked. The camera popped.

Pansy's lips parted in a slow smile, and Draco's eyes flashed at her.

came over and smoothed her ponytail, bringing her hair over her shoulder. Hermione didn't know how to stand or whether to smile or not, so Pansy placed her hand on her hip and told her to look out the window. Bozo loved it.

As she was being placed in another position, Draco entered, sliding his arm into his jacket. He stopped when he saw her and she met his eyes. The camera flashed. He fixed his collar and continued to Rita, shaking her hand. Rita blushed.

The photographers gathered in Draco's office, and slowly the Senior Consultants filed in. Rita began placing them around Draco's desk, getting them primed for a picture. Tracey and Daphne began running around, making sure the men's hair was in place.

It wasn't until that very moment that Hermione realized. She was the only female Senior Consultant. Yes, Dorothea was a managing director and would be in the same meetings, but she was in a room of men, mostly Slytherins, possibly pure-blood. She felt quite energized by that.

That was until Rita asked her to sit on Draco's desk.

She stared at her. Rita dragged her over to perch on the corner of Draco's very expensive looking desk. She looked for him, to see if he would stop this, and found him talking to Pansy across the room. She felt a pain in her ribs at seeing them together, that she shook away. Draco looked up at her as she slid onto the end of the desk. He said something to Pansy and Pansy smirked at him. Hermione looked down.

The rest of the Senior Consultants were placed around Draco's desk, leaving the chair for him open. Once he took it the flashes started. Hermione smiled, then quickly looked at Wentworth, who was smirking confidently. She looked to Pansy who shook her head at her. No, do not smile.

Hermione left her features blank. That didn't feel right.

"Excellent. Pause!" Pansy said. Hermione was surprised she could take control of this photoshoot like that. Tracey and Daphne went to the men, sweeping their hair the right way and Pansy approached her. "You have to smile with your eyes, Granger." Pansy demonstrated. "Imagine you have a secret."

Which one? Hermione thought.

They started taking pictures again and Pansy grinned at her. Was it possible she'd done it right? The photographers repositioned them all a few times, once having all of them stand behind Draco in his chair. Hermione and Blaise framed him.

Then Rita excused all the Senior Consultants except for Draco, Blaise and her. "We're going to focus a bit on this next generation." Rita's eyes were gleaming. "The youngest entrepreneurs."



The Right Thing To Do

Hermione wished she'd left The Wall up.

She'd finally gotten around to vanishing all the scribbled words just before Christmas, so her room was a blank slate again.

But she really would have appreciated a timeline right about now.

Draco had come into Cornerstone with the werewolf portfolio the first weekend of December, but before that, they hadn't spoken to each other in nearly two weeks – since the Marcus Flint incident.

Hermione frowned at her blank wall. Something must have shifted then. Something must have gone wrong if he had sacrificed his pride to come to her. He had freely admitted that he'd come to Cornerstone to ask her a favor.

Favors, she didn't mind giving. Manipulative publicity, she had a problem with.

Something tugged at her mind.... Something happened with Noelle and her father. And whatever it was, it happened before Draco asked Hermione to write to Quentin Margolis and before he'd started using her name to gather employees and clients.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. Draco had been very clear that she was *not* to write to Noelle...

So thirty minutes later, letter to Noelle off with an owl, she sat on the edge of her bed, kicked off her kitten heels and removed her jacket. Hermione dug into her bag to look through the portfolio Walter had drafted for her that day.

Walter was delightfully intuitive, Hermione had found. He'd knocked on her closed door that afternoon, finding her with her head in her hands, and had brought in every piece of fan mail and love letter she'd received thus far this week.

"Whenever my wife is having a bad week, I scramble together all the embarrassing poetry I wrote her at Hogwarts and all her N.E.W.T scores," he had said, shrugging.

Hermione had laughed. "Poetry?"

"Yes, during Professor Binns' class."

"Of course."

He had also brought in the Golden Snidget portfolio he'd been working on, and excused himself to let her read through her pile.

She had young business women writing to her for advice and thanking her for paving the way. She had war veterans penning letters of encouragement and praise. And one letter from a thirteen-year-old girl at Ilvermorny. She wanted Hermione's advice on a niffler she'd found in the trophy room that she wanted to keep as a pet. She also ended the letter with a request for Hermione's advice on how to respond to her classmates' teasing.

By the time she headed home for the day, Hermione had gotten a handle on her feelings about the situation.

She wasn't going to quit. That would be career suicide at this point, and she quite enjoyed what it was that she was doing at M.C.G. She enjoyed the possibilities. But she was going to let Draco know that she knew what was going on, and she didn't appreciate it.

And she would do it calmly.



By ten o'clock Thursday morning, she had worked herself up to speak with Draco. She would be direct and concise and honest.

She walked the floor to his office, and found the door closed. It was rarely closed, so he must have been in a meeting. As she approached to ask his assistant when she thought he'd be free, the door opened.

Pansy stepped out. Hermione blinked at her, confused. Pansy smiled.

"Hermione, dear!" She looked her up and down, assessing the outfit for today. "Wonderful, I was just coming to see you."

Hermione smiled and said something polite, all the while distracted by Draco having a closed-door meeting with Pansy. Draco appeared in the doorway, slipping on his jacket.

He met her eyes. For a moment she was fifteen, watching Draco and Pansy disappear behind a tapestry on her way back from the library.

She shook her head, finding the entire situation unwarranted. Pansy looked pristine, not a hair out of place, not a smudge on her lipstick. Just because Draco was dressing himself in his outer layer didn't mean that they had just...

Her complexion was perfect. Her eyebrows were darker and more defined, and her eyelids were dark and deep without looking too much like... well, like a prostitute. Her hair was in a high ponytail, tight and controlled, with curls falling to her shoulder blades.

The dress fit perfectly. She grabbed the vest, unbuttoned it and slid it over her shoulders. It was more of a waistcoat, really. It was a light brown leather and as she began buttoning it up the front, Pansy entered without knocking. Like the close friend she was.

"Oh, Granger." She brought her hands to her hips. Hermione looked down at herself. Had she done it wrong? Pansy continued, "You are stunning!"

Ginny ran in, still adorable in her pajamas and Tracey and Daphne followed, their eyes wide and gleeful. Pansy stopped her from buttoning the vest, claiming that she had no idea how *tiny* she was, and used her wand to size the fabric of her dress closer to her ribs. She helped her button up the vest, telling Hermione to tug at her breasts to get them to lift above the tight buttons. Hermione stepped into the nude heels, and looked in the mirror, Pansy appearing over her shoulder.

"*That* is the Modern Business Witch."

Even Daphne smiled.



Pansy, Tracey, Daphne and Hermione stood in the lift heading up to the top floor. It was a blizzard of activity when the doors opened. Rita was talking to Walter, Bozo was taking pictures of the office – focusing a bit too much on Melody – and another reporter was talking to Wentworth.

Pansy walked past them all, leading her tribe to the back left corner. Draco's office. She'd never seen it before.

It was all steel and leather and hilarious masculinity. It was just about the same size as hers, but instead of a wall of bookshelves, he had a black leather couch next to a singular bookshelf. His desk looked like it was made of stone instead of wood, like an obsidian or dark marble. His office was imposing and sexy. And she thought of how opposite her office was.

He wasn't in the office, thankfully, but Blaise was talking to a reporter, having a photgrapher dance around him. He looked her up and down as she entered and couldn't even find a comment to make, but he smiled as he continued what he was saying. It seemed Tracey and Daphne were here to check the hair and skin of the others being pictured. Daphne took Blaise to the side to smooth out his complexion with a darker color. Hermione watched the two of them frown at each other, not speaking.

Rita pounced on her at that moment, having followed them into Draco's office. She answered questions on what her role at Malfoy Consulting will be, and what cases she was excited for. Rita shoved her back against Draco's window, and had Bozo take a few pictures of her. Tracey

"I've heard of it, yes."

"It's lovely. You *must* try it. I have a sample."

"Oh, wonderful!"

Hermione stared at the two of them... bonding? Pansy called for someone out in the living room, and then a Greengrass sister was in the doorway too.

"Daph, can I get two samples of Hush Cream?"

Daphne Greengrass was *not* the nice Greengrass from New Year's. She was equally as pretty as her younger sister, but less inclined to smile, Hermione soon realized.

After Pansy and Ginny gushed more about this cream, and Daphne asked her if she knew how to apply it – "Doesn't it just go on your face?" – and Daphne showed her the upward circle technique, Hermione was ushered into the living room, still wearing only a towel.

Tracey Davis was there, setting up a hair station. Ginny played hostess in her pink pajamas, offering coffee and tea and then whipping together a tray of muffins.

Daphne prodded at her face while Tracey pulled at her hair and Ginny and Pansy talked shoes. Hermione sat still and drank her coffee whenever Daphne pulled a brush away. Tracey dried her hair and pulled it back into something she called the "power pony" after she curled it. Pansy had a tendency to ask her questions as Daphne was in the middle of something, causing Daphne to frown at her as she responded.

An idea struck her as Daphne came at her with an eyeliner pencil – what if they were painting her face like a clown, and ruining her hair. What if these Slytherin girls were torturing her to make her look ridiculous for public pictures. Her heart leapt, but then she remembered that Ginny was in the room. Ginny would know if they were.

When the girls were done, Pansy told her to try on the dress she'd laid on her bed. So, at some point, Pansy had entered her bedroom. Wonderful.

She shut her bedroom door behind her and finally took off the towel. Hermione sighed, stomach feeling a bit tight thinking of being interviewed today. And dealing with Skeeter. And Draco. And Blaise and Pansy.

She turned to see an olive green dress laid on her bed, with a vest of sorts on top. A pair of beige heels on the floor. It was... nothing she would have picked out for herself, but she could see how it fit into Pansy's Modern Business Witch aesthetic.

She slipped the dress over her head, liking how light the fabric was and how the long sleeves opened wide at her elbows. The bottom came just above her knees, and she was grateful that it wasn't really revealing or anything like that. She turned to see herself in her mirror and had to take a step back.

"Did you want me?" Draco's eyes burned into her. She almost laughed out loud at the unintended double entendre.

"I, er- No, not if you're just on your way out."

"I am." He checked his timepiece. "I have a meeting followed by a meeting. Er, actually if you're available for lunch, my client would like to meet you." He pushed his hair out of his face, and grabbed a folder from his assistant. "One of the Honeydukes sellers is suing Honeydukes, and is quite the fan of yours." He looked at the folder. She frowned. Well, if *this* wasn't the exact problem...

"No, I'm not free." Her voice was a bit firm. She could tell from the way Pansy's eyebrow twitched.

"Alright." He studied her. He excused himself and headed for the lifts.

Pansy turned to her: "Let's talk *Witch Weekly*. They'll be here on Monday for pictures and an interview." Pansy linked their arms, like they were old friends.

"Yes, let's talk. I'd like very much to not be in green for this shoot." Hermione shot her a glance.

Pansy raised her brows. "Really?" She smirked. "So Gryffindor red?"

"Just not Slytherin green." Hermione raised a brow back.

She sat down with Corban on Friday to discuss the werewolf case. There was still a lot to be done, even without Quentin Margolis and the North Forest Pack, but *not* having their support put a bit of a damper on things.

Corban helped outline the legal aspects of the next few months, and the two of them worked on the opening statement for the first day in the Wizengamot in March. Corban was just telling her a story about the strangest day he'd ever had in the courtrooms when Draco knocked on the doorframe.

She looked up at him, still smiling at Corban's story. He looked between the two of them.

"Hartford." He nodded to Corban.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy." Corban's voice was still cheery from his story.

"How's the opening statement?"

"We're almost done with it, and then I'll send it over to you for review."

"Excellent." Draco looked to her, jaw tight. "Granger, a Mr. Townsend is very interested in the Werewolf Policy." He looked down at the letter he was holding. "He wants to have dinner with us next week to talk about financial support."

He walked it to her desk and she took it from him. "Oh, that's wonderful." "Tuesday at seven," Malfoy said. He looked between them both, and turned to leave.

Hermione was too busy scanning the letter to hear him. Once his words sunk in she jumped. Madame Michele!

"Oh, I—" But he was turning out the door. "Excuse me," she said to Corban, jumping up and racing after Draco.

"Malfoy." She stopped in the doorway, hand on the frame. He turned. "I—I can't do seven on Tuesday." He stared at her and she felt anxious. "I have... I have a thing."

"Can't you reschedule?" His stare was firm but inquisitive.

"No, I really can't." She looked away from him and toward her doorframe, trying to find a reasonable excuse. "Er... it's... I have this..."

She looked back up at him and it seemed he had followed her eyes as she looked away from him. He stared a hole into her wall, right to where Corban was sitting patiently in her office. His eyes snapped back to her, dark.

He stepped toward her. "If you are postponing this *very* important meeting for something non-essential, I would question your priorities Granger," he whispered. They were steps away from Walter and a few other workers. He stopped in front of her. "I'd hate to think that you'd prioritize a *date* above your Werewolf Policy."

She blinked at him. A date? With Corban? That was a leap...

"I don't have a date," she hissed. "And even if I did, if I say I'm unavailable for a meeting, *I'm unavailable for a meeting*, Malfoy." She narrowed her eyes at him. His burned into hers.

"Fine." He bit out. "I'll ask to reschedule." He turned.

"Wednesday is best for me. I'm unavailable Thursday, as well." She crossed her arms.

"Wednesday is not good for me," Draco began.

"Oh, Malfoy, I'd *hate* to hear that you'd prioritize a *date* above your *company*," she hissed. She rolled her eyes and returned to her office, listening to Draco huff.

She'd managed to piss Draco off again later that afternoon. It was a wonderful day.

While she still needed to speak with him regarding his treatment of her and her name, she couldn't help but smirk and bat her eyes at him when his jaw clenched and he scowled at her again.

A wonderful day indeed.

She was balancing the ledger at Cornerstone on Saturday morning while reading through one of the new releases that had been shipped over. Corban said the author was one of his favorites, but she wasn't fully invested yet. At one hundred pages in, that wasn't a good sign.

"I thought you quit this job."

Hermione's eyes snapped up from the novel to see Draco standing a few feet from the register. His face was cold and his eyebrow lifted at her. She hadn't even heard the door open.

"Just to be sure everything is fitting right, see if I need to do any last minute resizing," Pansy said, grabbing her book and standing. "And I'll bring a stylist for your hair and makeup so you won't need to worry about that." She waved her hand and Hermione realized that she wasn't "worried about that" at all. She had not even thought about hair and makeup.

"Alright." Hermione stood to walk her out, feeling a bit dizzy. "Pansy, are you sure about this? I mean, there has to be another person who exemplifies this 'Modern Business Witch.' Someone who's in the papers often enough and – Katya! What about Draco's... er, Katya Viktor?"

Pansy grimaced. "As a model, Katya is signed with certain designers already. And also, I hate her."

Hermione laughed out loud. She bit back her grin, worry scratching at her face.

"Hermione." Pansy smirked at her. "You are the most talked about witch in all of Europe.

The most photographed, the most respected... and soon to be the most feared." Hermione blinked at her. "Isn't it time you started dressing like one?"

She didn't get a chance to tell Ginny about Pansy and her crew coming over. She didn't expect Ginny to have the day off. So, when the redhead knocked on the bathroom door at 5:45AM as Hermione was getting out of the shower, Hermione jumped.

"Hermione... Your friend Pansy Parkinson is here..."

She wrapped a towel around herself and cracked the door, letting the steam out. Ginny's face was wide, and her hair was a mess from sleep.

"Tell me this is a nightmare?"

Before Hermione could respond, Pansy appeared behind Ginny. "Hermione, love! So glad you're already showered. What kind of moisturizer do you use?"

She blinked at her. She was standing in front of Pansy Parkinson in only a towel. Ginny was right: it was a nightmare.

"Er... Well there's this Muggle product I sometimes put on my arms..."

Pansy's eyes shifted. "You don't use moisturizer?" Her eyes moved over her face. "Merlin, you've been lucky this far—" And suddenly Pansy Parkinson was pushing her bathroom door open and putting her hands on her face. She felt like she was about to be choked, or have her eyes gouged out. "Excellent pores, Granger."

"... Thank you."

"I've been telling her this for years." Ginny shook her head at her, curls billowing around her head.

"Yes, you really must use moisturizer. Ginevra, have you tried Harper Huddy's Hush Cream?"

She shoved his chest with her hands. He was so stiff she wanted to move him somehow. Make him fight her. Of course, he did not even sway, but she did see that his breath was uneven now. Good.

"Is that it, Malfoy?" she continued. "Is it nice having the Golden Girl to show off, to headline your Daily Prophet articles? Well if it's not my blood status or my gender, it must be my *celebrity*." She pushed his chest again, and again nothing changed. She could feel everything rushing inside of her body, waiting for him to break her.

"Or maybe," she snarled, "I'm only here to play dress up with Pansy! Is that it, Malfoy? Giving a doll to your fucking *girlfriend*!"

Her right hand shoved his chest as hard as she could and she realized her eyes were blurring. Before she could pull her hand off of him, his snapped up and grabbed her wrist, holding it between them, so tight it might snap.

He lowered his head to hers, sent fire into her eyes and hissed, "Don't. Touch me."

She glared into his face, took her left hand and slapped his chest with it. His free hand shot up, grabbed the back of her head, and pulled her face to his. And he kissed

her. And she was immobilized. Eyes open. A groan poured from his throat into her lips.

Her wrist in his hand, her head tilted up, and her breath lost. He placed open-mouth kisses against her lips, peppering her, and his breath hot.

He was kissing her. And she was doing nothing. She gasped at the realization, and his fingers dug into her twisted hair, tilting her head so he could taste her.

She closed her eyes, swaying into him as he attacked her mouth, gasping for air. His fingers were still so tight on her wrist and her left hand was stuck between them on his chest. She curled her fingers on his shirt and he gasped. She tried chasing his mouth, letting her tongue taste him.

He stepped into her, and she had to step back before she toppled. His hand still caught in her complicated hair, he pulled her head back gently, leading her backwards.

His mouth left hers briefly and she almost opened her eyes to ask him what was happening, but he heaved a breath in, throat clicking around the air, before attaching to her again. He kissed the side of her mouth, moving his lips across hers in small movements. She was burning. She couldn't wait for him to take her again. She was forced to step back again.

Her backside hit the edge of her desk and his body pressed into hers. He was solid and warm. He was attacking her mouth again and spinning the most delicious sounds into her. She felt him take the hand on his chest and then place both hands behind her on the desk. She leaned backwards into them, and his hands smoothed across hers, planting them down, keeping them from moving. She wanted to move them. She wanted to touch him anywhere. Feel his chest, run up his arms, and oh how she wanted to track her fingers through his hair. But his hands

forced hers to stay on the desk. She poured this frustration into his mouth, lapping at him and using her teeth lightly. He groaned and she found her knees being opened. His leg pushed between hers and moved her left knee outwards. He stepped in.

His left hand released her right, after giving a little push, telling her stay there. He carefully placed his hand on her waist. She moaned. He squeezed her lightly. His tongue was doing such lovely things to her and her breath was coming in gasps in between mouthfuls of him. His body was pressing into hers and pushing her into her desk. She wanted to touch him. She removed her right palm from the desk and brought it up to his jaw, her little fingers on his neck and her thumb near their mouths.

At the contact, he gasped and his left hand slid down to grab her hip, pulling her toward him, connecting them, and his upper body started pushing her backwards.

A knock at the door she barely heard and a "Hermione, you ready—?" was the only warning they had before Harry stepped into the room.

Draco jumped away from her, turning away from the doorway. Hermione straightened and wiped her mouth.

Harry stood with his mouth open mid-word, with his hand still on the door knob. Harry's eyes moved back and forth between the two of them.

"Is it—" she tried. She cleared her throat. "Is it lunch time?"

"Er, yes," Harry said. "But I can come back later."

"No," Hermione and Draco both said in unison. Draco finally turned to face Harry, tightened his jaw, and said "Potter," as he exited. The air was suddenly lighter.

Harry just stared at her, eyes wide, and a small smile growing on his mouth.

"God, Harry, don't," Hermione said, covering her face with her hands.

"I wasn't going to say anything!" He laughed.

"Are you punishing me?" She placed her hands on her hips and raised her brows at him. She must thank Pansy later for today's heels as they gave her much needed leverage in height.

"Punishing you?"

"Yes, because I haven't quit Cornerstone?"

His eyes flashed at her.

"Or maybe because my weekend clothing is unsuitable to you? If I allowed you to 'own' my weekends, like you asked, would the Snidgets have a fighting chance?" she screeched.

"Granger." He stepped into her, like she was a feral cat that he was cornering.

"Why am I even here Malfoy?" She couldn't bring her volume down as much as she tried. She knew she looked crazed, and her hair was falling out of the beautiful twist Tracey had pulled it into. "At Malfoy Consulting?"

"I wanted the best..."

"You said everyone needed a second chance, but I guess you weren't talking about magical creatures. You were talking about the Malfoy family and their reputation." She shoved her finger into his chest in a move she found particularly childish, but she couldn't be bothered to care. He stood very still and did not even sway from the force of her push, which aggravated her further.

"Watch your tone, Granger," he grit out, nostrils flaring. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and clenched his fists at his sides.

She persisted. "I'm glad I could really 'round' out your senior staff, Malfoy. My god, without me you wouldn't have made your Mudblood quota." His head twitched to the side so slightly. "How would you have ever changed public opinion of the Malfoy family without one? Isn't that right?"

He narrowed his eyes at her and she knew she was in dangerous waters. She was overstepping the line but she couldn't stop. She started a small pace back and forth, for show.

"Or possibly I am here to be the *female* member of the Group. Couldn't truly operate without one of those, what with all the pesky equality laws the Ministry has been putting into place..."

"Stop," he cautioned. She saw the tension ripple through his forearms, up his shoulder blades. "Stop there, Granger."

"No, thanks," she quipped. "I'm not quite done." She stopped her pacing and planted herself not two steps from him. "I'm assuming that the most important quality that I bring to this team, seeing as it clearly has nothing to do with my relationship with the magical creature community, is that I am Hermione Granger, *Golden Girl*," she spat at him. "Were you hoping I'd spread a bit of that golden dust around, Malfoy? I admit, it makes for excellent photo shoots with your pal Skeeter!"

"Respectfully, I'd like to begin now. The species is almost extinct as it is."

"Do you have a client who will pay consulting fees or would this project need to be fundraised?" He looked up at her, and his eyes were unreadable.

"It would need to be fundraised. The Sanctuary did not indicate that they would be able to pay—"

"I want to make sure the Werewolf Policy is fully funded before you start other projects that also need fundraising."

She scowled at him. "I *can* multitask, Malfoy."

"But would it be beneficial to both projects to have your focus split?"

Her face was heating, and she felt all eyes in the room on her. She took a breath to bite back at him, and he cut her off.

"Like I said, an excellent project for April. We can send you and Walter out to Somerset in March to start collecting data." Draco stood, and buttoned his robes. "Thank you for your time. Dismissed."

She could feel her blood boiling. She turned and stomped her way out of the conference room, muttering, "Bloody idiot."

Hermione couldn't remember the trip back to her office, but it was clipped. She stomped through the half empty desks of her team, watching as people jumped out of her way, all the while ignoring the click of dragon leather about ten paces behind her.

She wandlessly shoved the door to her office open and once through, tried to slam it shut. She heard the door hit Draco on his way in and almost smiled.

"Granger—"

"Why am I even here, Malfoy?" She rounded on him. He closed the door to her office while keeping his eyes on her. His jaw tight. She continued, "You told me you wanted to 'make a difference' and 'change the world.' What utter hogwash."

She turned from him and stomped to her desk.

"Like I said, Granger, it isn't in the budget for this quarter, but starting in April—"

"What bullshit!" She turned from her path to her desk, retracing her steps back to him in the center of her office. She tried not to use such Muggle phrases around pure-bloods, as they usually did not pick up on the sentiment, but her mouth was moving faster than her brain as her blood pumped through her like a dam had been released. "By April the species could be extinct!"

"That's an exaggeration." He placed his hands in his trouser pockets and leaned back on his heels. He frowned at her, looking the picture of nonchalance, but his tense jaw gave him away. "You'll be able to accomplish just as much in two months with a much larger budget—"

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Sixteen

Tuesday, January 18, 2000

I barely get a second to myself on the day of the *Prophet* shoot. Inviting six different periodicals to the office to interview and photograph M.C.G. was... an ambitious idea. And Rita is now pouting that she's not the center of attention.

I've spent all morning in the conference room talking to different journalists about current projects, future expenditures, and then—abruptly—about Katya and Granger. "Why Hermione Granger?" a sly auburn-headed witch asks, quill at the ready. Love, I've been trying to answer that question for myself for years now...

"She's the best," I brag, lifting my brows at her. "I wanted the best."

She grins and says, "Her relationship with the Magical Creature community must have helped, yes?"

"Absolutely—"

"Mr. Malfoy," an older gentleman covering a business magazine cuts in. "What do you most look forward to in your relationship with Miss Granger?"

I blink at him.

The sex.

And before I can answer with those exact words, my assistant Carrie pokes her head into the conference room and says they're ready for us in my office. I jump up, grab my jacket, and lead the way.

There's a witch standing at my office window that could give Granger a run for her money. Long legs and dark curls.

It's the flare of her hips that finally clicks with me. And my throat is dry as I drink in the sunlight bouncing off of her neck and chest, the waistcoat clinging tight to her ribs, giving me a

better idea of the lines and curves of her stomach, and the deep pools of her eyes that stare straight into me, digging into my mind and begging me to let her out of her box.

A bulb flashes, and she blinks.

I fix my collar and shake someone's hand. I let Daphne apply some kind of powder to my face. And I look back over at her.

Pansy's done this. She's done this for revenge.

She's put her in Slytherin green, something I will never forgive her for. And the angles of her cheekbones pop in the sunlight when she's got her hair pulled back like that. It makes her look harsher, older.

"Draco, darling." Rita is in front of me. "A few words for the *Prophet*?" The quill dances behind her head. I nod. "What drew you to Hermione Granger?"

The sex.

I clear my throat and ignore the figure near the window, speaking lowly.

"Er, what drew me to her was her mind. She's very... logical..." Ridiculous. "A true... asset."

Blaise appears over Rita's shoulder, smirking at me.

I glare at him.

"Asset. Yes," he says. Rita turns, opening the conversation up to us both. "And of all the assets she brings to the table," Blaise hums, "I'd say the most impressive..." He holds his hands in front of his chest like he's grabbing for an idea. Or like he's about to say her tits. "Her passion." He smiles at Rita. "She's as passionate as she is beautiful."

Rita's quill quivers.

"Well said, Mr. Zabini," Rita tucks a curl behind her ear, touching her neck in an obvious way. The woman needs a shag.

My eyes drift back to where Pansy is tugging at the arms of the green dress and Tracey is twisting a curl.

They've done something to her hair. Constrained it. I hate it.

"Well, I can say, Rita," Blaise continues jovially, "that Draco is truly looking forward to having Hermione Granger under him."

I close my eyes. Breathe deep.

"Not under." I smile. "I think of my Senior Staff as equals."

"Right you are," Blaise says. "I doubt a woman like Granger would stay in a position like that for long."

His eyes sparkle. I scowl. "Rita, darling. Shall we get started?"

She flutters away, placing everyone around my desk. Pansy floats to my elbow, straightening my cufflinks.

"That is the Modern Business Witch?" I whisper.

She waved him off and pushed past Blaise, ignoring the stares of the entire floor as she marched past them back into the office with Pansy and the girls.

"Alright," she said. "Tracey, continue."

Tracey raised her brows. Pansy turned away, smiling.

Hermione was exhausted by the end of the interview with *Witch Weekly*. She had worked so hard to keep the questions away from the vapid silliness of the magazine, but it was so difficult. She had managed to promote the work on the Werewolf Policy, and place a few suggestions on where she thought house-elf rights were headed, but primarily she had to discuss why her favorite color was blue, and what her favorite subject in school was.

The photographer got some lovely shots of her in her office, at her bookshelf and behind her desk. Pansy's clothes were a hit, and they fell head-over-heels for the periwinkle dress. Hermione found time to mention to the interviewer how much she appreciated the *Parkinson* line for its blend of the Muggle and the Magical, and Pansy smirked at her.

It was five past eleven when they finished with her. She ran to the board room, still in the periwinkle dress and heels, and apologized when she interrupted Draco in the middle of his opening. She then had to walk all the way around the table to Draco's left.

"You look lovely, young lady," Mockridge said as she passed. She blushed.

"Oh, thank you." She looked up at Draco. "Please, go on."

He was looking down at the table. He swallowed.

Draco continued, outlining that week's goals. There would be interviews that week for the Wizengamot Relations position, and Draco hoped to have it filled by the following week. Wentworth updated them with his success with the Diagon Alley businesses. He would be dealing with corporate restructuring for several of the chain locations, which made Hermione wonder if George would be interested in any assistance like that. She'd have to ask him.

When it came around the table to her, she updated them on the Werewolf Policy and then handed out a packet to everyone on the Golden Snidget project she was passionate about. It didn't bother her one bit that no one else prepared packets for this meeting.

"Essentially, the Snidget Sanctuary in Somerset is requesting our help. The breeding rates have dramatically decreased this season, and the Snidgets in the Sanctuary aren't living long. They want to be able to release Golden Snidgets into the wild, and to have the crime of poaching Snidgets or using them in unofficial Quidditch matches increased to a felony charge."

She looked around the table as they flipped through her paperwork. Draco's jaw clicked.

"This is an excellent project. I'd say you can start on this next quarter, once the Werewolf Policy is underway."

She blinked. He kept his eyes on her paperwork.

Hermione stood, tossing her notes across the room. "If you're too afraid to stand up to that entitled git, then allow me." She strode to the office door, threw it open and marched out in her bathrobe, barefoot, face half made.

She ignored the stares and open mouths as she made her way to the office at the opposite corner of the building. Draco's door was open, so she didn't even knock. She turned into the doorway and found him reading something intently behind his desk.

"This is the hairstyle for the photoshoot today," She gesticulated wildly to her head, and he looked up at her. He blinked and his eyes took her in from the top of her head to her bare feet. "Didn't know it needed to be *cleared* with you, but this is it."

"Did you really just parade through the office in a bathrobe?" He lifted a brow at her. "Yes. Yes, I did." She placed her hands on her hips. "And I'm thinking about doing it *more* often because it's damn comfortable. And the next time you have input on my hair or my clothing, keep it to yourself."

She turned to march out and he threw his reading onto his desk, standing. "Granger, what is wrong with you?" "Wrong with me?" she hissed. "Nothing is wrong with me. I'm trying to do *my* photoshoot this morning."

"In my office, so calm down!"

"Actually, the photoshoot is in *my* office—"

"That I paid for!" He yelled.

She stamped her foot and pressed her lips together, keeping any quippy remarks about how she actually was the one *paying* for this office by *securing* his inheritance!

"I don't understand why you are allowed to have any opinion on *my* hair for *my* photoshoot!" "It was a suggestion—"

"Keep them to yourself!"

He walked around the desk. "What is going on with you?" "Nothing is 'going on' with me—"

"You've been acting like a bitch for days!"

She gasped. "Maybe I've just realized that you've been a *dick* for *months*!" He scowled at her and she could feel her breath coming in uneven gasps.

"Hi, hey," a tentative voice said, and Hermione turned to see Blaise leaning into the doorway with wide eyes. "I'm just gonna close this door..." He reached for the handle slowly. "And silence the room, okay?" He looked between them both. "Something one of you should have done already," he said, like addressing children.

"Don't bother," Hermione said. "I'm done here." "Granger—"

"Yes. She's beautiful and she knows it." Pansy smirks at me. "And so does everyone else." I roll my shoulders back and take a breath. I need to turn away from the sight of Hermione Granger hopping up on my three thousand gallon desk and crossing her legs.

"Your mother would approve, I'd say." Pansy shrugs.

"Don't talk about my mother right now."

"Why not? I hear thinking about one's mother is the perfect way to squash unwanted thoughts."

I glare at her and she smiles back.

"Mr. Malfoy," Rita sings. "We'll have you in the chair now."

Rita takes me by the arm and sits me down, brushing my hair back more than necessary. When she walks back to the front of the room, I raise a brow at Tracey. She runs over and fixes whatever Skeeter did.

The pictures start. And all I can focus on is *not* letting my eyes drift to the left, where a little body is perched on shapely hips, leaning back on a small hand.

I can't get hard in the middle of this photoshoot. There is... no possible way. When we pause and rearrange, I refocus. This is about the business. Selling the consulting group. We'll have a beautiful woman on the front page, because that's marketing. But any other stray thoughts about keeping her on this desk indefinitely, or leaning back in this chair as she crawls her way towards me, or slowing popping the buttons on her vest as she lays across the marble top—

A camera flashes.

Rita repositions us. She and Blaise are on either side of me. Then she has her sit once, knees turned in towards me, torso twisting towards the lens.

This is fucking torture.

At least the scent of her is covered with some foul hair product.

We're on the couch before I know it. It's just Blaise, her, and me. She leans behind me, breasts inches away from my ear, and I know if I turn to look at her I'll get an eyeful.

"Miss Granger? Lean down closer? Move your hand over there? Yes. That's right."

And I can feel the heat of her at my temple. I stare down the lens imagining the tunnels of Severus' eyes.

Then I'm watching Pansy and Rita position her around my office. Standing in front of Blaise and me. Reading a document. Standing next to my chair. Belonging.

"You haven't said if you like the look yet." Pansy's at my side. I press my lips together as they give her a book to hold, and then tell her to bend over my desk, green dress pulling tight against her backside.

"Lovely idea for the shoot Pans," I cross my arms in front of my chest, and try to discreetly cover my flushed throat with a hand on my chin. Perhaps I can physically push a moan back into my mouth if it slips out.

"She's agreed to three months."

"My dry throat bobs. And Rita has her lean against the desk with her book, ankles crossing.

"And how'd you manage that?"

"I told you. I can be very persuasive."

"She's not cut out for your world, Pans," I say. "It's no offense to you, but she hasn't been trained for it. You spend three hours on her hair and makeup today and I promise you, tomorrow she'll arrive with today's hairstyle and a poor attempt at Daphne's contouring." I watch as they fix her hair, twisting a curl from her ponytail to lay flat on her chest. I press my thumb against my lips and mutter, "This isn't Hermione Granger."

Pansy is quiet for a moment as we watch her turn a page in the book, camera flashing.

"I think you underestimate her."

"Miss Granger!" Rita calls. "I am *adoring* this style on you. Who are you wearing?"

I watch as Granger's eyes meet Pansy's, a smirk tugging at her dark lips, and she lifts a perfectly arched brow.

"Parkinson," She grins. Like she's won a game of wizards' chess twelve moves before anyone will realize it.

And something thick twists inside my chest, dropping low, and swirling, licking at me. She meets my eyes, still smirking. And I let myself have one moment to drink her in. From the arches of her feet in the delicate heels, up her ankles and curving around her calves, lingering on the knees I've longed to press open, imagining the shape of her thighs, swooping wide around her hips and dipping back in to her tight stomach, lifting toward her full chest and the swell of her skin there, and finally sliding up her clavicles to her long neck.

The camera flashes. And I blink it away.

Wednesday, January 19, 2000

She wears an orange dress. I never liked the color orange. But it's growing on me. At least her hair is down again.

~*~

Friday, January 21, 2000

I'm relieved to find that she's in trousers today. Until I see how well they fit.

At lunch, I make excuses to Carrie and pop home for a cold shower. Only the temperature never turns all the way down. My hand leans against the stone tiles. The sway of her hips against my closed eyelids.

Hermione smiled. Blaise pursed his lips, holding back a smile, and was about to say something back when Tracey and Daphne pushed through the door. Tracey muttered an "excuse me" and continued in, but Daphne stood, waiting for Blaise to move for her.

Hermione watched as the smile dropped off his face. His jaw tightened as he moved out of her way, and continued on. Daphne frowned at his retreating back and then finally entered.

Before she had any time to think on that interaction, Pansy was unbuttoning her, and conjuring a bathrobe for her to sit in while they did her hair and makeup.

While Daphne layered on her face, and Tracey started twisting her hair into a complex style, Hermione asked if Walter could bring her work to do. She felt very foolish getting paid to sit and have her hair and makeup done.

People kept walking by the open door, and after seeing Draco across the way for the third time, she finally asked Pansy to shut the door.

Pansy was in and out for the hour. She was a restless person, Hermione realized, and she couldn't sit and just chat. She needed to be constantly in motion.

She'd been gone for ten minutes or so when she came back in, face set.

"Alright," Pansy said, rounding Hermione's chair and examining her. "We are doing Hermione's hair down today."

Tracey scoffed. "You're joking."

"Not at all." Pansy pursed her lips.

Tracey threw down the pin she was placing in Hermione's hair. She'd just spent thirty minutes on this lovely, complicated style and now she had to take it out because... because why? "Is *Witch Weekly* here?"

"No, not yet."

"So who wants it down?"

Pansy batted her eyes at her. "Draco suggested —"

"Oh, no thanks," Hermione sneered. "Tracey, please keep going." She folded her arms and set her stare.

Pansy and Tracey looked back and forth between each other. Daphne smirked into her makeup palette.

"Er... I think what Draco means, is that you should look a bit more like the Hermione Granger we all know for this photoshoot. I agree with him a bit —"

"But this was Tracey's design for this shoot," Hermione raised a brow. "And it's lovely."

Tracey blinked. Pansy's lips pulled into a grin that she suppressed. "Well, how's about we compromise. Do half up, half down?"

He was looking at the dress with a tight jaw. He hated it. She narrowed her eyes at him. His eyes found hers after taking in the dress, and he blinked, turning away, like he'd been caught.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said. He looked at the doorframe of the office, keeping his eyes off of her. "We've postponed the Monday morning meeting until eleven, to give you enough time with *Witch Weekly*."

That was perfect, actually. Harry was meeting her for lunch at noon.

"Alright, thank you."

He glanced at her swiftly and left. Only then did Hermione realize that Pansy was finishing the last of the buttons, and Draco had essentially just watched her "get dressed." That's why he'd looked away.

She blushed and tried to focus on what Pansy was telling her to do.

"Oh, I hope they pick this one for the cover!" Pansy pulled at the fabric with her hands and held her wand in between her teeth in a very un-ladylike way that Hermione found functional and hilarious.

"I love it. I can't even see myself in it and I love it!"

Pansy wandlessly conjured a full-length mirror, and then went back to tugging at the embroidery. Impressive.

Even without hair and makeup done, Hermione looked like a queen. She giggled. And Pansy smiled up at her.

"I do love it," Hermione said.

"I love it, too."

"Malfoy didn't," Hermione chuckled.

"Are you kidding? He *adored* it."

Hermione looked down at her. Pansy was aiming her wand at the seams, but she looked to be speaking honestly.

After they'd fit that dress to her, Pansy had her try on a few that were slightly more "Modern Business Witch" than Fairy Princess.

She was just stepping into heels to match a deep red dress with extra fabric that seemed to be for *aesthetic* purposes, instead of function, when Blaise leaned in the door, sipping from a mug.

"The Gryffindor Queen has returned." He smirked. Hermione rolled her eyes. "Lovely work, Pans,"

"Thank you, dear." Pansy ignored his presence after that.

"Do we need any help with zippers or buttons, or anything?" He smiled and Hermione shook her head at him, hiding her grin.

"Blaise, darling," Pansy said. "Do fuck off."

I'm ten minutes late to my 3 o'clock meeting.

~*~

Sunday, January 23, 2000

Mother wakes me up with the paper, going on and on about how *bloody gorgeous* – excuse my language, darling – Granger is in the *Prophet*, and how lovely Pansy's designs are, and would I like to invite Hermione over for dinner sometime to celebrate how smashing everything is going?

I stare blankly at the docile kitten in the paper, trying to reconcile her long legs and smooth curls with the ferocious girl in my dreams. Trying to wrap my head around this strange guilt, like I'm cheating on Hermione Granger every time this new version arouses me.

~*~

Monday, January 24, 2000

Ron Weasley sends me a Howler on Monday morning. And I have a complete mental break when I realize I'm agreeing with him.

"—HAS NO BUSINESS BEING PHOTOGRAPHED LIKE THAT. LIKE SOME MUGGLEBORN WHORE FOR YOU AND YOUR PURE-BLOOD FRIENDS—"

"Yes, yes. I know," I whisper, pacing the length of my office as the red envelope bellows from my desk.

"—SHE HAS A SOFT SPOT FOR YOU. ALWAYS HAS. AND WHILE I CAN'T EVEN IMAGINE WHAT YOU'VE DONE TO DESERVE IT—"

"Mm-hmm. I'm with you."

"—IT'S NO EXCUSE TO USE HER LIKE THIS. LIKE SHE'S NOTHING MORE THAN A PAIR OF LEGS—"

"Right. Because she's the Brightest Witch of Our Age—"

"—BRIGHTEST WITCH OF OUR AGE—"

"And for what purpose?" I spin towards the letter as it screeches. "Why does she need to look like that to work here, eh?" I ask.

"—NOT EVEN SURE WHAT IT IS YOU'RE SELLING AT THAT COMPANY OF YOURS—"

"Yes! Yes!" I point at the Howler. "Exactly, Weasley! Exactly!"

"—BECAUSE IT SEEMS TO ME LIKE YOU'RE SELLING SEX."

I clap my hands. "Yes! Why are we marketing it like this? We're not even *selling* things, Weasley!"

"SHE IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WITCH IN THE ENTIRE WORLD, AND SHE WAS STILL THAT SAME WITCH TWO WEEKS AGO, BEFORE YOU AND PARKINSON GOT YOUR HANDS ON HER—"

"You know," I say, leaning back on the desk like me and the Howler are old chums. "I'm not a fan of the makeover either, if I'm honest, Weasley."

"IF I FIND OUT THAT ANYTHING UNTOWARD IS HAPPENING AT MALFOY CONSULTING GROUP, IF YOU'RE USING HER OR IF YOU HURT HER, I'LL MURDER YOU, MALFOY."

The Howler descends into flames. And I feel very alone in my office.

I open the other three waiting Howlers all at the same time, and just sit on my couch, listening to the din.

Just as I begin in the 9AM meeting, Corban Hartford walks in late. I don't mind. And then she waves at him. And he smiles back. Like they're friends. Friendly.

I blink, tucking that away for later, and look at my notes again.

Later that afternoon, Blaise lets himself into my office, drops on the couch and says, "Where do you know Hartford from?"

I look up at him and he's got his eyes narrowed.

"He was an associate of my father's solicitor. He was fired for having too many morals."

"Hm," Blaise says. "Well, I've got my eye on him. Don't worry."

I almost ask, about what? But I remember this is Blaise. And he already knows. And if I saw Hartford smiling at her, then he already knows more.

~*~

Wednesday, January 26, 2000

We have the meeting with Margolis today, and I feel no more confident than I did last time.

But At least I'll let Granger take the lead on it.

I swing by her office at noon, delighted to find Blaise elsewhere. Perhaps doing work.

"Ready?"

"Yes!" She's standing from her desk, capping her ink, and giving me her bright eyes.

In a cream skirt suit, hugging those hips. I look away before my eyes linger on her calves. We share a lift downstairs with two of the interns headed to lunch, thankfully. It's not until the street that we're alone. We Disapparate and begin our walk through Muggle London.

The only reason Margolis would have chosen Muggle London as a meeting spot would be to throw me off. But I have her with me. And also, I swung by this shop on Monday, checking the menu, scoping the tables, examining the workers.

So... joke's on him.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she says, interrupting my judgment of the floppy-looking Muggle we just passed, "what happened to Tiberius Ogden?" The name shakes me. "I was very surprised to hear that the Wizengamot relations position was open."

"He declined." That's it. That's all there is.

She looked away and crossed her arms over her thin cotton shirt.

Hermione received an owl Sunday night from Pansy, requesting that Tracey and Daphne prepare her for her photoshoot at the office the next day. They would be doing several poses, backgrounds, and wardrobe changes throughout the morning, and it would be best to set up in the vacant office next door to hers, seeing as her office was to be the backdrop of the photoshoot.

Hermione was quite exhausted going into the next morning. She dreaded this entire publicity thing, and she hoped she'd be done with it after this *Witch Weekly* article.

She reminded herself that this article was not about M.C.G.; it was about her. She could focus the interview on how she was going to affect the wizarding world with the major policy changes. Publicity for the Werewolf Policy and her upcoming projects was perfectly fine. Publicity for Draco Malfoy and his damaged reputation was not.

She arrived at 7AM Monday morning, and found that Pansy was already set up in the office next to hers. She had conjured a changing curtain for Hermione to get dressed behind, and the rack of clothes she'd brought in for the shoot.

Hermione's jaw dropped at the rack. The fabrics and colors screamed elevated fashion. And Hermione couldn't help but notice that there wasn't a scrap of green to be found.

"Pansy..." She couldn't take her eyes off the rack.

"I know," Pansy said, coming to stand by her. "I'm good, aren't I?" She grabbed a dress off the rack. "Try this on. I want to fit it to you before they arrive."

It was a light blue with silver lace laid on top. Something was vaguely familiar about it.

Hermione took it from her and stared at it.

"It's based off your Yule Ball dress."

Hermione looked up to find Pansy smirking at her. "Really?"

"Well, you said no green, so I was stuck with so many colors that I hate." Pansy rolled her eyes and shoved her behind the changing curtain.

She began taking off the simple, but professional clothes she had worn in. She was just slipping on the periwinkle dress, when she heard a knock on the door.

"All good here?" Draco's voice.

"Yes, darling," Pansy replied.

"Granger here yet?"

"I'm here," she said. She stepped out from behind the changing curtain, and looked to Pansy.

Pansy gasped and dashed over to her, to help button the back.

She moved her hair over her shoulder and looked up at Draco in the doorway, suddenly very self-conscious that she didn't have shoes on.

Harry and Ginny had chosen a table a bit further away from prying eyes, thankfully. Draco was just arriving at the same time, so he held the gate open for her with a smirk and she glared at him.

After a bit of small talk, Harry and Draco went inside to the counter to order for them.

Ginny turned to her. "What in Merlin's name has got you in such a mood today!"

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "Malfoy stopped by Comerstone to insult my clothes."

Ginny gasped. "Not Pansy's clothes!"

"No, no. My clothes. These clothes." She gestured down to herself. "He's upset that I'm still

working at Comerstone, and he thinks I shouldn't be seen in such *disgraceful* weekend clothes."

She sipped her water glass. "Then he offered to pay me more so I would wear better clothes on

the weekends."

"Did he use the word 'disgraceful'?"

"Yes."

Ginny was quiet. Hermione took her eyes off the street and found Ginny smiling into her cup of tea.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"It's just..." Ginny laughed. She turned to her. "Hermione. I was six when I saw a Muggle girl for the first time. She was wearing the tightest pants I'd ever seen and a t-shirt that showed off her shoulders." She smiled. "I asked my mum if she was a sex worker."

Hermione laughed. "Okay... At six?"

Ginny waved her hand. "I had all older brothers, so I unfortunately heard things... I'm just saying... Muggle fashion doesn't come easy to pure-bloods. It's very difficult to understand when all you're used to is baggy wizarding robes."

"So I look like a prostitute to him?" Hermione raised a brow at Ginny.

"No, no!" Ginny laughed. "I'm just saying... your jeans are awfully tight... to a pure-blood."

She grinned. "Which isn't the worst thing in the world." Ginny winked. Hermione frowned. She heard Harry's laugh and turned to find the boys returning. Hermione was so curious every time Harry laughed at something Draco said. It was unnatural.

Draco placed a cup of coffee in front of her and Harry set their number down on their table.

Once Ginny started small talk with Draco about M.C.G., Hermione had a moment to examine them, struck by how this "double-date" looked. She was suddenly very conscious of Draco sitting on her right, Ginny across from her, and Harry to her left. A perfect little picture.

She shifted in her chair, pressing her lips together and reached for her coffee cup, trying to pick up the saucer with the cup like Madame Michele had taught her. Ginny and Harry were telling Draco a story she already knew, so she tuned them out, setting her saucer down. She looked up to Draco, and he was watching her.

I feel her eyes.

"Declined" But I thought things were going so well. I mean to say, from the way Noelle was talking about it," she says, and I focus on getting us to the café as quickly as possible. I guide her off the curb, resting my hand on her back for a moment longer than necessary.

She asks about the lunch Tiberius and I were supposed to have. I'd managed to block that entire family from my mind.

"He canceled. He said he had no interest in the company."

Finally to the café and I open the door for her, ending the conversation. Maybe I can guide her inside, let my hand rest low on her back again—

She stops in the doorway and turns to me. "Do you want me to write to him?" I almost sneer at her and her philosophy that all problems could be fixed by a simple correspondence from the Golden Girl. But I catch myself as I remember how we got the meeting we're currently walking into.

"No, we'll find someone else, Granger."

She frowns, and I should have guessed that this would open a door in her mind. "What about Noelle?" she says, and I flinch. "I think I hit it off with her. I could see when she's home next—"

"No," Merlin, if she wrote to Noelle... There would be a mess to untangle. That flighty bird would spin her own version of events and push Granger into a full investigation. I look directly into her eyes and say with an interesting imitation of my father, "Do *not* contact Noelle. Do you hear me, Granger?"

I watch as her eyes flick back and forth between each of mine. "Alright."

I fall into her deep brown pools for a moment longer and then retract, realign. Margolis is already here, even though we're ten minutes early. He's on the comfortable couches I saw on Monday with a man I don't recognize. I straighten my cuffs and lead her into the café.

Margolis actually shakes my hand this time – although my fingers may need to be reset – but his associate doesn't bother to stand. Mason, as he is introduced. I offer to order the drinks, and Mason decides to test me by ordering not one, but two entrees.

I nod, without comment, and head to the counter. I successfully handle the Muggle money and return to the table.

Granger jumps in. She has a presentation with her, which... I don't know why I doubted she would. I focus on my tea instead of her trim nails flipping through the pages, listening to her voice take lead, take dominance.

I catch myself staring at her jaw when Mason interrupts her, asking about the fundraising. I raise a brow at him. So, he's here to be difficult.

"And tell me, Hermione Granger," Mason says, and my eyes narrow at the way he slides over her name. "How much does it cost to get a court date with the Wizengamot?"

"I believe it is a ten galleon filing fee."

"Fundraising parties for ten galleons?" Mason sits back, sending me a satisfied smirk. "My, my. Your business must be further in the hole than I'd thought, Malfoy."

I examine him, letting my eyes drift to Margolis, who is looking elsewhere. We've lost. They weren't going to work with us, and nothing today would have changed that. There's no way Margolis would have brought a loose cannon to a business meeting.

I clear my throat and try to at least salvage my pride.

"The fundraising would cover the costs of research, the trip to the North Forest, the salaries of the staff working tirelessly, accommodations for the pack if they choose to come into London for the case—"

Mason cuts me off. He picks apart the proposal. I watch him as Granger handles him artfully. I pity her. She still doesn't know this is hopeless.

"I appreciate all you have done, Miss Granger, in preparing for this project," Margolis starts, "and all the work you plan to do for the werewolf community, but we will need to decline."

She's shocked into silence, and I listen to her throat squeak something while I keep my eyes on the two werewolves.

"It might be a bit easier for you, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don't believe in being bought out for publicity."

Easier for *her*. Like I've bought her. Something coils in my chest.

I feel her sputtering beside me, so I toss out one more useless statement so we can leave. "That's very unfortunate, Mr. Margolis. Is there anything we can do to change your mind?"

"Can you bring back Albus Dumbledore?" Mason smirks at me. And I wonder which would be faster, my wand arm or his jaws. He speaks again. "Or perhaps you can go back in time and put down Fenrir Greyback, instead of playing house with him for a year."

Playing house. Like when I would come downstairs to find him at our dining room table in my father's chair. Or when I found him sniffing at my mother when she swerved past him near the fireplaces.

Someone's talking. And it's a moment before I realize it's her.

"—no business with Fenrir Greyback that was not forced upon him—"

"I truly don't understand you, Hermione Granger," Mason cuts her off. "He fought against you in battle just two years ago and now you've thrown in your lot with him. The pay must be excellent at Malfoy Consulting Group."

It is. Thank you very much. I scratch my jaw and prepare to leave.

"Hermione? Hello?" Harry's voice called from the front of the shop. Hermione closed her eyes and filled her lungs. Her eyes opened to see Draco straightening and stepping back from her. He kept his arms engulfing her; so she quickly stepped underneath the arm at head level, patted down her t-shirt and rounded the corner.

"Harry, hi," she said. He turned from the counter. "I was sorting books."

"Hey! I was coming to see if you wanted to grab lunch with Ginny and me." Harry smiled at her, then his eyes slid over her shoulder and she knew that Draco had appeared. She watched as Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, taking in Hermione's flushed face. She didn't dare look at Draco.

"I don't know, Harry," Hermione said. She moved toward the counter and began to keep her hands busy. "You'll have to ask my boss." She shot him a look and Draco scowled at her. "Uh... yeah. Malfoy would you like to join the three of us?

Hermione snapped the quill in her hand.

"Oh, no," she said. "Malfoy is spending the whole day checking in on his Senior Consultants. He's booked." She slammed a volume down on the counter.

"I should be finished breaking up Wentworth's Wizard's Chest tournament by one," he drawled. Hermione clenched her jaw.

"Great." Harry looked like he wanted to just get out of the bookshop as soon as possible.

"So I'll see you both at Fortescue's at one?"

"Sounds perfect," Draco responded, directing his attention to Hermione. She huffed.

"Harry, what's the *dress code* for this lunch? Should I run home first and throw on something a bit more *pure-blood*?" She kept her eyes trained on Harry, narrowing them and sneering like she was speaking to Draco.

"Er... No. I think what you're wearing is fine. If you're comfortable," Harry said. Hermione turned to smirk at Draco. Harry continued, "I mean, do you have jeans without tears in the knees?"

Hermione's jaw dropped and she heard Draco chuckle. She turned to him and his face was split in a huge grin.

"Thank you, Potter. For everything. I'll see you all over there." Draco reached across her to grab one of his damn mints and left smirking.

Hermione headed over to Fortescue's scowling. It struck her as she was leaving that she could possibly be photographed again today, and if so, she would wish that she'd worn different clothes. Not that she'd led Draco know that.

Hermione scoffed. Her nostrils flared. "You will do no such thing. You are in charge of me Monday through Friday, Malfoy. Saturday and Sunday are my days off to do with as I please. I will work at this bookstore as long as I please."

He leaned into her, placing his right hand next to her head on the shelf. Her face was so warm and now he was closing off the rest of the cool air.

"I don't need people gossipping that I cannot pay my staff, Granger. If the world hears that Hermoine Granger, Golden Girl," he grinned at her and she scowled, "and Malfoy Consulting's highest profile consultant, still works at her part-time job, they will assume you are not paid enough."

"Then I will set them straight when the reporters *descend* upon Cornerstone Books!" She rolled her eyes at him and stepped to her right to escape. His left arm came up, bracing on the third shelf and her ribs just grazed his arm before she stopped herself. He stepped closer and she felt the shelves creating indentations across her back.

"For as long as you are employed by Malfoy Consulting, Granger, you will behave and dress as such. If you would like to go back to working as a Ministry drudge, filing reports and failing to create lasting change for your blessed creatures, be my guest," he said, his breath ghosting over her face.

How dare he. He was starting to sound like his father...

"I am only 'employed' Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, Malfoy. I am free—"

"Oh, I must have missed your resignation on Friday afternoons, followed by your application on Monday mornings then."

"I am only *paid* Monday through Friday. You can only control my whereabouts Monday through Friday."

"And what would it cost to control your Saturdays and Sundays then, Granger?" He quirked his brow at her and sucked in a lungful of air before continuing. "I'm sure I could more than cover the salary you make here."

She opened her mouth and closed it. She wasn't breathing. The heat from his body was suffocating her and she could feel her skin vibrating and her spine aching against the shelves. She chuckled in a way she hoped was condescending.

"I don't *need* more money, Malfoy—" She chuckled in a way she hoped was condescending. "Then what is it that you *do* need?" His eyes flashed at her and his voice was hot against her mouth. A lock of blond hair had fallen across his forehead.

Her lips were dry and her eyes burned as they moved back and forth between his. She released a shaky breath and gasped in the air she could find. His face consumed her field of vision, and she watched as the corner of his mouth twitched upward and his eyes flit toward her lips.

"If memory serves, Mason, you did not fight in my war," she hisses. "At least Malfoy had the decency to choose a side."

I feel a weight drop in my stomach. Simply picking a side isn't decency. I calm myself, tucking away memories of Muggle blueprints and marbles, bloody lettering and sprinklers. Fireplaces and lightning currents. Strangled screaming. Crashed chandeliers.

None of that was *decent*. None of that was enough.

But here she was. Because it was the right thing. And as the thought crosses my mind, she says it aloud.

"... When I find myself in a position to be of assistance to undervalued people, I do everything I can to help. It's not publicity."

She's fuming, and I'm caught between how beautiful she is and how irritated I am.

"But it sure makes for an excellent photoshoot," Mason responds, then to me. "Doesn't it, Malfoy?" He announces grandly. "What a team. The pure-blood and the Mudblood."

I'm almost to my feet, almost at his throat, when Margolis announces that they are leaving, but then she's standing, snarling back at them, promising vengeance. She stomps out and I'm left with the scowling werewolves. I nod to Margolis and follow her out.

She's halfway down the street, heels clacking against the sidewalk. Muggles move out of her way, turning back to take her in. I catch up to her quickly, watching a few curls fall loose while magic dances down her arms.

Maybe this is what our partnership looks like. Maybe this is fighting on the same side, with that fire directed somewhere else, so I just get to sit back and watch.

We pause at a corner and that dark coil in my chest springs.

Only we're not fighting together. She's fighting *for* me. She's stepping in because the spoiled Death Eater is so misunderstood.

My champion again. Like my trial. Stepping in when no one asked her to.

"I'm sorry for them," she speaks. "I'm sorry they don't see you the way I do" And how exactly is that? My heart beats and my skin buzzes. She steps through the crosswalk, leaving me behind and I remember her house elves and her dragons. Her werewolves. Her *undervalued* people.

"I don't need your pity, Granger," I hear myself hiss.

She turns, eyes wide. And I recognize this look, this surprise. From the courtroom corridor. "You don't have my pity." Her eyes scan me up and down, and she says, "You have my respect."

She spins on a heel, shaking her head, and disappears around the corner. I hear a crack that a few Muggles jump at, looking to the street for signs of an auto backfiring.

I stand on the corner, chewing the inside of my cheek, wondering how in Merlin's name I'd earned it.

The next morning she's in a flowing lavender dress with matching heels and it's possibly the most modest design Pansy has given her and I still have to meditate for a few minutes to calm my thoughts.

I send Pansy a quick note to pop by when she can, and she's climbing through my fireplace as I tuck away the image of the buttons on the front of Granger's dress.

She's folding herself into my guest chair, saying she was going to stop by anyway, and I'm regretting this, but here she is.

"Do you..." I stop, try again. "Could you..." I take my hands over my face.

She levels her eyes at me. "Draco, are you having a stroke?"

"How does your contract with Granger work?" Iumble through my fingers.

She blinks. "I send her a box every Sunday evening with that week's clothes and instructions on wear. She has free reign to choose the order of her outfit's, but I do give suggestions." She waits for me to comment. "Is there something coming up? I already know about *Witch Weekly*. I'll meet with her today—"

"Do you have record of what you're sending? Designs or..." My cheeks flush and I roll my eyes at myself. "This is ridiculous. Please forget this conversation ever happened."

I lean my forehead against the marble desk, clasping my hands behind my head.

"Easy. Because this conversation *isn't* happening," she deadpans. "Is there an issue with the clothes? Is she not wearing them right?"

"Oh she's wearing 'em great," I hum into the desk.

"Then what's the—"

I sit up, eyes away from her. "Can you send me a copy of what you're sending her on Sundays?"

"I don't think they'll fit you, Draco," she says, and I glare at her arched brow. "I don't feel comfortable with you controlling or censoring her wardrobe—"

"I'm just trying to prepare myself. For what's coming." I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. "Get an idea of what I'll be dealing with."

Pansy chuckles. I keep my face hidden.

"Where's the fun in that?" she sings. "It's like I'm giving you a present every morning. Just begging to be unwrapped."

"Pansy—"

"You don't need an itemized list of clothing, Draco. You need a wank."

"I've had one of those, thank you."

"You need a second one."

"No. Should I have?" she said.

He frowned at her and leaned forward onto the counter. "Yes."

Hermione looked into his grey eyes and felt cold. She felt very silly for being caught reading on her shift, so she picked up several books to refile and started for the stacks to the left. "I suppose I didn't find a logical reason to leave," she said. "You know me. Only 'logical' thoughts in here." She tapped her head with a grin, quoting his "favorite thing about her" and disappeared behind the bookshelf. She heard him follow her, as she knew he would.

She pushed several books to one side on a shelf just above her head as he appeared around the corner. She ignored him. He leaned his shoulder against the stacks and crossed his arms.

"You'll need to put in your two weeks' notice today."

Hermione finished pushing a book into place and looked at him over her extended right arm.

"I'll need a better reason than 'because I said so,' Mr. Malfoy," she scoffed.

"You signed a Conflict of Interest Clause."

She paused mid-reach. "Conflict of interest? How in Merlin's name is a bookshop conflicting with a multimillion galleon organization like Malfoy Consulting Group?" She shook her head at him and moved to her left a few paces to file a large red tome on the third shelf. He followed, standing directly behind her as she faced the shelf.

"This is a public place of business," he said. His voice washed over her right shoulder. It was unnerving to not see him, but feel and hear him. "Any one of our competitors could enter, start a friendly conversation and ask you about your position at Malfoy Consulting. Or worse, the press."

Hermione pursed her lips and sucked in a breath through her nose.

"Besides," he continued. "You have a contract with Pansy. If the wrong person saw what you wear to this bookstore on the weekends, you'd be jeopardizing her career as well as your image."

This spun her around. "And *what* exactly is wrong with what I'm wearing?"

He sneered at her. "Muggle jeans and a scrap of cotton that barely covers you? It's hardly the epitome of the Modern Business Witch."

Hermione's mouth opened to retort, but anger tightened her throat. She didn't dare look down at herself, but she knew that the t-shirt she had on was not revealing in the slightest. She took a moment to take stock and felt the cotton material against her low back and belly, and knew that it was pulled down far enough. She couldn't stop herself when she pulled the last book she was holding toward her chest, like a shield.

"This is what I wear on the weekends Malfoy. I don't see why—"

"I'll have to have Pansy make you a weekend line, then. Because *this*," he looked her up and down, "is disgraceful."

She'll get blue lips from it. Idiot.
Blue lips and a blue tongue.

I watch as her cheeks hollow out, sucking, popping the quill from her lips absently as she reads. Her eyes widen and she reaches for her parchment, scribbling a few words while her eyes scan the book. She jumps when she realizes she's been trying to write with the Sugar Quill.

I smile. Stupid little cow.

She pops the Sugar Quill deep between her lips, holding it there, and grabs her writing quill. Lips pressed tight around the blue sugary feather. Pursed forward, popping her cheekbones. Strong lips.

Blue lips.

Not thin like Tracey Davis'. Or smart and wide like Pansy's. Just... blue. And soft.

And I wonder about her blue tongue, and if it's strong too. If she knows how to use it yet. If Krum's taught her. If she's let him kiss her and taste her blue lips yet.

Maybe the only way she knows how to kiss is now through Krum. Sloppy and wet and harsh. No finesse from the Bulgarians.

She'd have to learn how kiss better after Krum. She'd have to soften her blue lips and let someone taste her sweet blue tongue, let them press into her and lick at her small teeth. And bite down on her bottom lip and suck the sugar from her.

The Sugar Quill pops from her mouth, the echo of it ricocheting off the library walls.

She looks up and right at me. I narrow my eyes automatically, and she looks down, rubbing the blue sugar away.

~*~

Monday, January 31, 2000

Maybe if I keep pressing my mouth against hers, she'll kiss me back.

If I don't let her breathe... she'll have to open her mouth at some point.

I feel bite in my throat. This is a mistake.

I press my mouth to hers again.

She doesn't want this.

But I concentrate on the feeling of my hand in her tightly wound hair, drinking this in for as long as she'll let me.

How do I explain this to her after she's slapped me. After she's glaring at me, scared and unsafe.

I'll stop now. Just once more. I memorize her lips beneath mine, fingers twisting in her hair. My other hand squeezes her wrist, and I drag my lips across hers one last time—

She opens her mouth, and I groan into her, angling her head just how I want it. She draws a quick breath from my lungs and then I'm pressing into her, tasting her tongue and dripping my desire into her like honey.

Her hand curls against my chest and I'd never considered her hands. Never known what she would do with them. Never imagined she could touch me back.

I breathe harshly against her mouth, and drag her backwards by her head. I need...

I need...

She squeaks, and I scrape my teeth over her lips. She gasps and I can hear myself moaning. If she'll let me, I need...

She bumps against the desk, and I drag my hand from her hair, down her neck. I need her knees open.

If she'll let me.

My hips so close to hers.

What will she give me?

This dress. I can ruck it up to her waist. If she doesn't protest I can go to my knees for her, show her what it's like for me to want her like this.

The pressure of her hand on my ribs, and if she touches me again I'll snap. Just unbuckle and push inside.

I wonder about her hands then. Will she hold onto me?

She sighs a dreamy breath against my lips and I take her hands off me, pressing them back on the desk.

Please stay.

She lets me lap at her tongue, pressing into her mouth and swallowing her sounds. I wonder if she'll let me press her close, feel how hard I am and gasp.

I push her knees open.

This dress. This fucking dress. I run my hands down her stomach, nipping at her, never leaving her mouth.

I don't want to hear her stop me. I don't want to have the memory of her voice telling me "no."

I wonder how much she'll give me. Could I lay her down on her desk? Would I be able to watch her face as I enter her, just looking down at her when we press together, fingers sliding over her legs.

Or should I just make her come? Drive her insane with it so she only wants me forever?

My mouth is ravenous at the thought. Devouring her. And she's kissing me back. The best feeling

Her fingers on my jaw suddenly. Not pushing me away, pressing to hold me to her. Like she wants me.

My hips snap. I grab for her thigh, pressing her hips close to me.

Going to grind her into this desk. Going to fuck her so slowly she'll beg me for it. Going to fuck her with my tongue until she's screaming, dragging her fingers through my hair—

"Hermione, you ready—?"

I drop her. She scrambles to sit up on the desk, wiping at her mouth.

Potter is here. For lunch.

"I can come back later."

"No!" And she's saying it with me. Like she knows I wouldn't have stopped. Like she knows Potter just saved her from me.

I'm dizzy as I push past Potter, keeping my eyes on the floor and keeping my hands from choking him. I'm aware that the entire floor staff is watching me as I cross to my office. Such a long walk. Why did I do that? She should have been next to me. With a door between offices. I'm still half-hard in my trousers, and I pray to the gods that no one is looking. We didn't silence the room. Everyone could hear yelling... and I'm trying to remember if she moaned too loud, and I have to close my eyes when I relive those sounds...

I get to my office and I shut the door. I silence the room.

"FUCK!"

The leather couch blasts open. Foam and fluff spraying like blood. The Tiffany lamp my mother gave me as an office-warming gift shatters.

I feel my head heavy as I struggle to bring in air, and I place my hands on my knees, bending and breathing.

A knock on my door. I squeeze my eyes. I want it to be her. I don't want it to be her.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Blaise. "Is this a good time to discuss the Cannons?"

No.

But he's helping the image. Business as usual. I lean against the wall near the door. With a wave of my hand, the door clicks open just enough. He pushes himself through and shuts it behind him.

"My couch..." Like I just ate his last chocolate frog.

I pace across my office, trying to breathe. Trying to figure out what possessed me. Her hot eyes and flushed cheeks, that's what.

It's no reason to... No excuse for...

"What are you saying?" Blaise stops me.

Have I been speaking out loud?

"I kissed her."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Seventeen



Friday, January 13, 1995

She's at my fucking table again.

There's one spot in the library that is tucked away enough to discourage people from ever finding you. It's also got the perfect table. It doesn't shake, it doesn't have annoying curse words etched into the wood.

There's sunlight from one of the few windows on the north wall that hits the book pages just right.

I haven't sat at that table in *months* because of her.

She's practically climbing into the tomes in front of her, hunched over in her seat, and scribbling notes on Potter's egg.

Merlin forbid Potter himself do the work. All the other Champions weren't assigned a clever witch to figure it out for them.

I frown at her profile again, watching as she flips the pages quickly.

She hasn't kept the hair from the Yule Ball. Her fuzzy curls are back, circling her head like a strange collar. And whatever she'd done to her skin to make it look smooth and dewy has been washed away.

She stretches her arms above her head, and sets down her quill, swapping it for a berry-blue Sugar Quill. I raise my brow, judging her obscene taste in sweets. If she wants a lolly from Honeydukes, she should try the Raspberry Raspy. It buzzes in your throat and changes your voice for half an hour. Or the Chocolate Cherry Bomb. More expensive. She probably can't afford that.

She leans back in her chair, pulling her book into her lap to lean against the table, and reads carefully, lips pulling around the tip of the Sugar Quill.

Her eyes are bright, wet. And she screams, "Or maybe, I'm only here to play dress up with Pansy! Is that it, Malfoy? Giving a doll to your fucking *girlfriend*?"

She shoves me again, and I have to touch her back. Have to know if she's really here. I snap up her wrist, and tug her close to me.

"Don't. Touch me." I warn her. I look into her eyes, telling her things will change. If you push me any further, I'll snap.

She heaves air against my lips, hair falling from the perfect twist. This brazen witch begging for me to snap.

And maybe I can have both. Maybe it's not betrayal. Maybe they're the same. And I can have them both.

She reaches her hand back and slaps my chest again.

And I pull her to me, breathing her into my lips, fingers grabbing for her twisted hair. It's the same. She's both of them, and I can have her. She asked me to.

And a long-imagined theory blossoms to life when she opens her mouth to let me in.

She tastes like coffee and sin.

My eyes on the expensive carpets and how my shoes tear across them as I pace. "I'll have to check who had that in the office pool." Blaise chuckles.

"Don't—Don't laugh at this. This is... What have I done?" I lean against the wall, dropping my head back, sucking in air.

"Draco, relax," he says. "You've just taken it to the next level. Not committed a crime."

Haven't I though? Did she want me to kiss her? To lay her down on her desk and fuck her like a tawdry romance?

Did she want any of that?

"She'll quit," I wheeze into the room. "She's going to walk. And I'll never see her again."

I listen to my gasping breath, listen as Blaise mutters a *Reparo* to sew my couch back together. I feel him leading me to it, forcing me down, pushing my head between my knees.

Black spots in front of my eyes. Blaise is talking to me, saying something. His hand on the back of my neck.

"... kiss you back? Think, Draco... apologize and move on... some women may take it as a compliment you know—"

I sit up pressing my hands into my eyes and focus on counting bricks in a circle. I build them up around myself, building me into the tower. Ivy grows around it, locking each brick into place, twisting and growing, sprouting.

I open my eyes.

"I have to go."

Blaise hesitates. "Alright..."

I stand and walk to my door. I poke my head out. "Carrie," I hear my voice. "Contact me immediately if I receive post from America. I'm going out. Gone for the rest of the day." I shut the door before she can even grab a quill.

"America?" Blaise asks.

I grab my coat, reach for the Floo powder.

"Draco—"

"Do the interviews for me, will you?"

I'm stepping through the fireplace and calling out to the Ministry before he can say another word.

~*~

Tuesday, May 7, 1996

It's so cold. Does it have to be this cold?

"Don't think about the temperature, Mr. Malfoy."

Severus sits across from me. A jewelry box between us.

I've never seen Severus sit cross-legged. It's... humanizing in a very disturbing way.

"Why, Draco, you'll make me self-conscious," he teases.

"Get out of my head if you don't want to know what I think."

He frowns at me. Or I assume he does, because I'm not allowed to look away from the jewelry box. I can see the reflection of my shoes in the antique mirrors lining the sides. Brass at the corners.

I let my eyes rove over the edges, memorizing it in a way that I could rebuild it blindly. I hear him. A small voice in the corner. Behind a door.

Envision the inside of the box.

My eyes take in the velvet inside. Navy blue. Older and fraying, worn down in places. The box has been used. I lean my consciousness forward, taking in the inner wall closest to me, the one I can't see with my normal eyes.

Also blue. Less worn away. Softer.

I lean in further, falling inside. A blue velvet lined room. I reach my hand out and place it on the wall, watching the velvet threads shift directions, memorizing the path of my hand.

I spell my name with my pointer finger, large as my head.

And without him telling me to, I erase my name, walk to the corner of the box, and in letters as large as my chest I begin to spell –

H E R M I O N E

Evenly across the wall. Blue velvet memorizing her name, the pattern sinking into the fabric. I hear him again, from above me. Outside of the jewelry box. Like a puppeteer. And I am the marionette.

Say out of the jewelry box. Take only what you need.

I push myself up to the edge, like a swimming pool. The blue velvet laps at my heels, swaying as I disturb the waters.

I sit on the ledge. Take only what I need.

I guess I need my mother. And my father. Sometimes I need Blaise and Pansy. I don't really need Crabbe and Goyle but –

And then memories splashing at my calves in the blue velvet. My first broom. I was four. Maybe five. Meeting Vincent. He'd laughed at my impression of the Minister of Magic even though he had no clue who Fudge was. Blaise on the Hogwarts Express, asking me if I'd just go ahead and kill myself if I was sorted into Hufflepuff.

Pansy in the Hospital Wing, holding my slashed arm. Theo and Millicent Bulstrode forced to kiss in Spin the Bottle in second year. First day of Potions class, and Severus awards me house points for being brilliant. A bobbing hand in the air, brown hair swishing as she waits to be called on –

She screeches at me again, and I step into her. "Granger!"

"Why am I even here Malfoy? At Malfoy Consulting?" Her hands fly out wide.

"I wanted the best –"

"You said everyone needed a second chance, but I guess you weren't talking about magical creatures. You were talking about the Malfoy family and their reputation."

She pokes me hard in the chest. And I think of Mockridge's judgmental eyes as she insulted me moments ago.

"Watch your tone, Granger."

She can talk to me like this at the bookstore. Even at the Manor, over a bowl of pumpkin soup. But not here. Not when she's been costumed as the Modern Business Witch, Senior Consultant.

She couldn't be both.

"I'm glad I could really 'round' out your senior staff, Malfoy," she hisses. "My god, without me you wouldn't have made your Mudblood quota." My eyes twitch at the word. "How would you have ever changed public opinion of the Malfoy family without one? Isn't that right?"

She's burning. Something so violent I haven't seen it since September. Since Gainsworth.

Shoving a book into my chest and demanding that I read it. Or maybe before that. Reaching back to third year, with her palm connecting with my cheek.

She's rambling, blazing. Calling me out for having an all-male staff. Suggesting that her only worth to me is that she's Muggleborn and female.

"Stop. Stop there, Granger." We have to go back. We have to start over.

"No, thanks. I'm not quite done." And she comes to stand in front of me, eyes on fire, blue dress spinning. "I'm assuming that the most important quality that I bring to this team, seeing as it clearly has nothing to do with my relationship with the magical creature community, is that I am Hermione Granger, *Golden Girl!* Were you hoping I'd spread a bit of that golden dust around, Malfoy? I admit, it makes for excellent photo shoots with your pal Skeeter!"

She shoves me. And I clench my fists to keep from grabbing her. She's too close. And she's dressed in Pansy's clothes. Not at all the girl I want. I want the curls. The jeans. The "Golden Girl".

"Is that it, Malfoy? Is it nice having the Golden Girl to show off, to headline your Daily Prophet articles? Well if it's not my blood status or my gender, it must be my *celebrity*."

She shoves me again. And I try. I try to put her back in her box. Try to breathe deep. Try to walk out.

And I'm struck again by the idea that there's two of them. One elegant Modern Business Witch with long limbs and smooth skin, begging me to ravish her. And one Golden Girl, with fire and wit, burning to take over the world and fight me every step of the way. And I'll always be betraying one with the other.

"Nothing is 'going on' with me—"

"You've been acting like a bitch for days!"

She gasps and steps into me. "Maybe I've just realized that you've been a dick for months!"

She's begging for a fight today. And Blaise is there to stop us, suggest we shut the door. She storms out, and Blaise looks back at me.

"You reckon she's naked under that bathrobe?" he asks.

I frown. "Go away."

I don't hear from the Modern Business Witch again that morning. I'm just starting the Senior Consultant meeting, deciding not to wait on her any longer when she flies into the conference room, hair in an elegant twist, and blue dress on again.

She apologizes to everyone and walks to me. To her seat. Walks to her seat.

She glances up through her long lashes and permits me to continue.

To hold a meeting, while she looks like that. While she sits in a chair next to me, looking like a dream.

I clear my throat and continue.
She has a new proposal. And I have to listen to her give a presentation without remembering a blue dress spinning, and lifting to show her knees.

"I want to make sure the Werewolf Policy is fully funded before you start other projects that also need fundraising."

She doesn't seem to understand me. We bicker in front of the other staff, and it's like she doesn't understand what a quarterly budget is.

"Like I said, an excellent project for April. We can send you and Walter out to Somerset in March to start collecting data."

I stand and dismiss everyone. She mutters a curse under her breath, some insult that has Mockridge raising a brow at me.

I follow her back to her office, and maybe we'll have this fight after all.

The door hits me on the way in, and I almost see her grin.

"Why am I even here, Malfoy?" she sneers. I close the door, eyeing her carefully. "You told me you wanted to 'make a difference' and 'change the world.' What utter hogwash."

I try to explain the budget again. She paces the room, and the movement brushes her skirt. Like she's dancing in the Great Hall again.

I place my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching out for her.

Her hands go to her hips and she's interrupting me: "Are you punishing me?"

"Punishing you?"
"Yes, because I haven't quit Cornerstone?"

Oh, she is pushing *all* the buttons today.

No.

I have to leave that behind.

Take it.

I frown into the pool of blue velvet, but listen to Severus. Watching my mother and father kiss at New Year's Eve when I was six. My father telling me I could have a glass of the 500-year-old scotch on my birthday. My father reviewing my marks and asking if I was below anyone. My father with his hand on my shoulder, pushing me forward.

—My son, Draco. My heir.

I take these memories. I take the rest with me. I stumble whenever I come across a bushy-haired buck-toothed Muggleborn Gryffindor, but Severus tells me to take her.

The Yule Ball. And I'm dizzy watching her dance. I push that back into the waters and Severus says nothing.

On top of Pansy, and closing my eyes, imagining her beneath me. I blush with Severus this close, but he says nothing and lets me slide that back into the blue velvet.

We wade through everything. The Dark Lord in my drawing room. I want to leave it behind, keep his red eyes away from me. But then he'll be down there with her. So, I bring him out.

Every meeting with Severus is left in the box. The waters getting thin.

I'm at present. Severus gestures to the floor in front of his desk, tells me to sit cross-legged. He asks if I've brought the box.

The waters shift, and then I'm back at the Yule Ball watching her calves, watching her bright perfectly-sized teeth. Watching Krum. I try to push it back into the velvet lining, but Severus brings it forward again.

We cut the evening into pieces, bringing some out and leaving some. I think I understand the trick, the way to leave her in the box, but then he's bringing her smile forward. And the partner dance. And the way her hand wouldn't touch mine, her bright eyes, my heartbeat.

My heartbeat.

My heartbeat.
We sever it.
My heartbeat.
My heartbeat.

My flushed skin. Her rising chest, pulling tight across her breasts.
They pour into the box. And we take the rest.

Pansy's beneath me. And the thought of longer hair. Curls. Wider hips. The closer I am to coming the more we cut away until just the memory of losing my virginity to Pansy Parkinson after the Yule Ball splashes out of the jewelry box.

I'm sweating by the time we reach yesterday, when I almost bumped into her outside the Great Hall. Her lips parted and my eyes dropped to them before I could sneer.

Her lips float through the velvet, lining the sides, kissing her name that I've written with my fingers like it was her skin.

Snap!

I blink. And I'm in the classroom, on the floor with Severus. He's closed the lid of the box.

My eyes are seeing lights as I try to breathe, try to focus, try to remember what day it is.

He stands, fluidly. I try to follow and fall back to my knees, sweat pouring from my temple, gaping for air.

He lifts the box from the floor, and I feel a sense of terror that he'll destroy it.

It's mine. Those are mine.

He extends the box to me. I take it and meet his eyes.

His brow is damp, but he looks the same, unaffected, unembarrassed.

"It gets easier," he says, and sweeps from the room.

~*~

Monday, January 31, 2000 - later

I haven't been to New York City since I was a child. Mother wanted to shop on Fifth Avenue.

It was the first time I had been exposed to Muggles – No-majs. Whatever.

The emergency portkey I'd spent two hours and several hundred Galleons acquiring dropped me off near the pier in the afternoon sun. I walked the block to 679 West 24th Street and stand now on the doorstep of a brownstone.

I ring the bell, waiting on the steps. A few minutes later, the door pulls open to reveal an old woman, with long white hair in a dressing gown. Her makeup impeccable, and I wouldn't know that she was 97 by looking at her. She doesn't look a day older than sixty. Her large green eyes look me up and down, a smirk forming on her pink lips.

"Sugar, I'm too old for you." She winks.

"Queenie Goldstein?"

She smiles slowly at me. "I would have responded to your letter sooner if I knew you'd just show up. I'm not able to help you, Mr. Malfoy."

She starts to shut the door, and my hand shoots up to the jam. "Please, Ms. Goldstein—"

"It's Kowalski, please. There's nothing left of him but his name, honey."

"Mrs. Kowalski," I try. "I just need an hour."

"You don't need an hour, you need a shrink—"

"I can pay you."

"You can't solve everything with money, Draco Malfoy. You need to put those gorgeous lips to work and speak to *Miss Granger*, not me."

I feel it like a lightning bolt, shuddering through me. I never said her name. I never said it was about a girl.

I blink, building bricks, laying cement. I tell her about postponing the Senior Consultants meeting and quickly excuse myself to my office.

I sit in my chair, and stare at a blank sheet of paper until I can clear my head. I haven't heard back from New York.

I head up to Melody at the front to see if she has any mail for me from America. And I pass the open door on my way.

The dress is off, thankfully. Tracey and Daphne have started in on her hair and face. Transforming her from the witch at the bookstore to the Modern Business Witch.

I frown when Melody doesn't have anything for me. A half hour later I find a reason to cross the floor again, and find Tracey twisting her hair up.

Tamed, Lucius's voice whispered to me.

Turning her into a Malfoy wife for me.

She meets my eye as I stare across the office, through the open door. I turn quickly to visit

Dorothea.

Another fifteen minutes and I'm checking the mail again with Melody. I hear Granger ask Daphne to close the door.

I return to my desk and sit patiently, meditating until Pansy comes to visit me.

"Do you like your present this morning?" She smiles as she shuts the door behind herself.

I sigh. "You know I do." She laughs as she leans her elbows down on the back of my guest chair. "I do have a request..." She lifts her brows at me. "Her hair."

"Her hair?"

"It's not... I mean, isn't her hair a signature look?" I turn to face the window.

"You prefer it down and wild?" she asks, and then a teasing lilt floats into her voices. "Well,

Draco, if I'd known that all it would take to keep your interest was growing out my hair and getting a perm..."

I glare at her. She chuckles. I clear my throat and say carefully, "Lucius likes it up. He likes that Pansy Parkinson has *tamed* her."

One of her brows slowly inches towards the sky. "He does, does he?" She scowls, pulls herself up tall, and says, "Excuse me."

She exits and I'm alone for a total of sixty seconds before my door is slammed open and a barefoot vixen is screaming at me about her hairstyle. I can't stop staring at her feet as she paces and stomps and tells me off for having an opinion about her clothes or her hair.

"I don't understand why you are allowed to have any opinion on my hair for my photoshoot!"

"It was a suggestion—" I try.

"Keep them to yourself!"

"What is going on with you?"

I'm breathless as I ask, "And what would it cost to control your Saturdays and Sundays then, Granger? I'm sure I could more than cover the salary you make here."

Her eyes flit to my mouth before she laughs and says, "I don't *need* more money, Malfoy—"

"Then what is it that you *do* need?"

Ask it of me and it's yours.

I watch her eyes grow wide, and she looks at my mouth again. And I wonder if there's any universe where she's thinking what I am. Thinking of ways I can give her what she needs. Give it to her here, in our bookshop.

And the one voice I'd never thought I'd hear while this aroused: "Hermione? Hello?"

Potter.

Like a jolt going through me. I step away from her. She collects herself and moves to the front without another glance at me.

Potter gives me a strange look when I emerge from the shelves. He's stuck inviting me to lunch, and despite her protests, half an hour later I'm sitting down to tea with Potter, his Weasley, and my Granger, having accomplished none of the goals I set foot in the bookshop to accomplish. And Merlin knows what those even were.

I wonder if this is what a double-date with the Potters would be like. Except the way she's scowling at me. I wonder if I'm sitting in Ron Weasley's chair.

She lifts her coffee cup, holding her saucer underneath with delicate fingers and a practiced hand as Potter prattles about the Ministry Quidditch league since I've been gone. Strange. She catches me watching her coffee cup and I look away.

~*~

Monday, January 31, 2000

Witch Weekly comes today to do a profile piece on Hermione Granger. Pansy's set up in the spare office that would have belonged to Ogden.

Once I get in and put my things down I go to check on Pansy.

"All good here?"

She's rummaging through her rack of clothes when she responds, "Yes, darling."

"Granger here yet?"

"I'm here," a small voice from behind a curtain responds.

And then she steps out. A blue dress. With lace. A trim waist and a wide skirt. It's like stepping into a Pensieve.

Pansy squeals, and helps her with the buttons. Pansy sends me a grin.

My jaw squeezes. Now this... this she's done on purpose.

I watch as Pansy Parkinson helps Hermione Granger into her Yule Ball dress, and I'm unsure which witch I'm escorting.

I stare at her; throat trying to make words. I have no security. No walls. If the Dark Lord was alive and in front of me, he'd already know about her.

There's a jewelery box somewhere, but I can't even visualize it.

Her eyes drift over my face, reading me, and she says, "You're a pretty young thing. Is it really so bad to be in love with another pretty young thing?"

My mouth opens and I can't squeak out the words. But then she smiles and steps to the side, inviting me in. I thank her, removing my coat and hanging it on the coatrack before she can take it from me. She leads me through her brownstone, dropping me into the parlour and taking my tea order.

"Honey, if you have it, please."

She's already holding the honey, and I realize she probably doesn't need me to respond to any question she asks. She can see it in my mind before I speak it.

"Actually," she says, "I prefer to hear your words." I blush. "It's very lonely only hearing your own voice. I welcome the conversation."

I nod, spooning in the honey, and look around her sitting room. A fireplace with pictures of a younger Queenie Goldstein with a portly man in France. The two of them a bit older in front of the brand-new Empire State Building.

How long has she been alone?

"Twenty years."

I look to her, and she's mixing milk and sugar cubes into her tea. She's not even looking at me, but she can dive into my mind. Severus couldn't do that. Only the Dark Lord.

"The dark wizard Grindelwald too." She looks up at me and I glance away, embarrassed by my thoughts. "I'm sorry. I'm doing it again." She sets her spoon down and looks at me kindly. "Why are you here, Draco Malfoy?"

I hesitate, wondering if I should think things. What I should reveal.

"Just talk to me," she says. "Like we're old friends."

I swallow, and stall by sipping my tea. Merlin... American tea is just—

"Awful, I know," she hums.

I smile at her and begin.

"I trained to be an Occlumens when I was fifteen. Severus Snape tutored me in Compartmentalization and Separation, and then my Aunt Bellatrix Lestrange taught me the rudimentary methods without knowing I was already proficient." I look at her. She's watching me while trailing bony fingers on her saucer. "I'm losing control more often. And I need a Legilimens to push me, to strengthen my walls."

She nods, looking down to my fingers, and they twitch under her eyes.

"Why don't you go to your grandmother?"

My heart swells in my chest. "Do you know her?"

"No," she says, and I realize I've thought about her at some point. She's read her from me. She's right on the surface.

"..." I don't really know how to explain to her. To tell her about the stroke when she'd read in the paper that her favorite daughter and grandson had been sent to Azkaban, only a month after reading about the death of one daughter and her only granddaughter. Queenie Goldstein nods and tilts her head. "You keep that hidden."

I blink at her. "I suppose I do."

"I couldn't read that stroke from you until now. Did you pack that away?"

I peel back the wallpaper in a drawing room about this size, with tea and scones and inheritance. A woman with my mother's eyes and Bellatrix's nose sips at her tea and asks me how much I'll need.

I blink, taping the lilac wallpaper back up with scotch tape. The last time I saw her before the stroke. To ask for money for an Auction that never happened.

"Hm."

I look back to Queenie Kowalski née Goldstein. Thirty years older than my grandmother but just as youthful.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to pry." She sets her tea down. "You feel guilty asking for the money, but she probably loved to see you anyways."

I lean forward, elbows on my knees and hand my head in my hands. I press my temples, remembering my training. Trying to breathe and remember how to push something back into place.

"It's alright that you haven't visited her since the stroke. Some people can't handle—"

"Stop." My fingers dig into my skull, like trying to drag the memories from my temples. I stand, and pace over to her fireplace. There's a few Christmas decorations she hasn't put away yet. And I wonder if she has anyone to help her.

Thankfully, she doesn't answer me. I stare at the portly man. Her husband. "Kowalski?" I ask.

"Jacob."

I nod and stare at the two of them in France. He looks dazed.

"He was a Muggle," she says.

"Muggle-born?" I ask, fingers resting on the frame.

"No."

I frown. A Muggle and a witch in the twenties.

I hear the clinking of a teacup, and she asks, "Why do you still need Occlumency?" I resist turning to her. I can pretend she can't hear me.

I push through the lopsided door at Cornerstone Books, and there she is. Like no time has passed. Reading a book behind the counter.

"I thought you quit this job."

"Yes."

She blinks at me. And when she snaps something back about "logical thoughts," I try to formulate some of my own. She's in her denims again. Thin cotton shirt. And her hair is back. Down again and running wild.

I follow her through the stacks, stand behind her, stand close to her. I can hardly believe she's real. I thought I'd lost her.

I tell her to quit. She doesn't like that. I pull something out of my arse about a Conflict of Interest, and she can tell I'm reaching.

But this version of her is ours. And she's searching for books for Hartford. And Lucius is still spying on her here.

She's ignoring me, rolling her eyes and placing books back on the shelves, jeans stretching tight. And I make no sense to myself when I say, "Besides, you have a contract with Pansy. If the wrong person saw what you wear to this bookstore on the weekends, you'd be jeopardizing her career as well as your image."

She spins to glare at me, challenging me. I insult her Muggle wear and she scoffs at me.

"You are in charge of me Monday through Friday, Malfoy. Saturday and Sunday are my days off to do with as I please. I will work at this bookstore as long as I please."

And she ignores me again. Re-shelving. Dismissing me.

I lean against the stacks, pressing closer to her.

Look at me.

She tries to move around me again, and I pin her in.

"For as long as you are employed by Malfoy Consulting, Granger, you will behave and dress as such," I hiss. "If you would like to go back to working as a Ministry dreg, filing reports and failing to create lasting change for your blessed creatures, be my guest."

"I am only 'employed' Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, Malfoy. I am free—"

"Oh, I must have missed your resignation on Friday afternoons, followed by your application on Monday mornings then."

"I am only *paid* Monday through Friday. You can only control my whereabouts Monday through Friday."

That fire in her eyes. Her curls dancing as she tilts her head at me. And I don't want anyone else to have her like this. Untamed.

Saturday, January 29, 2000

The Azkaban guard opens the door for me, and I walk into the small meeting room. My father leans against the side of the metal table, reading the paper.

"Father."

The door closes.

"Draco, how good of you to visit." He folds the newspaper and turns to me.

"I said I would. January and February."

"And here you are, with two days to spare." He levels a scowl at me, then holds up the paper, and I see Granger's dark hair and green dress. "This is excellent."

I blink. I've forgotten how to take a compliment from my father. It's not even my compliment, really.

He continues, "Has your client list increased? Your visibility is surely up."

"... Yes, I've had strong, positive reactions to the article. To her."

He gestures that I should sit. "And Pansy's work is brilliant. Truly stunning," he says. I nod and take my chair. "She's so much *more* like this, don't you think?"

I clench my jaw. "More what?"

"More prepared. More desirable. And it's lovely to see that ridiculous hair of hers tamed. Not a wild young thing any longer." He sits across from me and I press my lips together, swallowing any comments about loving her wild hair. He smirks at me. "Much more like a Malfoy wife."

I look between his two eyes, searching him, waiting for his game.

He says, "How are things between you two?"

"Completely professional," I say. "She's an employee of mine and there are contracts in place. You told me to show restraint, and I have. I would never do anything to jeopardize the office."

He watches me, and then hums. "And what about outside the office?" A sly smile. "At your little bookstore?"

I scowl at him. "No. She doesn't even work there anymore."

He lifts a brow. "Really?" He leans back in his chair. "Are you positive?"

I watch him. A slow grin spreads across his mouth.

"Yes."

"She was there just last week." He tilts his head at me. "Assisting Corban Hartford with a few top-shelf books."

I feel my heartbeat in my fingertips. I remember her on a ladder, reaching for the high shelves. Her t-shirt stretching away from her jeans. And her skin.

I swallow and look back at him. He grins.

"There's no Love Contract between Miss Granger and Mr. Hartford, correct?"

~*~

"I'm losing control. Making choices that aren't me. Giving in to... more basic urges." She chuckles. "You're twenty."

"I'm nineteen."

"Even more delicious."

I smirk at the mantle, and I know she hears it.

"Why do you need to be in control?" she asks.

My brows pull together. I think of M.C.G. and the role I play there. I think of the games I play with my father. I think of her lips.

"What else is there?"

She is silent. I let her drift through me.

"It's a shame you had to learn Occlumency at such a young age," she says, and I immediately think of Severus. Of a classroom and a bookbag on my shoulder and the dark twist of fear in my gut – *If the Dark Lord finds out* –

I blink and Queenie continues, "The years a teenage boy should be expressing their feelings. Giving in to those 'urges.' And you were left to fight it every step of the way. I've met some good Catholic boys less restrained than you, doll."

"I can't tell if that's a compliment."

She hums.

It feels better like this. Facing away from her. Keeping a separation.

"VolDEMORT is gone, sugar. So, who are you protecting her from?"

Me. I think for her. I swallow. I search for the reason, landing on a million small ones. Ones she can see.

"She doesn't want me. A relationship," I correct. "She told my mother that she will never be mine."

I hear the tap of manicured nails on an armrest. "Maybe because you weren't the one askin'?" I frown, shaking my head. "I won't recover. If she won't..." I pace. "I kissed her today with no provocation..."

"Oh, she was provoking you plenty..."

"And I'll do it again. It'll drag me under. I can't..."

I choke, and just open to her, letting her see things. See my desires. See her under me, surrounding me. See her thighs around me as my lips suck at her chest. See her in my bed, scratching at me. See her on her knees in my office, unbuckling me. On all fours with me behind her. In the bathtub with my fingers inside of her. Legs and arms clutching me as I push into her. I slam the wall back up, heat flushing me. I turn to her guiltily, and Queenie conjures a fan, cooling herself off while smirking at me.

"You can come over *anytime*."

I smile weakly. "It's too much," I whisper.

She closes the fan. "Because you held yourself back for the last four years. The years you were supposed to be feeling this way. It's like you're going through puberty all over again."

I run a hand down my face. "I have my own business. I'm an adult now. I can't be acting this way. And my father..."

I feel her inside and I shut her out quickly. She lifts a brow.

She presses her lips together. "So, what do you want to do? Push her into a corner like your grandmother until she's not even a passing fancy? That won't last."

"It's lasted me this long."

She looks away. "I don't agree with your methods, sugar. It's a band aid. It'll come off. You're so wrapped up in her," she says. "You won't have much left after that."

I swallow. "That's fine."

She sighs, considering. I ask her in my mind. I let her see the meetings I've been distracted in, the incident with Noelle. I open up the scene with my father, when I begged him to let her work at Malfoy Consulting. Begged him to let me keep her.

She frowns, and gestures for me to sit. I take the chair, and let her stare at me.

The clock ticks on the wall.

And after a while, she's inside, whispering:

Envision the inside of the box. Blue velvet, isn't it, sugar?

~*~

Monday, December 22, 1997

It takes me far longer than I care to admit to figure out where our kitchen is. In the Manor, I speak aloud the name of an elf and they appear, I ask for what I want, and it is given to me.

But I don't want a trail.

I finally find the large room with small tables and stools, elf-height. I grab a few things from the fruit bowl and find a slice of bread. I look at the knife that rests on the counter, wondering if...

Maybe just before the mission on Christmas. That way if I don't come back...

I pad through the drawing room, past the grandfather clock. Three in the morning.

I cast a silencing charm on the heavy door, and tug it open, heading down the stone steps I used to tumble down as a child. Before we needed a "dungeon."

I light my wand, feeling a twitching in my blood. And there, on the stones, hair as light as my mother's, curly as my aunt's. She could pass as my sister.

She hasn't been given a bed or a blanket, lying on the ground, curled into herself. I'll have to bring that tomorrow.

She turns over, waking at the light. "Hello, Draco."

Busy on Tuesday. With Hartford. Not even the decency to ask her out on a Saturday evening. Corban?

She mumbles something but I'm not listening. Blaise was supposed to watch him. Pansy shouldn't have made her so desirable.

And she shouldn't have said yes.

I step closer to her, lowering my voice.

"If you are postponing this very important meeting for something non-essential, I would question your priorities Granger," I say. "I'd hate to think that you'd prioritize a *date* above your Werewolf Policy."

She stares at me, caught in a lie. Awful liar, really.

"I don't have a date," she sneers, and I narrow my eyes. "And even if I did, if I say I'm unavailable for a meeting, *I'm unavailable for a meeting*, Malfoy."

The fire sparks in her eyes, and I miss the way she used to call me Draco. Miss the wrapping paper and the Gainsworth novels.

"Fine. I'll ask to reschedule." I turn on my heel to return to my office.

"Wednesday is best for me. I'm unavailable Thursday, as well."

I turn back to her, thinking of the dinner Mother has set up with Siobhan Selwyn to discuss her Diagon Alley boutique. "Wednesday is not good for me."

"Oh, Malfoy, I'd hate to hear that you'd prioritize a *date* above your company," she snarls back, rolling her eyes and disappearing into her office.

I growl and head back to mine.

I pace for twenty minutes, trying to get myself back together. Trying to let go of petty things like Corban Hartford and center my thoughts on my clients. Try to build a wall back up.

I call Blaise into my office in the afternoon, and tell him he needs to try again. Needs to push my thoughts away into corners.

He tries. It's not good enough.

At four o'clock she pops into my office to update me on her branch's finances and we bicker then too.

I can't concentrate for the rest of the day.

There's an address in my rolodex. Someone I'd looked up ages ago, before the war. When Severus had been taking on too much. Had been disappearing from his Headmaster's Office to chase Potter around the woods, and had made it clear that he didn't intend to survive the final war.

Someone in New York.

I pull a blank parchment and quill.

~*~

"Did you want me?" I ask, and try not to wince at my choice of words.

She sputters. I decide to give it a try.

"Er, actually if you're available for lunch, my client would like to meet you," I say. I look away from her and ask Carrie for my files. "One of the Honeydukes sellers is suing Honeydukes, and is quite the fan of yours."

There. A business meeting. And should we make small talk while we wait for the client to arrive, it would simply be a bonus.

"No. I'm not free." Sharp.

I look up at her, and she's frowning. Like she can see right through me.

What a bloody disaster.

"Alright," I say, and before I can send a glare to Pansy or ask Granger why she won't join me, I excuse myself to the lifts, watching my shoes against the carpets.

~*~

Friday, January 28, 2000

I have a letter from a Mr. Townsend. A perfect excuse to see her today.

I head to her office, and I hear laughter from inside. Blaise probably. I knock on the doorframe and find her smiling at Hartford, notes and papers forgotten on her desk.

"Hartford." I greet him and he smiles at me. He doesn't even have the sense to shuffle papers or look busy. "How's the opening statement?"

"We're almost done with it, and then I'll send it over to you for review."

"Excellent." I look at her, still smiling from whatever Hartford had been saying. "Granger, a Mr. Townsend is very interested in the Werewolf Policy." I have to look away. "He wants to have dinner with us next week to talk about financial support." I hand her the letter. "Tuesday at seven."

I watch her eyes skim the words, and decide I should go. They are in the middle of... something, and haven't asked me to join them.

Not that I would want to...

Fuck everything.

I roll my eyes at myself and leave, huffing.

"Malfoy." And I spin to see her, chasing after me. "I – I can't do seven on Tuesday. I have... I have a thing." She looks away, guilty almost.

Tuesday was Mr. Townsend's preferred day. I ask her if rescheduling is a possibility, and she stammers, fumbling her words, trying to explain... something. Her eyes drift back towards her office, as she cobbles an excuse. And as I struggle to understand her words, I follow her stare. Follow it back to Hartford.

I nod at her. "Lovegood." I wait for her to scramble back. To beg me to release her. To ask me not to hurt her.

She smiles and says, "Can't sleep?"

What a little loon.

"I brought you a bit of food. Have they been feeding you?" I hand her the bread and fruit.

"Thank you," she says. "They were at first, when Ollivander was here. But since they've taken him I think they've forgotten." She bites into the apple and studies me. "Your dungeon has a nest of Nargles." She points. "There. In that corner."

"Right," I say. "I'll get right on that."

"I have my necklace on, so they leave me alone." She fingers the cork on a chain and takes another bite of the apple. "How are your classes so far?"

Why do I even bother. She's clearly lost it.

"They're... good. I don't think you'll be returning to school though, Lovegood."

She shrugs. "I didn't think so."

"I'll try to bring you food when I can. There's a large mission on Christmas. I may not come back, but my mother will look after you."

She chews her apple, and watches me. As if she isn't a prisoner. "You've changed a tad, haven't you?"

I blink at her. "I suppose we all have."

"You used to be cruel," she says. "You're a different color now."

I narrow my eyes at her. I've spent too long down here, and she's probably delirious with hunger.

I nod at her, saying goodbye.

"Like a navy. Deep like velvet."

My feet stop on the first step. I hear the crunch of an apple, and I feel my heart pounding. I turn to look back at her. "What did you say?"

"Your color is navy blue now."

I stare at her, waiting. "Oh?"

"I see people in colors. Don't you?"

"Not really, no."

She bites down again, chews slowly and says, "For instance, Harry is a green, like his eyes. But I mainly see it from his heart. Lavender Brown is actually neither lavender nor brown." She smiles. "She's a light pink. Parvati's the same." She twists the apple rind. "Hermione Granger is a blue, like sky blue but..."

"Periwinkle," I finish.

She grins. "Yes. You *do* see it. You used to be an orange. It wasn't pretty. But now you're a deep blue navy."

"Like velvet," I say.

"Mm-hm. Velvet inside of something... A box."

I watch with held breath as she bites down again, crunching.

She's a Legilimens. She must be. A rare form. Something strange. I'll need to ask Severus. But first I need to get out. Before she sees more than a blue velvet lining.

But I have to ask.

"What color are you?" I say, still one foot on the stairs.

She smiles. "I don't know. I can't see myself."

She looks down at her arms, looking for pinks and blues. So small. Like a bird. A bird in a cage.

I need to get her out of this dungeon before the end of the war. Before the Auction. She shouldn't have to live through that.

She's wiggling her feet, examining herself for colors.

I look her up and down and say, "You're all of them."

She looks up at me. She smiles.

"Goodnight, Draco. Thank you for dinner."

~*~

Wednesday, February 2, 2000

Queenie Kowalski works with me for four hours. Then I come back on Tuesday and we spend twelve. I have tea with her on Wednesday, and she has a sad look in her eyes I can't interpret, but she does me the favor of trying to find her for a few moments.

I try to pay her, but she says, "Mr. Malfoy, it's been years since a boy as beautiful as you spent any time with me. I'd feel like I should be paying you." She winks at me.

I smirk back in the way that I am supposed to. She stops me on my way down the steps. "If your grandmother is a true Legilimens..." she says, hand on the door, "she's probably been waitin' to speak to somebody, honey. Go for a visit, will ya? It can get lonely inside."

I blink. I feel like I'm sad. Maybe I am.

The portkey lands me in my office. I take a look about, change my robes, and exit the office to the street. Disapparating when I can. I appear outside the lovely wizarding restaurant Carrie had set up for us.

I don't pause. I open the door and speak with the hostess. Her eyes dance over me, recognizing me, drinking me in. I do the same to her.

She leads me to the table where Hermione Granger sits with Geoffrey Townsend. He stands, shaking my hand and I make my apologies. I settle into my chair across from him.

"I've had one of those, thank you."

"Really? It's barely ten in the morning."

I peel my hands from my face and push my hair back.

"What are your next steps?" she says.

I swallow and look out my window. "My next step is seeing my father this weekend. He's required my visitation for the first two months, so I'm getting January out of the way this weekend."

"And with her?" she asks, sitting forward. "What are your next steps with her?" I study the marble of my desk.

"We're working on this werewolf policy—"

"Draco," she cuts me off.

I look up at her. "There are no next steps with her. There are contracts, there are rules," I hiss. "Just because she's wearing different clothes doesn't mean I get to fall into bed with her."

She laughs. "Who said anything about that!" She crosses her legs and smiles. "You get to spend time with her now. 'Business lunches' and the like. You can invite her to events and galas. And," she says, raising a brow, "the next time Skeeter asks you about her, you can compliment her. Without using the word 'logical.'"

I groan, and close my eyes. Pansy laughs and I look at my clock.

"Speaking of business meetings, I have two today. One starting in five minutes."

Pansy lifts herself from her chair, and says, "Perfect. Invite her to come along with you."

"I... it's not really her department."

"Does that matter?" She shrugs. "Invite her. Let her know how important she is not only to the company, but also to you." She leads us to the door as I consider how I could invite her to lunch with the perfect blend of business and personal reasons. "Draco," Pansy says, stopping with her hand on the door. "If you don't move on her soon, someone else will." She lifts a brow, and I immediately think of Hartford. "I don't know you if you've noticed, but she looks quite good in my clothes."

She winks at me.

"Yes, thank you, Pansy." I grab my suit jacket.

"I mean have you *seen* her arse?" She widens her eyes comically.

"Yes, thank you, Pansy."

She opens the door, laughing and then coos, "Hermione, dear! Wonderful. I was just coming to see you."

I slip my arm through my jacket sleeve, about to call her bluff when I see Granger truly is standing at my door. She meets my eyes and looks back and forth between Pansy and me. "Perfect," Granger says. "We can go to my office."

He grinned at her. "Because it's 'the right thing to do,'" he said, and popped another piece of bread into his mouth.

She nodded and he smirked. She could feel her face heat, so she watched him pull his sandwich apart. Such an interesting way to eat...

"What's the deal with you and Daphne?"

His fingers paused, and she looked up to see the grin disappear from his face. She felt like she was asking too much, suddenly.

"We... used to date." He looked down at his sandwich, placing his pulled piece back down.

"Oh," she said. "Difficult breakup, I presume?"

"Aren't they all?" He gave a small smile, before it disappeared.

She thought she could read guilt on his features, and she imagined what it would be like to be in a relationship with Blaise Zabini, the most incorrigible flirt she'd ever known. She took a stab in the dark.

"You cheated on her?" She kept her face nonjudgmental.

He snapped his eyes to her, and she was wrong. He pressed his lips together.

"The opposite, actually." Blaise swallowed, folded and scrunched his wrapper, stood, and excused himself.

She closed her eyes, tossing down her fork, remembering that she should never presume anything about Slytherins. They were far more complicated than she'd ever imagined.

She and Blaise finished the interviews, and she drafted up her notes for Draco. There were more interviews scheduled for Thursday, which she assumed Draco would be present for.

Madame Michele was a terror that night. Nothing Hermione did was correct, and the list of notes for her to work on was outrageous. It was her fifth lesson. She was now halfway done and she didn't feel like she was learning anything, or growing.

If Lucius Malfoy *really* wanted to torture her, he would have scheduled a test at the end of all of this.

On Wednesday, she repeated the steps from the day before. She layered on her clothing, her makeup, and her thick skin, and prepared to face Draco that day. But he was still out of the office.

She approached his secretary around ten.

"Will Mr. Malfoy be in today?"

"I don't believe so." The girl looked up at her from her magazine, trying to slip it under some paperwork.

"Alright," Hermione said. "Er... Has he cancelled the meeting with Mr. Townsend tonight?"

The girl looked at his schedule. "No," she said. "It's still on there." She looked up at her. "I think the portkey is scheduled for this evening, just before."

Hermione blinked at her. "Portkey? Oh, is he... out of town?"

"Yes, he's in New York City. He scheduled a meeting out there." The girl smiled up at her, twirling her hair.

Hermione couldn't find words for a moment. A rare problem. "Would you be able to gather any notes he has on the Townsend meeting? I'm afraid I'm underprepared and I was hoping to meet with Malfoy today to catch up."

"Absolutely," the girl said. She pulled a sticky note and started writing. "I'll send over the file."

"Thank you," she said, turning and wandering back to her office.

New York City. The only American she could think of was Noelle, and she really didn't think he'd have a meeting with her after his insistence that she not contact her. Besides, she was pretty sure Noelle's university was in California.

Who was in New York City?

She arrived fifteen minutes early for the dinner meeting with Mr. Townsend. She had fully prepared for Draco to not show up, just in case.

The hostess showed her to the table, and she was relieved to be the first one there.

She had read all about Mr. Townsend that afternoon. He was a half-blood widower in his late sixties who had gathered a small fortune from a potion-making business. He was quite outspoken about the Wolfsbane Potion being made available to those who could not pay for it. At five minutes to seven, one of the hostesses showed a grey-haired man to her table.

Hermione stood, smiling.

"Mr. Townsend?" She reached out her hand, confident that Madame Michele would approve of this.

"Yes, Hello, Miss Granger." He shook her hand and gave her a warm smile. "I'm quite pleased to meet you."

"Likewise, Mr. Townsend." She took her seat again. "I'm so honored that you wanted to meet with us regarding the Werewolf Policy. Mr. Malfoy should be here, but I know he's been away on a business trip." She gestured to his empty chair.

The waiter took their drink order. Mr. Townsend ordered a scotch and Hermione took a cue to order a glass of wine.

And it was at that moment that she wondered if this dinner was to be on Malfoy Consulting's dime. She blinked at the white tablecloth. She wondered if she had enough gold with her to cover this, and then later get reimbursed. Is that how business dinners worked? Or did Draco

have an account with this restaurant that she could charge this to? She looked around. This was a wizarding restaurant, right? She didn't have her Muggle credit card on her.

She tucked her worries away, resolving to excuse herself to go speak with the maître d' later on. She turned her focus on Mr. Townsend, who was a very pleasant man.

They chatted about Hogwarts and books, slowly working their way towards werewolves.

It was ten minutes past seven when she decided it was time to start the conversation without Draco. She had just begun to discuss their current progress with Mr. Townsend when a familiar voice froze her own.

"So sorry to be this late."

She looked up to find Draco Malfoy, smiling lightly at Mr. Townsend. She watched as Draco apologized, and Mr. Townsend stood to shake his hand. She was stuck, deciding if she should stand as well. Was that necessary? Damn you, Madame Michele. Why did she never learn anything useful?

He looked excellent. Beyond excellent. He looked delicious.

Hermione blinked and grabbed her water glass as Draco took the seat next to her, across from Mr. Townsend.

She watched him make small talk, trying to neutralize her expression. He smiled, and worked with his hands, and ordered Firewhisky – wizarding restaurant after all – and played the gracious, but late, host. Hermione watched him. And she tried not to watch him.

Once the conversation swayed back to werewolves, Draco gestured for her to take lead. She realized he had not looked at her once.

She blinked at him and turned to Mr. Townsend, starting up where they left off. She worked through the timeline of events, and their current struggles. Draco would chime in every so often and she managed to only shiver once at his voice.

Draco ordered a few appetizers for the table, and Hermione took the time to look over her menu. They strayed away from the Policy for a bit as Mr. Townsend chatted with Draco about mutual acquaintances, and Hermione read the menu.

"And Marcus Flint! You were close with him at Hogwarts, yes?"

Hermione flinched. She took a breath and looked up at Mr. Townsend. He was smiling, as if the memory of Marcus Flint was bright and happy.

She looked over at Draco just in time to see him smile and say, "Yes, he was my Quidditch captain for several years." She had to look closely to see the strain around his eyes.

She picked up her wine glass.

"Marcus was actually the one to tell me about the Policy." Mr. Townsend smiled, and Hermione drank deeply. "He said 'Geoffrey, have you heard what Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger are up to?'" Mr. Townsend – Geoffrey – chuckled.

"Mm-hm." Blaise played with the sleeve of his robes. She gazed over his shoulder, mind working. Why was he out? Was he sick? Was he avoiding her? This was a business for Merlin's sake; he needed to be here!

"The first one is at eleven. Will you please do them with me? If you don't, then I'm likely to hire the first good-looking woman who walks through those doors."

She scowled at him, knowing he was telling the truth. "Fine.

Hermione spent the next thirty minutes reviewing the duty statement and the submitted applications.

She and Blaise set up in the conference room, deciding on a list of questions that they would take turns asking. Blaise didn't seem like he was going to be taking notes at all, so Hermione resigned herself to be the note-taker.

After the first two interviews, Blaise had one of the interns bring them lunch in the conference room. Hermione wasn't really a big fan of using interns like that, or using company funds like that, but Blaise rolled his eyes and said he would pay out of pocket.

She was poking at her salad, moving the croutons around when Blaise spoke up.

"Why did you speak at Draco's trial?"

She turned to him. He was watching her, picking at the bread on his sandwich.

"It was the right thing to do." She was getting tired of those words....

He narrowed his eyes at her. "And what does that mean?" He pushed a piece of sourdough between his lips.

"I... didn't think it was fair, what the Wizengamot was charging him with. He was the only student going through trial and..."

"He was the only student to try to kill Albus Dumbledore."

She looked up at him. He chewed, watching her.

"And he failed. He lowered his wand. Harry saw it."

Blaise lifted a brow at her. "So that explains why Harry Potter testified," he said, and she waited for the "but..."

"When we were captured by Snatchers – Ron, Harry and me – we were taken to Malfoy Manor," she said, looking down at her salad. "And he refused to identify us." She stabbed at a tomato. "I don't think that type of person should be locked in Azkaban."

The image of Draco turning from her tortured body, the sound of his gasp –

"And if it was someone else?" he said, and she looked to him. "Say if it had been Gregory Goyle who had been asked to identify you. And he said he wasn't sure."

Blaise's eyes were sparkling, and in that moment, she knew. She wasn't fooling him one bit. She swallowed. "I would have testified for Goyle then, had the Wizengamot chosen to try him."

asked what it felt like, and where his hands were, and what do you mean "noises," and would you have let him?

Ginny had to be up at 5AM for practice, so Hermione finally let her drift off, apologizing to her. Hermione got about an hour of sleep.

She dreamt of the balcony overlooking the Malfoy Gardens. She stood at the railing, looking over the pond. Draco approached her from behind and she turned to see him in his black robes with silver accents, and she looked down at herself to find her white gown from New Year's.

He smiled at her and took her hand, and when she looked up, they were standing in the gazebo. She had a bouquet of silver flowers in her hand. She turned to see Ginny in a blue dress, reaching to take her flowers for her.

She woke up smiling at Ginny's ceiling, bed empty, the sound of the shower running. Then she cried.

She got it out of her system.

No, she didn't have all the answers. No, she didn't know what challenges she would face today with Draco. But she put on her purple dress, her matching heels, hid her dark circles and marched into the office.

She could feel her heartbeat in her ears as the elevator doors opened. But then Melody smiled at her, bid her good morning, and she gained her focus back.

She got to her office, and almost shut the door behind her, but realized she had no reason to. She left it open, feeling vulnerable, but at least she would be able to see or hear him coming.

The first hour of her day was quiet. Walter brought in her mail and Hermione responded to several letters. She tried her best not to jump when she heard footsteps, or the rumble of a male voice.

Blaise entered her office, pouting. She looked up at him and watched him throw himself in her guest chair like a child.

"I don't want to do the interviews. Please do them for me?" He frowned and rubbed his hand over his face.

"The interviews for the Wizengamot Relations position?" He nodded. "Why are you conducting them?"

"Because Draco didn't want to reschedule them – sorry, *Mr. Malfoy*." Blaise rolled his eyes. "Will you do them with me?"

She frowned at him. "Why are you in charge?"
"Beats me!" Blaise slouched down in the chair. "He told me to do the interviews while he was out."

Hermione stared at him. "Dra—Malfoy's out of the office today?"

Hermione pressed her lips together. She felt a bit nauseous.
"He was an excellent apprentice. Mighty fine potioneer."

And it clicked. Marcus Flint had brewed that potion himself. He'd been an apprentice to Mr. Townsend, who had dedicated his life to helping people by making potions. How terribly sad. She sucked in a breath and tried to breathe the tension out.

"That was so kind of him to recommend the Policy to you," she said. She smiled and heard Draco's knuckle pop on her right.

She took the opportunity to steer the conversation back, and away from Marcus Flint. The waiter came and took their order. From her cursory glance as the menu's prices, she was quite glad Draco was here to cover the bill.

Once the waiter disappeared, Mr. Townsend took his napkin off his lap.
"Excuse me, I'm going to find the restroom."

She felt cold dread twist in her chest. Oh, Mr. Townsend, please don't do this...

Every step he took away from the table tightened her stomach more and more. Hermione didn't dare look at Draco. She reached for her wine glass and almost knocked it over. She righted it and brought it to her lips.

She placed it down on the table. She waited three seconds and brought it back to her lips. She could hear him breathing next to her.

"How was New York?"

She looked over at him. He was staring at the salt and pepper shaker. She saw his jaw tighten. Then release.

"Excellent."

He didn't look at her. And she was almost grateful, not sure what she would do if he turned his eyes on her.

"A potential client?" She ran her eyes along his jawline, resting her gaze on those lips. "No," he said. He cleared his throat. "Personal appointment."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry—"

He shook his head at the salt shaker, implying that she wasn't prying.
"Blaise and I handled the interviews." She wished they could just sit in silence but apparently she wasn't going to let them. "Some excellent candidates."

He nodded.
"Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Mr. Townsend returned. And she could breathe again.
They had a lovely rest of the evening. Her dinner was delicious, Mr. Townsend kept the mood light, and he even pledged half of their fundraising goal. She was shocked.

Mr. Townsend and Draco argued over the bill, which she thought was adorable. When she stood from the table to use the restroom, both men stood for her. How precious.

When they left, shaking Mr. Townsend's hand and scheduling a follow up meeting at the office next week, Draco gestured for her to exit before him.

She didn't realize how accustomed she was to the feeling of his hand on her lower back, guiding her, until it was gone.

Draco, Blaise and she sat down on Thursday morning to discuss the interviews from earlier that week.

She triplicated her notes from Tuesday and handed a set to each of them. The woman who Hermione felt the most strongly about was Blaise's least favorite, of course.

"But I do want to share with you one of her answers. It was quite impressive really," Hermione said, flipping through the notes. "Ah, here. We asked 'name a time you had differences or a misunderstanding with a co-worker and how the two of you resolved the issue.' And she said that she likes to come at problems from multiple viewpoints. She'll take a moment to try to figure out where the person is coming from, put herself in their shoes, and accept the fact that she may be wrong."

Hermione looked up from her notes to find Draco looking directly at her. She blinked. She hadn't seen his eyes since Monday, since right before he kissed her. They were hot then, and filled with promises.

His eyes were neutral and even now. She watched for any of his facial ticks. None.

"Er," she started, "She also said she treats every situation in the office as 'business, not personal' and knows that office friendships must be sacrificed at times for the good of the client."

She looked up again and Draco's eyes were still on her. The same.

"She was dreadfully boring," Blaise whined. "And I felt personally attacked in the whole 'not everyone is going to be friends' part of it."

"Alright," Draco said. "I'll keep her in mind. Blaise and I will do the interviews today, so that he can properly compare and contrast all the candidates I didn't get to see." He stood from the table, picking up her notes.

Blaise would do the interviews today? She frowned. Blaise who didn't take a single note and judge people on their appearance? She opened her mouth to argue and Draco left the room. She huffed.



Hermione opened a packet of soy sauce.

"Was it sweet? Or... slow?"

"No. I'd use the word aggressive."

Ginny nodded and bit down on her egg roll.

"Did he tell you how he felt, or were you able to connect—?"

"We were arguing."

"Hm." Ginny turned on the TV.

"Groping?"

"Not really, no."

Ginny snapped the fortune cookie in half.

Ginny left her alone after dinner. She lay in bed that night, twisting and punching her pillow until finally she gave into her restless mind and just let it run.

What would she say to him tomorrow? Did she *have* to say anything?

Perhaps this co-worker thing was a bad idea. Maybe she'd write to Mathilda and see if her position had been filled yet.

She still needed to chastise him about using her name to start up the company.

Why did she have to touch him after he asked her not to? Why did she do that?

What was her outfit tomorrow? Was it too revealing? She'd need to check.

She'd touched his cheek, and he'd grabbed her hip. He'd started to push her back, down onto her desk... then what?

What did Harry really think?

What were the actual legal ramifications of that Love Contract. She'd need to check.

Would it happen again? Or would it never happen again? Which was worse?

How would she sit in a board room with him, talking about werewolves and Wizengamot trials.

She wondered if she kissed like she was a virgin...

She climbed into Ginny's bed at 3AM. She started from the beginning.

She told her about her discovery that he'd used her name to garner respect and business deals. She told her about the dress, and the hair, and the Golden Snidgets, and finally the kiss.

Ginny gasped in all the right places, and groaned at Draco's stupidity, and giggled at Hermione's insolence. She pried the details from her, making Hermione blush and stumble. She

to hear that the project was delayed, but Hermione told him they should continue to move forward with it as much as possible.

She stayed thirty minutes later than normal, just to avoid seeing anyone as she left. There was a light on in Draco's office. She could see it flooding under the door as she pressed the button for the lift. The lift took forever to arrive and Hermione felt very vulnerable, out in the open. She counted the seconds, eyes flickering to Draco's door, praying it wouldn't open while she was standing here.

The lift arrived with a loud *ding* and she winced, jumping in, and punching the "door close" button twenty or so times.

She Apparated home, and walked the few blocks to her building. She turned the lock on the building's exterior door, and looked up to see Ginny sitting on the stairs to their floor.

Ginny jumped up, eyes wide, one hand on the railing and one hand at her neck.

Hermione stopped. She blinked up at her. The door closed behind her.

Ginny blinked back.

Hermione opened her mouth and no sound came out.

Ginny twitched her head, trying to hear her.

Hermione looked over Ginny's shoulder, her eyes distant. She closed her mouth. And looked at the stairs.

Ginny took a breath. And stopped. And looked at the wall. Another breath—and stopped. Hermione pressed her lips together.

"Who kissed who?"

"Him. He kissed me."

Ginny nodded, trying to read her.

"How was it?"

"It was—it was... Yes. Good. It was... Yes."

Ginny crossed her arms. Then dropped them. "Shall we get Chinese tonight?"

"Yes. Excellent."

Ginny hung up the phone with the Chinese place. She turned to Hermione. "So he... I mean..." She frowned. "Harry said there was a desk involved?"

"Yes. Desk. Yes."

Ginny nodded. She bit the inside of her cheek.

"Was there tongue?"

"Yes."

Ginny nodded and Hermione started washing dishes.

She had his secretary check his schedule for Friday and find her an opening. While she would truly love to discuss the manipulative use of her name, the current atmosphere was a bit too... volatile for that discussion.

She wanted to give Walter an opportunity to pitch the Golden Snidget idea again. He also had two other portfolios he'd been working on, and one of them was quite interesting. He had drafted a proposal for Hermione and her branch to start a consulting service for Muggle-born families entering Hogwarts, giving counsel to the parents and starting a bit of a "catch-up" program for the students.

Hermione loved it. It was exactly the kind of work she would be interested in. She thought on Arthur Weasley showing her parents around Diagon Alley, watching her father become overwhelmed and watching her mother's awe. She would love to assist Muggle-born families with the transition process.

About thirty minutes before the impromptu meeting, Walter came into her office.

"Just got this," he said, waving a piece of paper. "We'll have to reschedule next week."

She frowned as she took the page from him. It was a memo from Draco's secretary, apologizing that Draco was actually unavailable for their 3PM.

She had just watched the girl check his schedule a few hours ago, finding that time slot open.

"Oh, well." Walter shrugged. "I'll keep polishing it and we'll try again next week." He left.

Hermione wandered over to her doorway, and leaned against the frame. Draco's door was closed, and there was a light on.

Did he really have a conflict? Or did he just cancel their one-on-one?

The weekend was slow. Nothing terribly exciting happened at Cornerstone, and she found herself wondering if she should think about giving it up. And then she found herself wondering if she should keep working there just to spite Draco.

On Monday the *Witch Weekly* issue came out. They had chosen the periwinkle dress for the cover, and several other poses and outfits filled the center pages. Hermione was quite pleased, and she got a lovely note from Pansy, letting her know how excited she was.

She stepped out of the lifts on Monday and almost stumbled to see Draco at the front desk, reading through something while Melody opened mail. He turned to head back to his office, and his eyes landed on her.

She nodded at him and continued to her office, trying to shake off the dead stare he had given her.

At the Monday Senior Consultant meeting, she brought in Walter's proposals. It seemed that Wentworth had followed her lead from the week before and had drafted his own packet to pass out to everyone, proposing his next steps for acquiring more businesses in Diagon Alley.

When it came to her, she handed out two packets.

"Walter and I have been working on revising the Golden Snidget proposal, adjusting the budget, and laying down a more workable timeframe to hopefully move up the project into this quarter instead of next..."

"I thought I already shot this down."

Hermione looked at Draco. His eyes were still dead.

"You did. That's why we revised it. For your review."

He closed the packet, opened his mouth to speak, and she cut him off.

"Which means you take it, you read it fully, you think on it, and you come back to me with a decision," she said.

Her neck was warm. She thought she saw a flicker of life in his eyes, but it was gone before she could think on it. She took a breath.

"The next project I wanted to present is truly Walter's idea, and I think it's wonderful."

She went on to describe the Muggle-Born Integration Program, taking them through the packet. Once she was wrapping up, she turned to see Wentworth grinning, Mockridge glancing over the financial analysis, and Blaise doodling on the pages... as expected. Draco was frowning at the front cover. She finished, and he spoke up.

"So, this is the third project of your branch that will be fundraised, having no direct income from specific clients?"

She kept from rolling her eyes at him. "Some Muggle-born families may very well be able to afford the program's fees, but yes, I have projected needing a sort of 'scholarship fund' for the Muggle-Born Integration..."

"So, again, your department's spending will be putting us in the red, without a projected future income for any of your projects."

She met his cold eyes, trying to keep the heat out of her own.

"Isn't that the point of fundraising?"

"Three projects at the same time?"

"The Muggle-Born Integration Program won't even be needed until closer to July, when Hogwarts letters go out. That's definitely to begin next quarter."

"This is a business, Granger." He sat back in his chair, and his nonchalance irked her. "You are only trying to spend money instead of thinking of the profitability of your branch. While all of your causes would, of course, gather excellent publicity for M.C.G...."

"Isn't that what I'm here for? Public opinion?" she shot at him.

Blaise lifted a brow, suddenly interested.

She definitely saw a fire in Draco's eyes that time. He clicked his jaw shut. And the fire died. "Keep thinking of ideas that will increase profitability."



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Twenty Nine

She had signed the Love Contract less than three weeks ago, and she was already letting him lay her down on her desk and ravish her.

She swallowed, rapping her nails on that very desk, and let her gaze blur at her bookshelves across from her. She tapped her quill against a parchment, creating little blots and blobs.

Would he have done it like in the movies? Sweeping her ink pot, her picture frames, her texts all off the desk so they crash to the floor, and then press her down. Maybe they'd laugh about it.

She blinked and shook her head, clearing the image.

She couldn't tell who had felt more awkward about lunch, Harry or her. It was the quickest and quietest lunch they'd ever had. Harry had asked for the date the day before, so she had thought he had news to tell her or some funny story, but he just sat and watched her eat. Watched her think.

She kept her door closed the rest of the afternoon, and every time someone knocked, she jumped. Hoping it wasn't Draco. Hoping it was.

Dark thoughts slithered into her distracted mind throughout the afternoon. What if Harry hadn't walked in? Would she have let him... completely? She hadn't ever...

Did Draco know? He had assumed, back during the Auction. He had asked for 35,000 galleons, thinking that extra 5,000 to be necessary.

Another 5,000 would be added on if it could be proven that you were 'untouched.'

She closed her eyes, sneering at herself and her stupid, dark thoughts.

Walter checked in on her around 3PM, asking about the Golden Snidget pitch in the morning meeting. Hermione had completely forgotten about that part of her day. He was disappointed.

I can't wrap my head around the idea of kissing her, and leaving it there. Of letting her go to bed alone after taking her to dinner.

What was she waiting for?

"I wanted you to know, before..." She trails off.

Before I took her against a wall. Before *I* took her against a wall.

She was waiting... for something. Or someone – the thought slices me – and I was about to fuck her against a wall at four in the afternoon.

I slide my hands away from her, dropping my thigh from her warm center. I can't look at her or else I'll forget everything and just slip inside of her.

"I'm sorry," I hum against her skin. "Things went too far."

I'm out of control. I never would have fucked her against a wall. Not for our first time. Or our only time. It's been too cold inside.

Compartmentalizing was not the best course. It was like a dying of thirst. Who could blame me for drinking so quickly.

I think of how this started and suddenly my hands are on her face.

"Don't leave. Don't resign." She can't leave after this. "I'll be better," I promise, panicking with her lips a breath away from mine. "We'll go back to how it was... before. I won't ignore you or treat you any differently because of this."

I don't have bricks. Or a box. And it's painful to look at her like this, knowing she can see me. All of me.

She hesitates, staring into my eyes. I try once more, "Don't leave."

She can't leave. It will be empty all the time without her.

I could go back to bookstores and giftwrap. It was a slow ache, but it was mine.

She won't let me have her. Her soul or her body. And I can't be happy just kissing her like this. I'll never stop. But it was like that before. There was no chance of it when she was my Saturday girl.

It was going to hurt either way. Might as well not drag her under.

I memorize her face like this. So close to mine. Her breath on me. And her lips... pink and abused. I touch her one last time, my thumb across her mouth.

"Okay," she whispers.

She'll stay.

I release her. And step back.

"No."

She blinked at him. "No?"

"I do not accept." He returned to the paperwork in front of him, not sparing her a glance.

She took a deep breath. Draco dismissed the meeting. And she moved as calmly as she could back to her office.

Part of her knew he was absolutely correct. She knew better than anyone about this company's financial situation. But how much longer could she work only on the werewolf project. She was bored with the work she was doing, and her relationship with Draco had her on edge at all times.

This was becoming... impossible.

On Tuesday afternoon, she crossed the office floor, folded piece of paper in hand. She approached his secretary – whose name, she was embarrassed to admit, she still didn't know – and checked to see if he was in a meeting.

The girl told her no, eyes shifting to the side, but he'd asked not to be disturbed unless it was of huge importance.

Hermione nodded, and knocked on his door.

A moment's pause.

"Come in."

Hermione took a deep breath and opened the door. He sat behind his desk reading through Wentworth's proposal from yesterday's meeting. He leaned back in his chair, comfortable. His eyes flipped up to her, then back down to the paperwork.

"Yes?"

She shut the door behind her. He looked up at her again, eyes flickering between her and the closed door. She swallowed.

She walked toward his desk, fingers playing with the one-page letter she'd written up. She had chosen the outfit Pansy had penned in for Friday, but it was her favorite of the week. Flowy, knee-length navy skirt with a grey button-up. She wanted to get a chance to wear it. She had her hair pulled into a sleek ponytail, controlling the curls like Pansy taught her.

She placed the letter on his desk. "I wanted to... I need to give you my notice."

He stared at the letter and clenched his jaw.

"I've started to feel uncomfortable here and I don't think my comfort will improve over time. My work is starting to be affected. I had unreal expectations coming into this company, and I don't think it's going to work out. So I am giving you my two weeks' notice."

She clasped her hands in front of her, and bit the inside of her cheek as she watched him remain still.

"No."

She blinked at him. "No?"

"I do not accept." He returned to the paperwork in front of him, not sparing her a glance.

Hermione felt heat flushing her neck and she pursed her lips, biting back a few choice words.
“Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I will gladly train my replacement. But my last day will be February 25th. I’ll work until the end of that week, and leave that Friday.”

He cracked his neck, tossed Wentworth’s proposal across his desk, and stood from his chair. Her heart pounded. He looked up at her and his face was bored but his eyes were on fire.

He walked around his desk, grabbed up the folded paper she’d placed at the edge and opened it. He stood three paces from her, leaning on the edge of the desk. His eyes flew across the words.

“It doesn’t say anything in here about your boss sexually harassing you.” He looked up at her; scowling.

She swallowed. Oh, so they were going to talk about it now? “No. That is not my intention.”

“And what *is* your intention, Granger?” He crumpled the letter and tossed it to the side. He gripped the edge of the desk behind him, lifting his chin proudly. His cheeks were pink. “What is it you want?”

“I... I want to resign. Clearly.” She shook her head at him, not understanding.

“You’ll resign if I don’t... what?” He tilted his head at her.

“If nothing,” she laughed. She studied him. Jaw tight and knuckles turning white. “This isn’t blackmail, Draco.”

“Draco, again.” He stood tall, stepping off the desk. Now only two paces from her. “It’s been months since I’ve heard that.” She heard one of his knuckles pop and her breath left her. “I think the last time was in an alley, whispered into my ear as your fingers gripped my hair—”

She gasped and stepped backward.

“—or maybe it was on my balcony, you in a white dress, smiling at me like you knew what you were doing—”

“What are you talking about, Malfoy—”

“Nah-nah! Can’t take it back now. It’s *Draco*, again.” He stepped toward her, eyes flashing, breathing uneven. She stepped back, cursing the heels. Her chest was heavy and she felt like he’d let all the air out of the room. His eyes were dead seconds ago, and now they were burning.

“Do you *want* me to make a sexual harassment claim?” She laughed, shaky.

“I *want* you to be honest about why you’re leaving, Granger.” He stepped forward again and she wished she could stop herself from retreating. “Brave little Gryffindor Golden Girl, let me kiss her, and doesn’t know how to take it back.”

She laughed even as she stepped backward again. “*I’m* the one who wants to take it back???”

His grey eyes danced over her face, spots of pink high on his cheeks as her back landed against the wall. He had her pinned, again. Always pinning her. She snarled at him, “*Draco Malfoy*, calm

I pull my lips from her, heaving.
“You’re driving me insane,” I confess against her lips, pressing my forehead to hers while I concentrate on getting inside of her shirt.
“Sorry...” she whispers.
Like she doesn’t know. Like she’s completely blind to the sight of her own arse in these skirts and curve of her waist.
It makes me laugh. I should show her. Should touch her and show her what it’s like to be me.

I reach inside her blouse, barely unbuttoned, and find soft skin covered with lace. She gasps a pleased sound and I need to be inside of her. Need to hear her gasping for me.
I heft her thigh up over my hip, bringing my hips closer.

Need to touch her.
I’ll make her come. Make it good for her and she’ll never want to be parted from me again. I’ll press my fingers inside of her and squeeze at her breast, kiss her breathless and thumb at her clit and make her beg me to let her come.

My fingers are dancing on the edge of her knickers, slipping under the lace, searching for the warmth. The moisture.
“I’m... I...”
I love you too.
I kiss her again, pouring my want into her, and finally touching her breast, the edge of her hard nipple beneath my fingers.
She’s mumbling, trying to slow me down. But I can’t stop my hands, so close. I can feel her wetness already, beckoning me closer, inside.
“... five additional.”

“What?”
“It would have been 35,” she whimpers.
She’s not making sense. Or maybe I’m the delirious one.
“35,000.”
Freezing me. Like coming up for air after drowning.
She’s a virgin. Five thousand additional Galleons if she was pure.
I open my eyes to see her nervous, dazed.
“I’m... I haven’t...” she mutters.
I think of Weasley. Of Krum. Fucking McLaggen and O’Connor. Scamander and Hartford.
These boys – men who wanted her. Who touched her and kissed her even.
“How...” I lean my head down on her shoulder.

I have to touch her. I have to—
Her hair. I need—

It's up again. Off her neck. I reach up, and drag the band out of her hair, pressing my nose behind her ear. I can smell her there. Where there's no hair product.

She should never do this. Never keep it from me. I kiss her there, on her neck, where she smells the most like her. And I need to return to her mouth. Need to keep her lips occupied so she won't stop me. But her skin, her pulse pounding. My fingers threading through her hair, holding her close, and I can't get enough of her neck. The sounds she spins into the room. The way her breath catches when I suck.

Maybe she'll let me. Maybe she would have before.

I press my knee between hers and they fall apart so easily, like she's been asking me for years to open her.

My fingers curl in her hair, scratching her scalp, and my teeth drag along her neck. She turns her head, giving me more room.

My hand squeezing her hip, clutching her, dragging up her skirt. The thighs I'd wanted for years suddenly in my hands. I press my leg up, pushing against her and she moans again. I lick at her shoulder.

She shifts her hips forward, pressing her center against my thigh, and I feel her throat drag in air under my lips. She canters her hips again, and I'm holding myself back from pushing against her.

Once more, and she's moaning "Oh, god" against my ear, dragging her fingers through my hair. My cock twitches, knowing her body already. Knowing her hips and the warmth of her hands in my hair.

She pulls my head back and I can't breathe when I see her like this, this close. Her eyes dark, lips open for me, panting against my face. Her hair tangled down around her neck. And I need to lay her down. I need to kiss down her body.

She reaches up with her lips again and I can't breathe until we're kissing. I have to have more of her.

And she'll let me. She wants this.

I don't know what I've done to deserve her.

Her tongue is pressing into my mouth and I drag my hand down her neck, scraping down her chest. Need her skin. Need her breasts in my hands.

The thought rocks me. I shake as my cock presses against her. I scramble my fingers on her skirt until my fingertips have her skin. My other hand trying to unbutton her. I'm gonna come in my trousers.

and collected, never mixing business and personal, kissed an employee and now wants to be punished for it."

His arms came up to the wall on either side of her. He stepped impossibly closer, and she could feel his chest against hers.

"Are you gonna punish me, Granger?" He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, and she could make out a smirk begging at the corner of his mouth.

She shivered. This was... not what she had intended. She could feel his breath in her mouth. She waited, feeling him sway into her and ebb away with every breath. She tilted her head back, waiting. His breath was heaving.

She found his eyes, dark and flashing, and waiting. Waiting for *her* to kiss *him*.

Goddamn him. She stood on her tiptoes, in her heels, and caught his lips with hers. He chased her mouth and murmured a "fuck" as he connected their hips. She gasped and he pushed into her mouth.

She heard herself moan, and one of his hands grabbed her waist, as he ground his hips against hers. The other moved to her neck. He grunted, and reached up, grabbing her ponytail, ripping the band from her hair.

"Never do this..." His voice was hoarse against her neck as her hair fell around them. He sucked on her neck and she shivered.

She felt him running his teeth along her skin, and she let her eyes drift close. His hand at her neck threaded through the hair behind her ear, curling his fingers against her scalp. She pressed her lips together, but the groan still poured out of her.

He gently pushed her knees apart with his right thigh. He was moving slowly on her lower half but ravishing her on her top half. She was gripping his arms, not sure what to do. She was panting. His knee came between hers, softly. Opening her. She could feel the hand on her hip starting to gather the material of her skirt, pulling it up.

She bit her lip. This was heaven. It was everything it was supposed to be. She felt his thigh rising higher, connecting with her center and she moaned, realizing that this was what she'd seen him do to Pansy in the Hogwarts corridors. This was what she'd dreamed about as a sixteen-year-old, what she'd wondered about.

She moved her hips against him, and electricity ran through her body as she came in contact with his thigh. She did it again. And again.

"Oh, god," she moaned and her hands slid up his shoulders and grabbed his hair. Perfect. She felt a tremor go through him and she pulled at his head, pulling him back from where he was attacking her neck. His lips were swollen and his breath caught when he saw her face. She reached up with her mouth again and he kissed her, running his hand down from her neck, down her chest, barely grazing her breast and she groaned against his mouth.

She felt the top buttons of her shirt opening, and the fabric of her skirt scraping against her thigh as his fingertips finally found skin.

He was going to have her naked in minutes and she wouldn't stop him. He wanted her, and she wouldn't stop him.

"You're driving me insane." He wheezed against her lips, eyes closed, pressing his forehead to hers. His right hand was rubbing circles on her upper thigh where the skirt had been pulled, his left was dipping into her shirt, reaching for her breast.

"Sorry..."

He chuckled, squeezing his eyes closed, biting his lip. He brushed against her breast, the fabric of her bra pushing against her. She gasped and he grabbed her thigh, pulling it up to his hip. She teetered on one heel, barely able to stay upright when she was on two.

His fingers roamed across her outer thigh, rounding down toward her backside, finding the fabric of her knickers. He kissed her. His fingers dipped under, and she snapped her eyes open. He'd know. Soon he'd... be able to feel it, right? She panicked. As if he couldn't already tell by the way she could barely touch him even as he undressed her.

This was something you warn a person about, right? Even if he already had guessed...

"I'm... I..."

He kissed her mouth again, sighing into her as he pulled her bra cup down. "Wait, wait," She gasped. "I'm... you were right... to assume, before. About the five additional..."

"What?" he whispered, his fingers growing closer to her core.

"It would have been 35," she said, blushing.

"35?"

"\$5,000." She gasped. His fingers stilled on her skin. His eyes snapped open to hers. "I'm... I haven't..."

His mouth was open and panting. He squeezed his eyes shut, dropping his head on her shoulder.

"How?" It left his body like a laugh.

She didn't know if she was to respond.

"I wanted you to know, before..."

Then she felt him remove his hand from her knickers. And it was like ice water. He left his head on her shoulder, breathing mist on her neck, and placed his hand against the wall by her neck. He pulled his other hand out of her shirt.

He dropped his knee from where it had been pushing against her, rubbing her perfectly, and she almost whimpered.

She blinks rapidly at me and says, "What are you talking about, Malfoy—"

Don't you dare.

"Can't take it back now. It's *Draco*, again."

Maybe this is what she wants. She misses the chase. She longs to be the siren in the waters, watching me circle her until I'm under the current.

She steps back, creating more space between us and that really should be a sign that she doesn't want me closer. I step in.

"Do you want me to make a sexual harassment claim?"

"I want you to be honest about why you're leaving, Granger." There's a fire in my blood. And it consumes my skin like a dry forest. "Brave little Gryffindor Golden Girl, let me kiss her, and doesn't know how to take it back."

She laughs at me, and the sound shivers my spine.

"I'm the one who wants to take it back?" Her back lands on the wall and I step closer still. "Draco Malfoy; calm and collected, never mixing business and personal, kissed an employee and now wants to be punished for it."

And maybe she has me pegged. Because I had this under control four minutes ago. Four minutes ago, she was nothing to me but a name carved into the velvet lining of a jewelry box. My arms press against either side of her head, closer and closer, and for the first time I realize that Poofie was the one who stopped us. Blaise was right. She never pushed me away.

So, I push my luck one step further. "Are you gonna punish me, Granger?" The words course through me, and I bite my lip before I can ask her to.

She trembles, and I almost wrap myself around her. I breathe into her, and she tilts her face up to me.

Fuck.

Oh, fuck.

She'll let me.

I sway into her, and stop. I need her to tell me this time. I need her to decide. I watch her roll her eyes, and I'm afraid that's the end of it before she's suddenly on me. Her mouth pressing to mine.

And it was her choice.

She kisses me. And I'm drowning in blue velvet.

I moan into her and press against her. Her lips open and I taste her again, pushing into her mouth, and pushing my hips into hers.

She moans. And maybe I've heard it before. Maybe she made noises before. Maybe she did want this.

My head spins, calculating. It's been dry and cold inside of me for six days. For six days I haven't felt anything. Haven't thought of her. Haven't looked at her. Haven't touched her. Haven't kissed her.

And she's still leaving.

She's finished speaking. Waiting for me.

"No."

She sputters, "No?"

"I do not accept."

And maybe that's all that needs to be said. Maybe she'll quietly retreat.

I must have forgotten her amongst all this emptiness.

She persists. She names the date of her last day. Like clock counting down until she's gone.

But she could just leave and walk out. She didn't have to give notice.

She wants something from me. I can give it to her and she'll stay.

I stand and grab the letter, feeling her eyes on me. They're warm.

I lean on my desk and skim the words, trying to read between her lines.

What does she want?

What's different? The kiss.

I look up at her and it feels like I haven't seen her in weeks. Like I could drown...

"It doesn't say anything in here about your boss sexually harassing you."

Her eyes widen, and maybe that's it.

"No. That is not my intention—"

"And what is your intention, Granger?" I toss away her letter. It's meaningless. "What is it you want?"

Tell me.

I've been asking her what she wants for weeks now. And she won't tell me.

"You'll resign if I don't... what?"

She laughs, and I should be offended. I should scowl and hiss back at her. But her teeth...

I clench my fingers around the desktop. Her perfectly-sized teeth. And a blue dress spinning.

"If nothing. This isn't blackmail, Draco—"

Like diving into a pool.

"Draco, again." I'm closer to her somehow. "It's been *months* since I've heard that." I could touch her if I'm Draco again. No. "I think the last time was in an alley, whispered into my ear as your fingers gripped my hair—"

Her lips fall open and I swim toward her.

"—or maybe it was on my balcony, you in a white dress, smiling at me like you knew what you were doing—"

He wasn't going to continue. Because she was a virgin. He didn't want her because she was a virgin?

She opened her mouth and no sound came out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her shoulder. "Things went too far."

She swallowed, tears pricked her eyes. This wasn't fair. She'd waited. She'd only dreamed of him. She hadn't bothered with anyone else, and now he didn't want her for it?

He lifted his head and placed his hand on her cheeks, lightly.

"Don't leave." His grey eyes moved back and forth between hers. "Don't resign." He swallowed. "I'll be better. We'll go back to how it was... before. I won't ignore you or treat you any differently because of this."

Back to before. Back to co-workers after this. After tasting it.

"Don't leave." His thumb brushed across her lip.

She could have nothing or she could have something. But he wouldn't give her everything.

"Okay."

I feel her eyes on me, but they don't burn any more.

Mr. Townsend mentions Marcus Flint and I feel her twitch. I am angry. But I don't concentrate on why.

When he leaves us at the table alone, she babbles. And the melody is familiar.

On Thursday I sit down with Blaise and Granger to discuss the interviews. I can tell she wants to continue the interviews today. But I choose Blaise. Blaise asks me about New York and I say the weather was nice.

She tries to meet with me on Friday, and I cancel.

Witch Weekly prints a cover of her in periwinkle dress, smiling smartly.

My eye twitches. And I toss the paper across the room like it's burned me.

I meditate that evening, skipping dinner. Mother is concerned, but I tell her in a flat voice that there's nothing to be concerned with.

On Monday, I take my mail from Melody and I can't get my feet to cooperate. I should move back to my office. But it's 8:57 AM.

I open a letter, reading it. And the lift doors open. I should have left. I look up and she's there, coming through. She nods at me and I watch her walk away.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Malfoy?" Melody asks.

I don't respond. I walk away.

At the Senior Consultant meeting she tries to push the Golden Snidgets again.

"I thought I already shot this down," I say to her. And she looks at me. I feel heat.

"You did. That's why we revised it. For your review."

I open my mouth to protest and she snaps.

"Which means you take it, you read it fully, you think on it, and you come back to me with a decision."

Her eyes burn now. And I think I see a bookstore. But then it's gone.

She tries to start another project and I shoot her down. Something bubbles beneath the surface as she fights back.

On Tuesday, there is a knock at my door as I'm reading a proposal Wentworth brought in yesterday.

I look up and it's her. She's shutting the door.

Her skirt is too short. I blink and look down at my paperwork again.

"I wanted to... I need to give you my notice."

She places a letter on my desk. Folded in threes. Barely a paragraph long explaining why I won't be seeing her any longer.

And my chest cracks in two. And where the wind rattles through my ribs, filling the empty spaces, it blows across blue velvet.

Oh yes, *that's* what else she wanted to yell at him for. She placed her hands on her hips.

"Don't you mean as the *Golden Girl*, I'm expected to be there?"

He looked at her. "Excuse me?"

She stepped toward him. "I was hired to be Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations,

not the face of Malfoy Consulting Group."

"What are you going on about, Granger—?"

"I know about Wentworth," she snapped. She lowered her voice, moving away from the door. "You used me to get Wentworth to sign on – and countless others, I'm sure! Told him I would be working with M.C.G before the idea had even entered my head. I know you used my name and my reputation to enhance your own, just like you used Katya and I'm sick of it," she hissed.

"I might have said I was offering you the position," Draco said, raising a brow, "but I don't remember telling Wentworth you had signed on."

"But you didn't!" She stopped and whispered, "But you didn't offer me the position. You toasted a champagne glass at me." She crossed her arms.

"Same thing." Draco waved his hand, narrowing his eyes in confusion.

She huffed.

"Listen, Malfoy. I'm happy to defend you to those that don't believe in you, or write letters of recommendation. I'm happy to stand up for this company and what it represents. And I'm happy to help you make a mark in this world, but don't you dare assume anything about me without asking."

She sucked in a breath. There. It was done. She looked at Draco, and he was pressing his lips together.

He stood from his chair and stepped toward her, a slow pace around the desk.

"The only thing I assumed about you, Granger, was how ridiculously undervalued you were at the Ministry." His eyes were hot again, and she stepped to the right, hands grasping for one of his guest chairs as he advanced. "I assumed the Ministry would destroy you like it destroys all dreamers. And I assumed that you could do better."

"Steady breath. Stepping to the side of the guest chair, putting it between the two of them.

"You came to me with the werewolf project, knowing I couldn't resist—"

"I came to you with a project to lure you to me, yes. To make you see what you could be capable of. What we could be capable of." He stepped closer, stopping at the chair. "But I don't give a fuck about the werewolves."

She should snarl at him, berate him for being a hypocrite and single-minded. Instead, she shivered.

He saw it, and his eyes flashed at her, like they used to.

"You... You shouldn't have told people I'd be heading up this branch without knowing for sure."

"I created this branch for you," he whispered, and she watched his eyes flicker over her while she tried to catch her breath. "There would be no Non-Wizard Relations branch of Malfoy Consulting without you. It was tailor made for you and only you. To give you exactly what you wanted."

His knees were touching the chair, and she gripped the back of it, holding it between them like a shield. Her lips were dry. She wet them and regretted it as his eyes slipped downwards.

"Next time," she whispered, "ask me if I want it."

Her words slipped through the space between them like mist. She watched him breath them in, and she was suddenly unsure what it was they were even talking about. But she watched him nod once, and she felt the air shift, like they had an understanding.

He sucked in a deep breath, and she watched the heat in his eyes dissipate. "I would like for you to come with me to the Governors' Ball." He swallowed. And she kept from biting her cheek at the phrasing of his request. He continued, "There are several people attending who will not only be great connections for Malfoy Consulting, but also for you personally."

It was her turn to swallow. "I—I have nothing to wear."

A small smile lifted his lips, and he took a step away from the chair. "I'm sure we can get Pansy to whip something up."

He crossed back to his desk, away from her. She still gripped the back of the chair.

"She's in Italy. She's—" Hermione took a deep breath, now that he was away from her.

"She's on a project."

He stopped, remembering. He cursed under his breath. "You honestly have nothing at home?"

"I mean, if it was socially acceptable to wear the same dress I wore to New Year's..."

This was not the thing to bring up, clearly. She watched him turn to her, eyes hot. He quickly looked her over before looking away.

He cleared his throat. "Where did you get that dress?"

"It was... a small shop in Diagon Alley. I don't remember the name."

"Desrosiers?" he asked, crossing to his fireplace.

"Desrosiers." She watched him toss Floo powder into the fire and call out for

A thin woman with long grey hair popped her head through the fire, and her wrinkles pulled tight as she smiled brightly at Draco. She greeted him like an old friend, and suddenly, Draco was speaking French to her.

She'd never heard a more delectable sound.

Hermione gripped the back of the chair again. His voice dipped and flowed over the foreign words, and Hermione tried to catch on, but couldn't. He gestured to her, and scooted to the side.

"Mz Granger!" The woman gasped. "Yes, mademoiselle, I 'ave your measurements." She continued speaking French to Draco. He responded and then they were laughing about something. Hermione frowned.

They wrapped up, and the woman kissed the air. She disappeared. He stood from the fireplace.

"They'll send your dress directly to you by tomorrow afternoon. It's close enough to your New Year's dress without being too close."

He crossed back to his desk, and grabbed up his quill to write a note.

"Send me the bill," she said.

He chuckled. "Sure."

She narrowed her eyes at him, not entirely convinced. She watched him write, bent over his desk, hair falling into his eyes. He said nothing else to her, so she took her cue to leave.

She headed for the door, barely reaching it before he spoke out.

"What is different about your partnership with Pansy? She is riding on your coattails just as much."

She turned to him. "It's completely different."

He dotted an "i" and looked up at her. "How?"

"She... I'm getting something in return. It's helping her image as well as my own."

"So, you're not getting enough from our relationship, Granger?"

She had no idea how he managed to suck the air out of a room with only a few words and his eyes.

"That's not..." She looked away from him.

"I'll give you the Snidgets."

Her eyes snapped to him. He put his hands in his pockets. He continued, "Let's move up the court date."

"I don't... You're not..." She stammered as he watched her.

"Or the Muggle-Born Integration Project? It's approved," he said.

She blinked at him. She opened her mouth. And closed it.

He continued, "Or whatever pet project you want. It's yours. Fully supported."

Her heart beat wildly in her chest. She didn't know how she got him started on a negotiation. He started walking towards her, slowly. She wished she still had that chair...

smirked at her. "I wasn't aware one needed to declare the recipient upon requesting giftwrapping."

Her jaw dropped. Her eyes narrowed. "You know what, Malfoy?" she hissed. "Now that you mention it, giftwrapping is *not* a free service. It actually costs two sickles." She leaned her hands on his desk. "I had forgotten about it because no one else has ever been *idiotic* enough to ask for a *book* to be wrapped!"

Her volume had risen, so she took a slow breath while she glared at him. He remained in his chair, holding her eyes. Then he reached into his robes pocket, pulling out a pouch.

"Two sickles, you say?"

She gasped. "Don't you *dare* try to *pay* me."

"I'm not paying you, I'm paying Cornerstone."

"I don't *want* you to pay Cornerstone!"

"Then what do you want?" His voice had finally soared above a normal volume. He threw his hands out to the sides and his cheeks were pink.

Hermione looked at him from the other side of his black marble desk, chest heaving, and for a moment, she wondered if this was why he hadn't moved from his desk yet. Usually at this point in the argument, he had her pressed against a wall...

She took a deep breath, taking one step back from his desk. "I want to know," she said, "what the point was."

She watched as he took an even inhale, and said, "It was a way to spend three extra minutes with you."

She met his eyes, heart thundering. The grey in them was warmer than usual. She took a slow breath.

"Anything else, Granger?" He blinked and his eyes were back to neutral. Not cold, but not warm.

Her cheeks were hot, and she looked down at his desk. "No. Yes, that's all." She kept her eyes down. "Yes, alright," she stammered and headed towards the door. She felt like there was something else she needed to yell at him for...

"See you tomorrow."

She stopped at the door. "Tomorrow's Saturday."

He lifted his eyes to hers. Neutral. "The Governors' Ball."

She blinked at him. "I wasn't... I'm not going."

He narrowed his eyes. "Did you not receive the memo?"

"I—" she started. "It was an offer, not a necessity!"

He tapped a knuckle on his desk. "As a Senior Consultant and one of the major forces behind Malfoy Consulting, you are expected to be there."

The lift doors opened, and Blaise was leaning at the reception desk, flirting with Melody. When Melody saw her exiting the lift, she straightened and her smile disappeared. Blaise turned to Hermione and said something, but she ignored him, headed to the back office on the left.

His door was ajar, so she didn't bother asking the secretary anything. She marched in, closing the door behind her.

He looked up at her, and she could see his eyes flicker towards the closed door. He swallowed.

"Yes, Granger?" He looked back down to his paperwork.

"I just had a very interesting date."

Draco's eyes snapped to her. He looked her over head to toe. "Oh?"

"With Katya."

He held her eyes. "Oh." He gave a tiny shrug. "Didn't know she was in town."

She fumed. She pulled her wand from her robes, and muttered, "Silencio."

"Don't—" Draco clenched his jaw. "Please don't silence the room."

"But I want to yell at you." She hissed.

"If I know the room is silenced and the door is shut, this will be harder for me," he bit out, color rising in his cheeks.

She almost lost her breath, but that shivering thread of rage in her won out. She returned the sound to the room, and took a breath.

"Where are the books?"

He stared at her. "Books?"

"The books—!" She stopped herself, and adjusted her volume. "The giftwrapped books."

He shifted in his chair. "If they were gifts, then I'm sure I gave them away—"

Katya never received a book. She told me today." Hermione paced a bit. "I giftwrapped books for your *girlfriend* and now she's *not* your *girlfriend* and never *was* and she never received the books!" She lowered her voice. "I want to know what happened to them."

He studied her, lifting a brow. "You're truly upset about those books?"

"Yes!" She adjusted her volume. "I'm *livid* about the books," she hissed. She made up for volume by beginning to gesture wildly.

"Did I not purchase the books?"

"Yes, you did —"

"So after the transaction, was I not free to do with them whatever I please?"

She glared at him, watching him steeple his fingers, elbows on his desk.

"I spent valuable time and effort wrapping up those books for *Katya*, and now I hear that *Katya* never received those books. So, I want to know what the point was!" she whisper-yelled.

"I'm sorry," Draco began, with that touch of superiority that had her fuming. "I was under the impression that gift-wrapping at Cornerstone was a service provided to the customer." He

"But you'll need to realize that it's not Draco Malfoy they'll want to see at these galas and fundraisers and dinner parties. It's Hermione Granger, activist, warhero, Golden Girl. You'll need to use that celebrity to get what you want."

He stopped in front of her, close enough to touch. She breathed as evenly as she could, the echo of her first name on his lips.

She looked up at him through her lashes. "You may need to teach me how."

His jaw clicked. He took a deep breath, and she noticed his hands were still in his pockets, purposefully away from her. "We can start tomorrow night," he whispered.

She nodded.

He looked down, stepping back. "Your Bulgarian will be there tomorrow." He checked her reaction.

"Viktor?" She raised her brows. "At the Governors' Ball?"

"Mm-hm." Draco hummed. "You can talk to him about the Snidgets. Try to get his support."

She bit her lip, thinking. "Wonderful," she said, eyes dancing over the carpet.

"A few other people who I think you could get on your side for any of your causes," he said.

"I can introduce you."

She looked up at him. "Okay."

His eyes ran over her face and he said, "See you at seven."

The dress arrived Saturday morning. A box she recognized from the last time Desrosier's delivered a dress to her. Hermione pulled off the top, and peeled back the tissue paper, anxious to find what kind of dress Draco had ordered for her.

Her breath left her in a puff as her fingers dragged over the silk.
It was gold.

Hermione watched Katya. This woman who she had respected and hated and envied, and Hermione begged her to please explain.

Katya looked around, lowered her voice and said, "I have a fiancé in Bulgaria." She pointed to a ring that Hermione hadn't noticed. It was plain, yet lovely. "He's a Muggle."

Hermione's eyes snapped to her, waiting for the punchline.

"My father... He doesn't approve." Katya frowned at the table.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her. "I'm sorry. I thought your mother was... I had heard that you were half-blooded."

"She was Muggle-born. She was still a witch. My father sees a difference."

And like that, a vacuum had sucked all the confidence out of this girl at the mention of her father. Her posture slouched and she bit her lip. Katya looked up at Hermione and shook it off. "I needed a pretense. While Andrei and I saved our money, I needed a reason for my father not to set me up with the Durmstrang graduates, or Undersecretary to the Bulgarian Minister of Magic." She rolled her eyes. "But now Andrei and I are eloping next month." She smiled. "So... Andrei was alright with this arrangement?" Hermione tried to keep the judgment out of her voice. She tried. "You kissing another man for the papers?"

Katya laughed. "The first time was easy. But the second kiss, he did have a bit of a problem with." Hermione listened to her laugh bounce around the café as she remembered the image of Draco pushing Katya against the bricks, hands in her hair and on her hip. Katya's voice broke her out of it. "But Draco asked permission. He said he needed something more, just once."

"Why?" Hermione's voice was quiet. She knew the answer, but she desperately needed to hear it.

Katya batted her lashes as her, casting her eyes to the side quickly, then back to her. "For his father."

Hermione swallowed, hearing the words she had memorized...

Going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of you are pictured together in the paper.

Hermione felt ill. The waiter placed her salad down in front of her, and Katya began rambling about the charity she would be starting that year. Hermione kept to one word responses, not trusting her voice.

As they left each other, promising to keep in touch, Hermione turned and said, "Oh, Katya?"

The girl turned, hair moving in slow motion behind her.

"Did Draco ever give you a gift? A book, giftwrapped?"

Katya blinked at her. "No. I don't remember anything like that."

Hermione's blood boiled as she smiled at the Bulgarian girl. She waved a jaunty hand and spun on her heel, marching back to her office.

right amount of milk and the right number of sugar cubes, as suggested by Madame Michèle. Her spoon did not clink the cup as she stirred. But then again, neither did Hermione's.

"Oh, I'm so glad we had the chance to catch up! I've been *dying* to sit down with you ever since we met – well, before that!"

Hermione was struck with the same thought she had when she'd seen Katya in the papers with Draco: She smiles too much.

"I'm also glad we got a chance to really meet each other," Hermione said. "Will you be in town more often?" Hermione couldn't stop herself as the next words poured out of her. "At least through Monday. Valentine's Day?"

"Oh, no!" Katya pouted. "I leave for Bulgaria tomorrow. I won't be back until March at the earliest."

"Oh," Hermione said. She raised her brows as innocently as possible. "I would have thought you'd be spending Valentine's Day with Draco."

Why, Hermione. Why.

Katya waved a manicured hand, and said, "Oh, there was no need for that. We ended our arrangement a few months ago." Katya brought her teacup to her lips, hovering the saucer just below in a way Madame Michèle would approve.

Hermione's eye twitched as she watched her. "Arrangement?"

"Yes, the dating thing." Katya set her cup and saucer down, taking a look around the shop.

Hermione stared at her. Perhaps there was a Bulgarian-to-English translation issue at work here?

"Do you mean you broke up?"

Katya looked at her. "Broke up?" She seemed just as confused as Hermione was. Then it was like a light went off in Katya's head. "Oh! How strange!" She laughed. Hermione thought this was no laughing matter. "I thought Draco would have told you, since you're so close."

Hermione waited, ignoring her own confusion about Draco and her being "close."

Katya continued, looking at Hermione with kind eyes. "Draco and I had a relationship for the papers. We weren't actually involved." She leaned back. "I'm surprised he never told you." Hermione clenched her jaw. "As am I!" She bit out a laugh that sounded a little hysterical. "I'm afraid I still don't understand."

"He needed an exciting and desirable social life once he left Azkaban, to rehabilitate his image. So, we had an arrangement." Katya shrugged and flagged down the waiter.

They ordered and Hermione simmered. Once the waiter had left, Hermione turned to Katya. "I don't mean to be blunt, but didn't you feel used?"

"Oh, no," Katya said, smiling. "In fact, I think I got the better end of the bargain some days."



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty One

She told Morty about the Ball that night, and asked if possibly he could cover the last hour of the evening so she could get home and get ready.

"Absolutely not." He frowned at her. "You will leave at noon today, young lady."

She blinked at him. "I'm sorry?"

"The Valentine's Ball is a huge event! I don't want you doddering around a bookshop when you should be getting ready!"

She gaped at him. "I... Well, I don't need that much time. I'd hate to inconvenience you— And don't worry about tomorrow." He waved the air, beginning up the stairs to his flat.

"You'll need to recuperate!"

"What? No, Morty. I'll be in tomorrow!"

"Don't even think of it!" he yelled back at her.

She pouted. "Fine! But I'll be in by noon!"

The door slammed to his apartment.

She frowned.

When he forced her out of the store at twelve that day, Hermione went home and showered, preparing for Daphne and Tracey to come over.

She'd owled them as she left work the day before, asking if she could pay them to fix her up for the Ball.

It was odd, having the two of them over without Pansy. Pansy was always the one chatting and gossiping about old friends, so when Tracey played music from her wand, Hermione resolved to remain quiet for the afternoon.

"Do we want it up or down tonight?" Tracey asked, breaking the silence.

"Er..." Hermione stammered. The dress was similar to the New Year's Gala white dress. Ginny had made her wear her hair down that night, even though the witch styling her suggested up.

"What's your dress like?" Daphne asked, as she mixed some goo together to match her skin tone.

"It's gold. And floor-length."

"Will you go put it on?" Tracey asked with wide eyes. Daphne looked like she more wanted to make sure she was matching her makeup tones, but Tracey looked quite giddy.

"Er... yes..."

Hermione went to her room and slid into the gold dress. She hadn't tried it on yet. The silk was cold against her skin, and it was cut very much like the white dress. She was planning on transfiguring the color of her New Year's shoes to gold so she could wear them with this dress too.

She came out of her room. Tracey gasped. Daphne appeared over her shoulder and sent her a very Slytherin smirk.

Hermione stepped into the living area where the light was better. "I'll need to wear a different bra, I know," she said as she turned. The dress was backless just like the white one, but the front was slightly different.

Just as Tracey was about to talk about her hair again, the fireplace roared to life and Ginny's head popped through. Her eyes went wide.

"What the fuck are you wearing! What is that!?" Her mouth dropped open.

"I - Ginny!" Hermione jumped. "What are you doing?"

"What are you doing? I go out of town for three days and now you're the Queen of England?"

"I'm going to a Valentine's Ball tonight."

Ginny gasped. "With Malfoy?"

Hermione's eyes popped out of her head. Ginny couldn't see Daphne and Tracey from her view of the living room. Hermione had also not gotten a chance to talk with Ginny about much of anything this week.

"With... Malfoy Consulting, yes," Hermione tried. She looked to Daphne and Tracey quickly.

Tracey was smirking, heating up a few hair instruments, and Daphne raised a brow at her.

"*Mertin's beard*, Hermione." Ginny looked her up and down again. "Do you need me to teach you the Contraceptive Charm before you go?"

Ginny wiggled her eyebrows at her. Hermione froze with her mouth open. She heard Tracey snort.

"...I..." Hermione stammered. "Tracey and Daphne are here, doing my hair and makeup."

Hermione grinned and nodded and laughed and giggled and asked how he was going to do it, would he be romantic or spontaneous, how did Arthur react, what restaurant were they going to. She listened to him and the weight in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

Harry was getting married, Ron was dating a nice girl, and Hermione was playing grab-ass with Draco Malfoy once a week.

Friday morning, Hermione stared at her planned outfit for that day, and frowned. There was something slightly off about it. It was like the colors didn't go together, or maybe it was the hem of the skirt.

She thought about calling Pansy over to figure out what was wrong with her, but she was in Italy, designing a Debutant Ball dress for the daughter of the Italian Minister of Magic. It was a big deal for her, and Hermione didn't think "lunch date with Katya Viktor" qualified as an emergency.

Draco met her with coffee again, like he had on Thursday morning as well. It seemed like this was going to be a habit. He would take the fifteen seconds they had to pace to her office door to fill her in on anything pressing, any meetings they should take, and then leave her at her office, staring after him as he headed back to his own.

She escaped from the office at ten minutes to noon, and headed to the only wizarding café near the M.C.G. office. She'd never been there but Katya said it was "to die for."

Katya was early. Earlier than her, which was hard to do. She stood from the table with a bright smile and silky arms and enveloped Hermione in the friendliest hug she'd ever had from a stranger.

Well. It didn't seem Katya knew anything about Hermione's kisses with her on-again-off-again lover...

"My dearest!" Katya pulled back from the hug and gripped Hermione's upper arms. "You look splendid!" Katya's eyes ran over Pansy's outfit for today, and Hermione bit back some comment that Madame Michele would describe as "not taking a compliment."

Katya ran her fingers over the fabric on Hermione's shoulder. "Oh, I wish Pansy Parkinson would build for me! She is so talented!" Hermione almost laughed, remembering Pansy's distain for the Bulgarian girl. Katya continued, "And, of course, the clothes are nothing if the right witch is not in them!" Bright white teeth. And then Katya's hand was touching Hermione's face lovingly.

Hermione figured out a way to thank her and slither out of her grasp so they could sit, getting the attention off of her.

They chatted a bit about their holidays, ordered drinks from the sweet old witch who ran the place, and fixed their tea and coffee the way they liked it. Katya, she observed, used exactly the

"Er, nothing's wrong." Harry pushed his glasses up and started to twist his fingers around themselves. "Can we sit?"

Hermione stared at him. What had she done? Was this about Draco? Was he finally telling her his opinions? Was someone hurt? Had something awful happened?

She sat at the dining room table, legs feeling quite wobbly. Harry sat across from her. He took a deep breath, and the words came tumbling out of his mouth.

"I'm going to ask Ginny to marry me."

Hermione felt her brows lift, but that was the only part of her moving. She couldn't feel her heart beating, or her lungs expanding. She stared at him.

Smile. You were supposed to smile when this happened.

Hermione smiled. She giggled. "Harry!"

Harry's worried face evaporated and he grinned at her.

"When!?"

"Monday," he said. "Valentine's Day."

She brought her hands to her mouth. "Why were you so nervous to tell me?"

"I dunno," Harry laughed. He rubbed his eyes. "You're the last person on my list – besides Ginny, of course – and I'm just so relieved that it's half done now."

The last person...

"Who else?"

He looked down at the table. "I went to see Arthur this week. And last weekend, I went to Ireland."

To see Ron. Hermione nodded. He went to a different country before seeing her. Then she remembered the awkward and horrifying lunch date they'd had last week, when he'd walked in on her and Draco. He'd asked her to lunch that day. But unfortunately, Hermione had made it all about her.

She bit her cheek. "Which of those conversations was harder?" She laughed.

"Ron, surprisingly." Harry nodded his head. "He's well, by the way."

"Excellent."

"He's... Well, he's seeing someone." Harry looked up at her. Hermione swallowed.

"Yes, he told me at Christmas."

"Yeah," Harry said. He scratched his face. "I mean her. She's really nice."

Hermione took a slow breath. "That's great."

Harry looked back at her. "Anyway, I'm glad you know about me and Ginny." Harry smiled.

Hermione nodded, smiling as brightly as she could. "Do you have the ring on you?"

Harry blushed and pulled the box out of his robes.

Tracey came over to wave. Ginny lifted her brows. "Oh, hello." Like it didn't bother her one bit.

"Alright, did you need something, Ginny?" Hermione felt her face flushing, and knew Daphne would be able to see it as she started applying her makeup.

"I was just popping in to let you know that I'll be home later tonight. Tomorrow's match is rescheduled due to weather," Ginny said. "But it looks like you won't be home!"

"Oh, alright. I'll see you when I get back then," Hermione said, aching to take off the dress.

"Have fun! Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Ginny winked at her, and disappeared.

Hermione closed her eyes. When she opened them, Tracey was looking over at her, hiding a smile.

"So. Up or down?"

"Er... Would up be best? Or is down alright?"

Hermione could hear a voice against her ear, whispering *Never do this* as he ripped her ponytail out. She looked up at Tracey, and it was like Tracey heard it too.

She smirked. "Let's do a little bit of both."

Hermione changed out of the gold dress, returned to the chair in the living room in her bathrobe, and let the girls continue. Daphne started applying her concealer, and Hermione tried to keep her face from flushing.

Daphne pulled back, looking down at her.

"Granger, are those love-bites?"

Hermione looked up at her, mortified as Daphne stared at her neck.

She popped through the fireplace at seven o'clock. The hall at the governor's mansion was just as large as Malfoy Manor, but instead of marble and snowflakes, she found warm tapestries and fluttering hearts.

She joined the receiving line, heading toward an entryway with swooping drapes, tied back with vines and finished with low lanterns.

Hermione realized she didn't have an invitation. Or an escort. At the New Year's Gala, she'd been sent an invitation and had even brought it with her, in case Narcissa needed to see it. Now she was just wandering toward a candlelit opening with a group of people, with nothing but the memory of a memo on her desk.

As she approached, she saw there was no list, and no one checking invitations, but she also had no idea who was standing at the entrance, shaking hands. He was a grey-bearded gentleman with kind eyes, and his considerably younger wife hung off his arm like a purse.

"Miss Granger!" the man said. He smiled brightly at her and Hermione decided to smile back.

He shook her hand and introduced her to his wife. The woman shook hands like Madame Michele liked, and Hermione reciprocated.

"I'm honored to be here tonight. Thank you for inviting Malfoy Consulting Group."

"Of course, of course!" He patted his chest with pride. "We are so excited to see what young Mr. Malfoy and yourself achieve."

She nodded politely, noting that he picked out only her and Draco from the whole of Malfoy Consulting.

He continued, "I believe Mr. Malfoy is already inside. Please enjoy yourself tonight, Miss Granger."

She smiled and stepped under the canopy of drapes, following the silks toward an entrance. She found herself on the second story of a large ballroom, counting twelve chandeliers lighting the room. Before her, the staircase split, rounding down the two sides to pour into the ballroom.

She was just wondering to herself if the purpose of the two staircases was aesthetic, or if there was a proper staircase to enter from, when Draco appeared at the bottom of the staircase to her right.

And it was decided.

She placed her hand on the railing, letting her other gather the silk material at her hip to keep from tripping, and stepped off the landing. She kept her eyes on him. He wore a white suit and a smirk.

He let his eyes wander down her form once before returning his gaze to her face. She felt a blush running up her neck before a flash went off to her left, and she turned her head to see Skeeter and her photographer set up in the middle of the two staircases.

"Miss Granger! You look stunning!" Skeeter screeched. "Tell me, do you have your eye on someone special this Valentine's Day?"

She stopped on the staircase, and blinked at her. She opened her mouth, make a squeaking sound, and closed it.

She turned back to Draco, still watching her, four stairs away.

How mortifying. Was this a date, or wasn't it?

And it was *her* decision in that moment?

Draco looked down. She watched him shift backwards, like he was about to step away from the stairs. From her. Step out of the way, and remove himself from the moment.

Hermione turned to Skeeter. "I will refuse to answer that incredibly invasive question, Rita, but if you'd like to photograph me walking away with Draco Malfoy, feel free."

Rita's eyes grew wide and greedy. She saw Bozo lifting the lens quickly, and Hermione turned to find Draco's eyes flashing at her.

M.C.G. had been invited. She rolled her eyes at it, despising the celebration of Valentine's Day just as much as the actual day. Harry would be out of town this weekend visiting Ginny at her match in Canada, so she couldn't count on either of them to go with her to this thing.

She started flipping through the fan mail and personal letters first, and landed on a beautiful burnt orange envelope with loopy scrawl across the front.

Miss Hermione Granger

Hermione frowned at it. She flipped it open and her eyes grew wider and wider.

My dearest Hermione!

I am just finally back in the U.K. from the holidays, and I would love to take you to lunch! I need to congratulate you on all your success with Malfoy Consulting Group! I've been dying to pick your brain on a charity I'm beginning back home. Please let me know if you are free at the end of this week!

Love to you,

Katya

Hermione dropped the letter on her desk, and ran her hands over her face.

Are you fucking serious.

Thursday evening, Hermione's dance class took a surprising turn. A familiar tune played out of the gramophone, and Miss Truesdale announced that they would be working on the French Waltz that evening.

The French Waltz, coincidentally, was the only pure-blood dance Hermione knew. It was the one she'd learned for the Yule Ball, memorized and practiced – desperate to not embarrass herself on Viktor Krum's arm. The one in which she'd momentarily spin around Draco, hands not touching, and therefore, the one she had ingrained in her head for the past five years.

Not that she told Miss Truesdale this. She simply nodded her head as she was shown the formation, and how to count a waltz, and how to stay on the balls of her feet. She turned the wrong way few times just for show, but by the end of the lesson, Miss Truesdale had a small look of satisfaction lifting her features.

That night, she let herself into her flat, feeling like there was nothing she'd rather do than just lay down, read, and fall asleep.

Harry stood from the couch as she entered.

"Oh, hello."

"Hey, Hermione." He rubbed his palms on his trousers.

"I thought Ginny was in Canada?"

"She is," he said, scratching his ear. "I let myself in."

"Oh." She set her purse down, and kicked off her heels. "What's wrong?"

"I don't have guests, really," she said. "The only person who sits there is Blaise."

"Oh, then we'll leave them." He grinned up at her.

She met his eyes, warmer than usual. She was unsure what it was they were doing. Her lips twitched at his joke, but she didn't understand where this part of him was coming from.

She decided to move the conversation back to the Snidgets. "So, we'll plan on April for a court date?"

Draco nodded. They moved on to discuss her fundraising goals.

"I think it would help to get the Golden Snidgets case into the public view," Draco said. "Not a lot of people know their history, or their relation to Quidditch. We could get more eyes on their case with some assistance from the handful of Quidditch players we know." He looked at her carefully.

She raised her brow, pondering the idea, and suddenly said, "Oh! I wonder if I could get in contact with Viktor!"

Her brain started forming around this plan, thinking of how interesting it could be to have a Quidditch spokesperson, someone to interview. She looked up to Draco and found his lips tight.

"I was referring to the Weasleys, but, yes," Draco said, rubbing his jaw, "Krum could be useful, too."

Oh, of course, Ron and Ginny. She hadn't really spoken to Ron since he wrote her that nasty note a few weeks back.

"What is it you're thinking?" she asked.

"I think going public with the project might help," Draco said. "Get Skeeter to do a write-up. Even see if Lovegood's paper would be interested."

Hermione nodded. This was wonderful. "You know who else was really quite interested in the Snidgets? Rolf Scamander," she said. "He would probably love to bring attention to this as well."

She looked up at him with wide, excited eyes, and saw him still, clench his jaw, then release it.

"Wonderful." He stood. "Go ahead and make some initial contact, and make arrangements for Walter to head out next week." He grabbed up his notes and headed to her door.

"Thank you, Draco." She bit her lip as soon as it left her mouth.

He turned to her, nodded, and left.

Later in the day, Walter brought in her mail. He continued to separate the personal letters from the business ones, trying not to read through the personal ones once he was able to distinguish between the two. He gave her an interoffice memo that let everyone know that the Governors of Hogwarts were hosting a Valentine's Day Ball that Saturday night, and all of

She continued descending the last four steps, lifting her hand from the railing and slipping it into Draco's outstretched hand.

His fingers were warm as they slid across her palm, and the camera flashed. He tucked her arm around his, and turned them as she stepped off the last stair, heading away from Skeeter, and it was at that moment that Hermione realized that Draco's white suit was embroidered with gold thread.

She grinned down at her shoes, and Draco steered her to a tray of champagne glasses with strawberries at the bottom. He handed her a glass, and just as he turned to say something to her, a familiar voice caught her ear.

"Miss Hermione Granger!"

She turned and found Professor Slughorn sloshing toward them, his glass of brandy slopping around the edges and his cheeks ruddy.

"Professor!"

She barely had time to take him in before he was pressing a light kiss to her cheek. Oh, my. "Miss Granger! You are a *vision*, my dear!" He turned his eyes on Draco. "And my favorite Slytherin – don't tell Mr. Zabini;" he whispered.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Draco smirked, and shook his hand.

"I knew it, I said," Slughorn hiccupped. "I knew that I had chosen an excellent bunch for the Slug Club that year! Wildly successful consulting firm containing not one, but *three* of my students!"

Hermione pressed her lips together, keeping herself from mentioning that Draco had other things on his mind that year...

"Oh!" Slughorn burst. "I want to introduce you to someone, Miss Granger." He started turning away from them, gesturing for them to follow. "She was before your time at Hogwarts, but she would be an excellent contact for you."

They followed, Draco slipping her arm from his elbow, and placing his hand on her lower back.

That was so much worse. The silk was cool against her skin but heated immediately upon contact with him.

She mingled and spoke with Slughorn's friend. Thirty minutes into the evening, Hermione was surprised at how Slughorn had tossed them about the room, introducing them to four people who would all make excellent resources or clients for Malfoy Consulting. Hermione sipped her champagne and found a new respect for Horace Slughorn.

Throughout all the introductions, Draco kept his hand on her back. She couldn't tell which was worse – toward the beginning when he had his palm so low on the curve that she could feel electricity running in all directions every time she moved, or when he'd brought his hand slightly

higher when they were speaking to the vampire novelist, letting his thumb brush across the bare skin in a way that could be purely accidental, but made every hair on her body stand up and shake.

"Ah! Mr. Buckworth!" Slughorn's voice pulled her out of her thoughts. "Mr. Buckworth, come meet my friends here."

A broad man about her grandfather's age approached, extending his hand to Slughorn. She felt Draco shift next to her, and she glanced at him quickly to see that he was focused solely on Mr. Buckworth.

"Mr. Buckworth, you know my friend Draco Malfoy, yes?" Slughorn gestured to Draco with his brandy glass. Hermione thought she maybe felt a drop land on her foot.

Buckworth looked to Draco. "Lucius's boy. My, my. You've been making quite a splash!" Buckworth smiled and shook Draco's hand.

At Lucius's mention, Hermione checked in with Draco, waiting for his eye to twitch or for his feathers to ruffle at being called "Lucius's boy." Draco grimed. And shook his hand enthusiastically.

"Thank you Buckworth. My father talks about you very fondly. And you, of course, know Hermione Granger?"

She felt a slight push on her back, and she was stepping forward to shake hands with a friend of Lucius Malfoy. For the second day in a row, the sound of her first name from Draco's lips paused her brain processes.

"I don't know if I've had the pleasure!" Mr. Buckworth's smile was kind, and she appreciated that his eyes didn't rake down her body like so many of the people she'd been introduced to this evening. "Rhett Buckworth, Miss Granger."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Buckworth. Do you know Horace from Hogwarts?"

"Er, yes and no." Mr. Buckworth chuckled and Slughorn giggled into his brandy. "Despite being a terrible student at Hogwarts, I worked with Horace after my time there, working with potions and the like."

"Oh, wonderful," Hermione said.

"Tell me, Mr. Buckworth, do you still keep in touch with Geoffrey Townsend?"

Hermione looked to Draco. He had a glint in his eye that she recognized, but it was so faint that she was sure no one else would see it.

"Geoffrey?" Mr. Buckworth leaned his torso in, like he hadn't heard correctly. "My! I haven't seen Geoffrey in years! Mighty fine potioneer, wasn't he, Horace?" Slughorn mumbled something into his glass.

Oh, thank god.

"Alright," he said, walking to her desk, pushing his hair back. He tossed something – some paperwork – on her desk and took one of her guest chairs. "Let's go over this."

Hermione had the horrifying thought that the portfolio he'd just tossed on her desk contained the Love Contract or the Conflict of Interest or any number of unpleasant things.

He scooted his chair forward, and opened the portfolio.

"The Snidget Sanctuary," he said, running his eyes over the paper. "Have they provided actual numbers of decline, or just estimations?"

He looked up at her, and blinked quickly, like he was clearing his vision.

She took a moment to figure out what exactly was happening before she cleared her throat and responded, "Those are estimations based on last year's decline."

"So, the first thing would be to send our people out to get actual numbers, based on this year, and also, projected decline for the next year." He looked down at the paperwork, and Hermione finally put two-and-two together. It was her Snidget proposal, with notes scratched all over it. He'd reviewed it.

"Your revised timeline and projected budget is much more workable than your first, but to cut costs dramatically, I'd like to send only Walter out to Somerset." He looked up at her to gauge her reaction.

She could feel herself about to pout –

"He could go out as early as next week," Draco said. "But if you go with him, you'll start to miss several important dates and deadlines for the Werewolf Policy."

Hermione clicked her jaw shut. *This is what compromise was, Hermione...*

She didn't like it one bit.

"Yes," she said. "If we can start as early as next week, then that would be wonderful."

He nodded at her. "I still think setting the court date in March is too ambitious." She pursed her lips. "I anticipate that the Wizengamot will be quite fed up with us by the end of the Werewolf Policy proceedings, and to jump on them with another project not weeks after our first might cause some backlash."

"But they should be impartial," Hermione said, frowning. "They should look at each case as separate entities."

Draco raised a brow at her. "They should..." His *but they don't* didn't need to be said.

He shifted in his seat, trying to cross his legs unsuccessfully. He looked down at the chair. "I'll need to get you better chairs. These are awful." She watched him move to a different position.

"I like these chairs."

"You must hate your guests, then."

Her stomach twisted.

She watched his eyes lift to hers from the paperwork he was reading. He nodded in greeting and took a deep breath, calming. She wouldn't have noticed it a week ago, but she felt like she'd been synchronized with his breathing now, the way his exhale pushed into her mouth on her inhale –

She stepped out of the lift, not knowing what her face was doing, and turned right to walk to her office. He fell into step with her.

"Morning," he said.

She looked up at him and found a hand extending a coffee cup to her. She blinked at it. It was a to-go cup, with the name of a coffee shop around the corner.

"Mr. Townsend wants to come in to go over paperwork tomorrow. Finalize things."

She took the coffee cup from him, forgetting manners entirely and saying nothing in thanks.

"Okay."

"Is just before lunch alright?"

"Yes." She stared at the cup in her hands. He could have checked her schedule with Walter. They reached her door.

"I have some ideas for the remainder of the fundraising that we can go over when convenient for you."

She looked up at him. His face was still, eyes grey and neutral, but he wasn't cold like before. "Excellent," she said.

They stood there for a moment, in front of her office door, staring at each other, before he nodded and turned to walk back to his office. She might have been mistaken, but she could almost see his eyes slide over her neck before he turned away. She brought her free hand to her bruise, and her coffee to her lips as she watched him walk away. Perfect ratio of sweetener to cream.

Which "before" did he mean, when he said they'd go back to before?

Not an hour later, once Hermione was settled and finally invested in her work, did he come again.

"Granger."

She jumped at his voice and double-jumped when she looked up to see him in her doorway.

"Yes?"

"Are you free?"

She blinked at him. "Yes?"

He entered her office and her heart stopped when he started closing the door... but then he left cracked, a sliver of the rest of the office visible.

"Granger just had a meeting with him last week," Draco said. Hermione blinked at him. Was he not there at dinner as well? Draco looked down at her and gave her the smallest nod that she couldn't dream of interpreting correctly.

"Is that right?" Mr. Buckworth said. "He always loved beating me at Quidditch in school. How is the old fellow?"

Hermione turned to Mr. Buckworth. "He's wonderful. I had a lovely meeting with him." She felt Draco's hand on her back, pressing slightly. She gave it a whirl. "We were discussing my current project, the Werewolf Policy. We're taking it to the Wizengamot next month, trying to get equal rights for employment and education for werewolves. Mr. Townsend was so generous – he pledged a considerable amount to our fundraising goal."

"Oh?" Mr. Buckworth said. And Hermione watched the man's lips twist and his eyes narrow. Had she said something wrong? He continued, "So Geoffrey is still throwing his money around, is he?"

Draco chuckled next to her. Hermione felt like she was missing something. Was she not supposed to bring up the fundraising? "How much did he pledge?" Mr. Buckworth asked, eyes squinting. Hermione blinked at him.

"I think just about half of the goal," Draco supplied, looking down at her like he needed confirmation of his facts. The glint was still in his eyes, and she recognized it. She'd seen it before on him. It meant he was winning.

"Of course, he did," Mr. Buckworth muttered. He looked at a spot over Hermione's shoulder, then brought his eyes back to her. "At your next meeting, you tell him that his old pal Rhett matched his donation." He looked to Draco. "And he sent a lovely fruit basket on Monday morning."

What... what just happened.

Draco chuckled, saying something about Mr. Buckworth's generosity and shook his hand. They made some kind of joke about how Draco's favorite fruit was those chocolate-dipped strawberries, and Hermione felt Draco's thumb brush across her skin again. Like praise. Slughorn pulled Mr. Buckworth's attention with an old story about flooberworms, and Hermione turned to Draco's shoulder.

"I have no idea what just happened," she whispered.

"You just secured your fundraising for your first project, Granger." His voice washed over the top of her head and down her neck.

"I... I didn't do anything, though."

"You were perfect."

He was teaching her, like he'd promised.

She was elated that they had just secured the funding for the Werewolf Project. She was confused at how they had done it, but she felt slightly giddy.

As Slughorn grabbed the attention of a passing gentleman, Draco leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"I need to speak with Horace about something, but this gentleman here is the youngest Hogwarts governor. He's also Muggle-born."

She looked up into his grey eyes, and nodded. This was her opportunity to discuss the Muggle-born Integration Program with someone who could actually support it.

Draco shook the governor's hand, and stepped to the side with Slughorn – hand sliding across her back as he moved away, thumb grazing the skin – as Hermione introduced herself. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Draco asked Slughorn a question, and the older man's eyes opened wide and he nodded erratically. Slughorn escorted Draco away, and Hermione refocused on her discussion with the Hogwarts governor.

Twenty minutes later, as she was saying goodbye to the governor, promising to be in touch, Draco had still not returned. She set her empty champagne glass down on a passing tray and turned to see that the dancing had started in the middle of the ballroom. She edged her way toward a pillar, and searched the room for someone familiar to talk to.

"Merlin, what a sight!"

She turned to see Blaise approaching her, running his eyes over her dress, her hair.

"Eyes up here, Blaise." She pointed at her face.

"An impossible request."

She looked him over. He was wearing a pink suit. She blinked at him, amazed at his nerve.

"Someone's in the Valentine's Day spirit," she said.

He leaned with her against the pillar and said, "Well, I assumed most single women would be in red for the Ball. I wanted to make sure I matched for the pictures."

She grinned. "And how are the prospects? Anyone caught your eye?"

"Besides present company, you mean?" He winked at her. "There's not enough singles here," he whined, looking out over the dancers. "A few here and there, but I don't even have my proper wingman. Even *Draco*'s here with someone."

She felt her blood run cold and the smile drop off her face. She looked at him, searching wildly.

"What?"

Blaise kept his eyes on the crowd. "Some gorgeous model in a gold dress."

Hermione frowned, trying to suck in air. That's why he was in gold accents. To match a different girl in a gold dress. Why would he...? Was he with her now?

She turned to scan the dance floor, looking for gold.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty



He had bruised her. Marked her.

Hermione stared at the love bite on her neck, her hand pulling her hair back.

Claimed her.

She let her hair fall. She considered not covering it, remembering that he hadn't covered the marks she had left on him, but it still didn't make sense to her why he'd left them.

Then she thought of what people in the office might think if they saw. What Blaise might say...

She covered the love bite with a charm, and then even further with makeup. She stood in the elevator up to M.C.G. on Wednesday morning, running through her head all the reasons she had tried to quit yesterday.

Her projects were getting shot down.

She wasn't getting the support she needed to pursue her ideas.

She was bored with the current project she was working on, and it was the *only* project she was allowed to work on.

Her boss was ignoring her and treating her like a nuisance.

Her boss was using her as a means for publicity.

She had a volatile relationship with her boss that had an unpredictability that had started to give her stomachaches.

She decided to leave out any sexual harassment claims from this list, due in part to the fact that she would hate to sound like a hypocrite. He kissed her first. Then she kissed him second.

She shook these thoughts from her mind before it could ask *Who would kiss third?*

The lift doors opened. She raised her eyes from the floor, steeling her expression, and her gaze landed on Draco, standing at the reception desk.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Eighteen



Wednesday, February 9, 2000

I'm waiting for her with coffee. Like I used to.

The lift doors open, and I focus on the heat under my fingertips, not tucking *her* away, but closing the lid on my desires. Like before.

I tell her about our meeting tomorrow, walk her to her door. I watch the way her eyes drink me in.

We're done. Stopped talking. I watch her eyes float across my face, and I wonder if she remembers it like I do. If she thought about me last night.

I wonder if she's ever touched herself while thinking of me.

I should leave.

My eyes drift to her neck, hoping she left the picture I painted on her skin.

But of course, she's covered the love-bites.

Back to before.

Like we didn't happen.

~*~

I wanted to visit her after lunch to discuss her proposal, go over my notes. But I can't wait even an hour. Once I'm seated in her awful chairs, sitting in front of her, I feel like I can breathe again.

We negotiate until I can give her everything she wants.

I try to make jokes about her chairs that land flat, and I watch the way her eyes flip away from me whenever she's had them on me for too long.

"I think it would help to get the Golden Snidgets case into the public view," I say. "Not a lot of people know their history, or their relation to Quidditch. We could get more eyes on their case with some assistance from the handful of Quidditch players we know."

I'm already regretting bringing up the Weasel, but then—

"Oh! I wonder if I could get in contact with Viktor!"

Viktor. What joy.

"Krum could be useful, too."

I try to relax my jaw, discussing the promotional campaign with her more, when she's suddenly bringing up Rolf Scamander as well. I have to remind myself that neither of them have been in bed with her.

She thanks me as I leave her office, and I guess that's enough.

I cross the floor to find Blaise waiting for me at my door. I nod to him. He follows me in and shuts the door.

"You've returned to us."

"Pardon?" I sit in my chair.

"You were gone a for a week. And now you're back."

He's being witty. Like my Occlumency was a vacation. Or a death I've returned from.

I'm not amused.

"Yes," I say.

"What prompted your return," he says, fiddling with the papers on my desk, eyeing me.

"It wasn't sustainable," I say, dismissing him.

I can't share with him again. I can't talk about kissing her like we'll be doing it again.

~*~

Friday, February 11, 2000

I put several of the interns on researching the guest list for the Governor's Ball. When one of them – Tommy! – comes in with their analysis, I find several people who we could connect to, who Granger could impress.

Dr. Henry Flanders – Attending Healer at St. Mungo's

Expert in magical neurology; memory; motor function.

-Hogwarts class of 1965 – Ravenclaw

-Oxford class of 1970 – Experimental Psychology

The list goes on. Tommy is very detailed.

But my eyes linger on *memory*.

Then my door is opening, and Granger is stomping in.

Merlin. What have I done now.

She shuts the door. And my fingers curl on my notes. "Yes, Granger?"

She watched his face, his jaw open and his eyes squeezing shut. He dropped his head onto her chest, and breathed out, the air hot against her skin. One hand was still gripping her hair, and the other tight on her hip. His body was heavy against her, and she slowly ran her hands from his shoulders, across his back and up into his wet hair, repeating the motion over and over like waves.

She wondered if maybe they slept like this. Then she felt his lips brush against the top of her breast, his tongue flicking out to taste the sweat on her chest. Then he shifted and slid out of her.

That was an odd feeling.

His arms shook as he pushed himself up, kneeling over her. She remembered just how naked she was as he took one last look at her before standing, and offered his hands so she could sit up.

They got dressed. Well, he got dressed, and then he transfigured a robe for her out of her torn dress. He found a pot of Floo powder on the mantle, and after she'd given up the search for her underwear, she joined him at the fireplace, holding her shoes.

"If you're planning to go back out there," she said. "You'll need a look in the mirror first."

His hair was a mess, his face was flushed, and her lipstick was all over him.

He nodded at her. "I'll make excuses for you."

Hermione nodded, imagining all sorts of things.

Granger had to leave. She's gotten well and truly shagged and now she needs a rest.

Please excuse Granger; she's looking for her underwear.

She looked up and he was watching her. He stepped into her, and kissed her lightly on her lips. She swallowed, and he tossed the powder into the fireplace. She stepped through, and muttered her location.

She watched his eyes swirl away from her as the flames licked at her.

She stepped out into her living room. It was late.

She dropped her shoes, turned, and went to Ginny's room. She was asleep.

Hermione sat on Ginny's bed and shook her shoulder.

Ginny's eyes opened slowly. "Hey. Did you have fun."

Hermione stared at her.

"I need you to teach me the Contraceptive Charm."

Ginny was suddenly wide awake.

He let that hand trail down her stomach, rounding her hips and pulled her knee up slightly, and it was like he slid in deeper. She wasn't that big of a fan but she got to watch his face and hear him grunt.

That was more better.

She watched him, his eyes pressed closed and his breath pushing out, and the sweat darkening his hair. Every few thrusts he would drag his lip into his mouth and release it on the next thrust. She liked that.

She was just getting used to the rhythm, starting to count the thrusts when his eyes drifted open. She watched her breath move his hair.

"Can I go faster?"

His voice was low, and raspy, and everything she wanted. She nodded. He snapped his hips, and watched her reaction. She pressed her lips together, and nodded that he could continue.

He brought his forehead down to hers again, and lowered his upper body down on her. He grabbed the leg that was around his hip, and held it there as his hips moved.

That was... better.

At least she could feel his chest against hers, her breasts rubbing him.

Then the hand that held her leg to him slipped around, and in the little space he had, he touched her again.

That was best. Yes, that was the best.

She groaned as she pushed against it. She almost wanted it to stop, so she squeezed quickly, and Draco's rhythm stuttered. He found it again, just in time for her to try squeezing again. He groaned and got even faster. And his fingers played with her even faster.

She felt sweet between their bodies, and she was starting to gasp. This was best. This was sex and it was best.

The hand that propped him up, holding him above her, starting winding into her hair. She felt a slight tug, and his lips her on her neck, his hand between their bodies, and his fingers in her hair.

"Fuck..." he whispered.

And she moaned. And he slipped, and worked her harder. She was at the top, and she stared at her chandelier, and she bit her lip, and he pressed a light kiss to her cheek.

And she groaned, letting her mind close and her body open.

She grabbed at his back, and he snapped his hips and she cried, and squeezed him. He slowed as she fell apart, and once she was coming down, she opened her eyes and he was watching her.

She swallowed, and smiled. And he snapped his hips against her four more times before he groaned and tremored.

"I just had a very interesting date." I look up at her again. "Oh?" I hadn't thought when I'd given her coffee this morning that she looked so smashing because she had a lunch date.

Why would she tell me this.

"With Katya."

Oh.

"Oh," I look back down to the list. "I didn't know she was in town."

I hear a whispered "Silencio" and my heart screams.

"Don't—Please don't silence the room."

"But I want to yell at you." Fuck, she's so cute.

I breathe deep. "If I know the room is silenced and the door is shut, this will be harder for me."

What a mess. I hate this "openness."

She looks at me like it hasn't occurred to her that I want to fuck her into my desk. She blushes.

And I feel disgusting for saying it out loud.

She counters her spell, and turns back to me, still fuming.

"Where are the books?"

"Books?"

"The books—!" she yells, then whispers, "The giftwrapped books."

Of all the things I've done in my life... all the lies I told, all the people I've hurt... I should have known she'd lose her shit over those books.

"If they were gifts," I try, "then I'm sure I gave them away—"

"Katya never received a book. She told me today," she says. "I giftwrapped books for your *girlfriend* and now she's *not* your *girlfriend* and never was and she never received the books! I want to know what happened to them."

So, Katya told her about the ruse. The way she keeps hissing the word "girlfriend" reminds me of our bookshop. Of the way she used to read about my dates in the paper the next day.

"You're truly upset about those books?"

"Yes!" she screams, and then hisses lower, "I'm *livid* about the books."

"Did I not purchase the books?"

"Yes, you did—"

"So, after the transaction, was I not free to do with them whatever I please?"

She looks like she wants to strangle me. And although the fantasy has crossed my mind—

"I spent valuable time and effort wrapping up those books for *Katya*, and now I hear that *Katya* never received those books. So, I want to know what the point was!"

Her logic is unsound. Which means her emotions are in the way. Which means she *feels* something.

“I’m sorry,” I say, not sorry. “I was under the impression that gift-wrapping at Cornerstone was a service provided to the customer. I wasn’t aware one needed to declare the recipient upon requesting giftwrapping.”

Her jaw drops open, like I’ve cursed her cat. “You know what, Malfoy? Now that you mention it, giftwrapping is *not* a free service. It actually costs two sickles.” She leans down against my desk and I have to force myself to stay seated. “I had forgotten about it because no one else has ever been *idiotic* enough to ask for a *book* to be wrapped!”

Her eyes are hot, and burning into me. She wants me to fight her back, wants me to test her. But if I push too far I’ll forget myself.

I reach for my coin purse. “Two sickles, you say?”

“Don’t you *dares* try to *pay* me.”

“I’m not paying you, I’m *paying* Cornerstone.”

“I don’t *want* you to pay Cornerstone!”

“Then what do you want!?”

I can feel the fever running up my chest, into my neck, like lava about to overflow. Her chest is heaving, her eyes on me. And I’m begging her to say it. Tell me you want me. She steps back from my desk, like she knows we’re in dangerous waters.

“I want to know what the point was.”
But instead it’s me who has to admit it. She won’t move until I do, I realize.

I breath into my mind, breathing through the cracks in my bricks. “It was a way to spend three extra minutes with you.”

Her eyes are so deep, waiting for me to take it back. Waiting for me to ruin it. She blushes, like I’ve complimented her. And I suppose I have.

I feel my skin buzzing, my mind open. If she continued, if she asked me something else I’d answer her.

It hurts. I pull back.

“Anything else, Granger?”

She stammers, pulling away from me, looking at her shoes.

“See you tomorrow,” I say, looking back at the guest list, letters blurring together, keeping myself from begging her stay, but she’s confused. I look up, reminding her of the Governors’ Ball.

“I wasn’t... I’m not going.”

Not going? “Did you not receive the memo?”

“It was an offer, not a necessity!” she hisses.

The hand still on her hip started tugging at her knickers, sliding them down, and she lifted her hips to help him.

She was wheezing in a particularly unattractive way, but he didn’t seem to care. She reached down to help him with his underwear, but he was touching her again. She threw her head back and stared at her favorite chandelier in the history of chandeliers.

He pushed a finger inside of her and she hummed. Then he worked a second in, and she closed her eyes, pressing her lips together. She could feel his breath on her neck and he started moving his hand.

His fingers were thicker than her own, and the pressure was good. Too good. “Draco, please. Please, please.” She opened her eyes and found him watching her. “No more of this, please.”

“Shh.” He breathed across her face, hushing her as she whimpered. “Trust me.” He moved inside of her for a few strokes, opening and twisting, then pressed against her sweet spot and her mouth opened in a moan.

“I’m ready, I’m ready.” She gasped. And she released the cushions where she was gripping them and grabbed at his hair, bringing his face to hers. She began kissing him, begging him, and he pulled his hand away, ridding himself of his underwear.

She felt him at her entrance, and she opened her eyes to look at him. He pressed his forehead to hers, and she nodded.

He pushed inside of her, and it was tight. She bit her tongue to keep from saying so. She squeezed her eyes shut, a pinching and pressure, and why did people do this?

She grit her teeth together, and felt him release a breath across her face. She opened her eyes, and Draco’s eyes were pressed shut, jaw tight. If it was hurting him too, maybe they should stop? And then she saw his jaw release, and recognized the raw pleasure on his features. And she was the one giving it to him.

He opened his eyes to look down at her, and they were hot, and she shivered. “Okay?” he asked.

She nodded.

He pulled back and entered her again, slowly. The pinching pressure was still there, but now she got to watch his face, as he pressed his eyes closed. The third time, he bent his head forward and kissed her, letting his tongue wander into her mouth and push and pull at the same time as his hips.

That was better. Her hands were on his shoulders and she let her nails dig in. He let one hand come up and palm her breast.

That was better too. She got to feel some of that electricity again, and it calmed her.

She sucked in a breath, and her breasts touched his shirt. She wanted to step backwards, give him some space, but she held her ground. She looked up at him, craning her neck at the small distance.

His lips were parted, and she heard him breathing as her breasts brushed against him with every one of her inhalations.

He moved his hands to the buckle of his belt, knuckles sweeping across her belly. She gasped. His lips quirked.

She heard the harsh sounds of the metal, and the buttons of his dress pants slipping through the holes. She kept her eyes on his, finding herself breathing faster just to feel the caress on her breasts.

One of his knuckles continued to brush her stomach as he unbuttoned, lower and lower, feather light. She licked her lips. He swallowed.

Out of the bottom of her sightline, she saw his hands come to his waist, and slowly he pushed his pants past his hips. She heard them thud to the ground, and she pushed on his stomach, falling with him as he tumbled backwards to sit on the couch. She placed her legs on either side of him and attached to his mouth as her fingers grabbed for the rest of the buttons of his shirt.

He groaned against her, and she could feel the fabric of his trunks against her thighs. His hands came up to her hips, squeezing and running his fingers across her softly.

She finished with the last of his shirt buttons and pulled the shirt open. She placed her hands on his stomach, and he gasped. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and he tilted his head back. She shoved the shirt down his arms.

She moved her knees outward, trying to get closer to him, and then brought her hips down to his.

They gasped together, sucking the air between them. She could feel him hard against her center, and she knew she was wet and warm. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together, and rolled her hips against him, feeling him press right against her. Sharp pleasure ran up her spine and he grabbed her hips, letting out a tight sound.

She ran her hands up into his hair, and moved again. His hips chased her but then his fingers were pressing bruises into her hip bones, and he was holding her still.

"Draco, please."

He reached up, holding her to him, and turned them until she was on her back again, with him pressing against her on the chaise.

He breathed against her face and she looked at him while he pressed his eyes closed.

They snapped open, and he looked at her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she rasped. "Yes, yes, yes."

He moved his hands to the buckle of his belt, knuckles sweeping across her belly. She gasped. His lips quirked.

"What are you going on about, Granger—?"

"I know about Wentworth," she interrupts.

I stare at her, trying to catch up. She accuses me of using her, using her name to land Wentworth. A conversation over Butterbeer floats through my memories, and I suppose I did mention her to Wentworth when he asked me for a reason to sign on. But that's... that's not...

"I might have said I was offering you the position but I don't remember telling Wentworth you had signed on."

"But you didn't—!" She remembers to keep her voice down. "But you didn't offer me the position. You toasted a champagne glass at me."

"Same thing."

"Listen, Malfoy," she begins, and my eye twitches at my surname again. "I'm happy to defend you to those that don't believe in you, or write letters of recommendation. I'm happy to stand up for this company and what it represents. And I'm happy to help you make a mark in this world, but don't you dare assume anything about me without asking."

She dips her chin at the end. Like she's made her point.

She thinks I *assume* things about her. About her value and potential. And I'm only angry that she doesn't assume them herself.

She thinks I want her for her name? For her titles? She thinks I want the Golden Girl by my side, when all I've ever wanted was her.

I refuse to stay seated like some child she can scold.

"The only thing I *assumed* about you, Granger, was how ridiculously undervalued you were at the Ministry." I round my desk, moving toward her. And she does the smart thing, placing a chair between us. "I *assumed* the Ministry would destroy you like it destroys all dreamers. And I *assumed* that you could do better."

"You came to me with the werewolf project, knowing I couldn't resist—"

"I came to you with a project to lure you to me, yes." I step closer, only the chair between us. "To make you see what you could be capable of. What we could be capable of." I'm stumbling too close to the truth, but I can't pull back now. "But I don't give a fuck about the werewolves."

She trembles, eyes on fire. This fucking chair. I should be pressed against her already.

She mumbles, trying to keep her moral high ground. "You... You shouldn't have told people I'd be heading up this branch without knowing for sure."

I want to laugh at her. It was never about the branch.

"I created this branch for you," I hum, eyes dipping over her neck and chest as she draws ragged air. "There would be no Non-Wizard Relations branch of Malfoy Consulting without you." She swallows and her throat flutters. "It was tailor made for you and only you. To give you exactly what you wanted."

And I wonder if I give too much away, but then she licks her lips.

"Next time," she whispers, "ask me if I want it."

And there's so many things I want to ask. So many things I already *should* have asked.

Can I kiss you.

Can I touch you here.

Can we continue.

I wonder if she feels as out of control as I do. She needs me to ask. She needs to give.

Like I never asked about fucking her against a wall. I wasn't going to wait for her to give it to me.

Ask her.

And a breathy New York accent swirls inside my head. *Maybe because you weren't the one askin'.*

"I would like for you to come with me to the Governors' Ball."

There. That wasn't so hard, sugar.

I continue, "There are several people attending who will not only be great connections for Malfoy Consulting, but also for you personally."

She looks at me like I've asked her out on Valentine's Day. And I hope that's what she's thinking. Terrified that's what she's thinking.

"I-I have nothing to wear."

Relief shivers over me. "I'm sure we can get Pansy to whip something up." I smile, walking to my desk so I can send her an owl.

I suddenly can't wait to hear what Pansy has to say about this development—

Until she reminds me that Pansy is away in Italy. I'm sure she told me, but...

"Fuck. You honestly have nothing at home?"

"I mean, if it was socially acceptable to wear the same dress I wore to New Year's..."

She chuckles, and I remember her skin in that dress. The way the fabric draped over her hips, teasing. Could she wear it again, and be on my arm? My hand on her back as I weave her through the crowd, fingers tracing patterns on her skin.

I look away, trying to remember what we're talking about.

When she floated down, Draco was still watching her. Cheeks pink and sweat dampening his hair. His mouth was slack open and he panted. She could see his tongue running over his bottom teeth.

He withdrew his hand from her and she bit her lip to keep from moaning.

She sat up. And he pulled back to let her. She slipped her dress off her shoulders and tugged until she could pull her bra off and toss it to the side. As her arms came back, she saw him lick his lips, and place his left hand on the backrest of the lounge for support. She reached up and began unbuttoning his dress shirt. Such fine material.

He sat still, watching her undress him, and she felt his eyes eating her alive. Topless, and undressing him.

She was halfway done before she saw it. A faint jagged line starting at his collarbone and zaggering down his chest. She pulled the right side of his shirt back and found where the line cracked under his heart and ricocheted down his stomach.

Sectumsempra.

He snatched her hands off of him, grabbing her wrists. She looked up at him and his jaw was tight, looking away from her. He took a calming breath and turned her right hand, kissing the inside of her wrist.

She let him kiss her arm two more times before she threw herself at him.

She smacked her teeth against his and he grunted. She pulled back, bringing her hand to her stinging lips. He laughed. And the sound bounced around the room, warming her.

She tried reaching up again, but the remains of the dress were slipping under her. She huffed and tossed her legs off the chaise, standing and shoving the dress down to the ground. She reached back and pulled off each of her heels, and it wasn't until she turned to come back to him that she realized she was in front of him in just her knickers. And he was fully dressed still.

Not that it bothered him one bit. She watched his eyes run down her body, and her arms twitched to come up across her chest. She kept them down.

"Take off your trousers."

She could hardly believe the words had tumbled from her lips. Neither could he, apparently. His eyes widened and darkened all in one breath. He looked at her and breathed deeply.

"I mean..." she said, sounding a bit more like herself. "That is where we're going with this, yes?"

She stood before him on the couch. He was still on his knees, where he had been before she stood and took off her dress. He smiled darkly at her, and in one fluid movement he stood, right in front of her in the very little space between her and the couch.

"That's why you stopped us. Last time."

"I stopped us?? You stopped us!" She started to sit up, and he leaned back on his heels.

"You said you had never – So I pulled away!"

"Yes, I remember." She snarled at him. "But I never asked you to stop!"

His brows came together and his mouth opened. He looked so young. Then his grey eyes turned dark.

"If you don't tell me to stop, then I'm going to take you, Granger. Right here on this chaise lounge."

She shivered and gasped.

"What are you waiting for?"

She felt her cheeks blush at her brazenness, just before he shoved at her shoulders, her back landing on the cushions. He leaned over her, eyes taking her in. Then he brought his hands to the front of her dress and ripped it down the middle. She gasped.

"What are you –?"

"I'll buy you a thousand dresses," he said as his lips caught hers. And her pulse jumped at the promise.

She had just started to wonder how she would be *leaving* the governor's mansion, when Draco slid his lips down her cheek, sucking a path over her collarbone, and trailing toward her left breast. Her bra was useless as Draco pressed an open-mouth kiss against her over the fabric. She clutched at his hair, pressing him closer, and brought her leg up to move against his hip. His fingers started gathering the material across her legs, pushing it up to her waist and he reclaimed the path he'd found earlier, circling closer to her core. One of his fingers dipped underneath and found her precious sweet spot immediately. She bucked her hips and cried and Draco ran his teeth along her the top of her breast.

He started a torturous rhythm against her core, swirling and rubbing and Hermione closed her eyes and felt *everything*. She was rising, and she didn't notice that his mouth had left her chest until she heard him speak.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes and found him watching her. She barely had enough time to be embarrassed at what she assumed her face had been doing before he swirled her again and twisted his hand, pressing one finger inside of her.

She gripped the arm of the chaise lounge behind her head and fell apart.

She slid her gaze to the chandelier above her, watching the many crystals spiral out from the center and continue to dance into space.

She gasped and shook and squeezed her thighs together, holding him inside of her.

I ask her about that dress. She thinks maybe it was from Desrosiers. Luckily, Narcissa Black has an account there.

I'm at the fireplace on one knee calling for Madame Destroisiers. She pops through, making small talk before I ask if she remembers styling Hermione Granger.

Her eyes brighten, and I tell her I need it done by tomorrow. She doesn't bat an eye, knowing that I'll be paying double for it. I tell her she can make it similar to the white dress, and she says in French, "You want more décolletage, no?"

I chuckle and shake my head at her, telling her to do what she thinks I'd like the best. She winks at me. And asks me for the color.

I say gold before I can stop myself.

She sends me kisses in goodbye, and I stand to make a note for Carrie to follow up on the bill on Monday.

"They'll send your dress directly to you by tomorrow afternoon. It's close enough to your New Year's dress without being too close."

"Send me the bill," she says.

I laugh. She would never pay this much for a dress. And yet the feeling of buying her something, of making her feel special... I could do that every day.

But she would never accept that from me.

But Pansy gets to give her things, and pretend she gets nothing in return.

"What is different about your partnership with Pansy?" I ask. "She is riding on your coattails just as much."

"It's completely different."

I finish my note and look up at her. "How?"

"She... I'm getting something in return. It's helping her image as well as my own."

Getting something in return. And I wonder how much more I can give her before there's nothing left of me.

"So, you're not getting enough from our relationship, Granger?" I can't believe she needs more from me. More to prove myself. To prove that she can have anything she asks. "I'll give you the Snidgets," I say. "Let's move up the court date."

I've surprised her. She's stammers her way through a response and I give her another.

"Or the Muggle-Born Integration Project? It's approved."

We'll figure out the logistics later. Now the only thing I care about is how speechless she is, how astonished she is that I can give her the things that she wants.

I'm in over my head when I say, "Or whatever pet project you want. It's yours. Fully supported."

She's breathless, and I imagine this is the equivalent of giving a woman a diamond necklace, and then a box of matching earrings, and then the tennis bracelet. But Granger will never want those things, as much as I want to give them to her. To see her wear them every day while women look on in jealousy and men's eyes slide over her sparkling body.

"But you'll need to realize that it's not Draco Malfoy they'll want to see at these galas and fundraisers and dinner parties. It's Hermione Granger, activist, war hero, Golden Girl. You'll need to use that celebrity to get what you want."

I'm in front of her now. And I almost ask her if we can continue. If I can have her again.

She blinks up at me with thick lashes, and in a low vixen's voice, says, "You may need to teach me how."

The things I could teach her.

"We can start tomorrow night," I hum.

She nods, looking at my lips, like we're sharing thoughts. Like she's also imagining my mouth between her legs, *teaching* her.

Teaching Hermione Granger. What a quick learner she'd be. Like with everything, she'd excel far past my instructions. Creating new ways to make me come, new ways to cross my eyes and shake my legs.

My hands curl in my pockets. I swallow and step back from her.

"Your Bulgarian will be there tomorrow." I watch her brows raise in surprise.

"Viktor? At the Governors' Ball?"

"Mm-hm. You can talk to him about the Snidgets. Try to get his support."

She looks down, brain working. "Wonderful."

"A few other people who I think you could get on your side for any of your causes," I say. "I can introduce you."

"Okay."

And I can't wait to roam the ballroom with her at my side, meeting people and whispering in her ear.

"See you at seven."

After she's left, I call Madame Desrosiers again, asking for a redesign of my suit for tomorrow.

~*~

Saturday, February 12, 2000

Blaise looks ridiculous. But he's confident that he'll get laid tonight, so I guess that's all he needs.

"Oh, god, Draco."

He bit her lip, a stinging pain. He quickly pulled away. She pressed her tongue against the sting. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, attaching to her neck again as he continued to play with her through the silk.

She brought her hands up to his sides, feeling his muscles shiver. She wanted him on top of her, pressing against her. Why was he so far away?

"More. Please, Draco."

He shivered and huffed against her neck. She moved her legs, bringing her left knee up, feeling the silk slide down her thigh toward her waist. Her knee pressed against his hip and he started to move. He lowered down on her, pressing his chest against her and she sighed.

"Better?"

"Yes, god."

She could feel his hips against hers, could feel him, hard against her.

He kissed her, and she shifted under him and he gasped. She loved it. She did it again and he pulled his mouth from hers.

He slipped a hand between their ribs to touch her breast again. She moaned and then he rolled his hips and she yelled, clutching his shoulders.

"Tell me when to stop," he whispered against her mouth and rolled his hips again.

The third time she met his hips with hers and cursed. He slipped. He shivered and groaned. She brought her hips up again but he was still.

"I can't... I need to..."

He was pulling away and she was terrified. He lifted his hips away. Then he leaned over her again, and she could feel his hand on her left hip, slipping under the silk.

She sighed, and he kissed her neck again. She stared at the chandelier and his fingers followed the line of her knickers, coming closer.

He touched her over the fabric, and she turned her head to bite his ear. She felt his breath on her neck, as he touched her again.

"God, please, please, please," she panted.

"Tell me — Tell me when to stop."

"Why are you—" she moaned as he touched her again. "Why would you stop? What's wrong?"

He looked down at her, cheeks pink and his brow was moist. "If you want me to stop... If you want to stop—" He was panting, his eyes flashing at her.

"Why the fuck would we stop!"

She caught her breath as his eyes moved across her face.

"Because... because I'm a virgin?" She licked her lips. "Is that why?"

She wound her hands up his lapels, behind his neck, and into his hair, pressing her chest into his. His lips moved over hers and his hands slipped across the silk, down and around to grab her.

He walked them towards a door, pressing her against it as he opened it. She tumbled into a small sitting room. She gained her balance as the door closed, and then her back was pressed against it.

He was panting against her face and she heard herself gasping for air. His grey eyes were dancing over her, and she felt his hand tracing her ribs through the silk. She felt his forehead against hers.

She could see a fireplace, chairs and couches.

"Did you know this sitting room was here?" She looked at him suspiciously.

"Granger, you led me down this hall, not the other way around." He leaned in, hovering his mouth close to hers. "But, yes, I've been here before. My mother and I had tea on those chairs just last month."

"I miss your mother."

"Let's talk about her later, shall we?"

She smiled and pressed her lips against his. She still had her hands tangled in his hair, and she took the opportunity to pull her fingers through it. He groaned, and his hands squeezed her backside, and bringing her closer to his hips.

"Tell me what you want." His breath misted over her lips, his hands running along her torso, sliding closer to her chest. One hand grazed her breast and she gasped.

"Everything."

He dropped his head onto her shoulder and groaned.

Then she was being lifted. She gasped, his arm wrapped around her waist and took her off the door, turning them. She grabbed his shoulder, and he walked them into the room. She had a moment to take in the fireplace, the arm chairs, before she was falling, landing on a plush chaise lounge. The back of the lounge rose on her right side, the fireplace on her left.

She found her breath again just before Draco sat up and started removing his jacket.

Oh, god, please.

She was panting by the time he lowered down on her. The chandelier above them twinkled, and it fit his hair perfectly, just like she'd always dreamed.

"Tell me when to stop."

She almost laughed at that, but then he was kissing her again. He knelt above her, both knees to the one side of her, and one hand braced on the lounge, while the other moved from her hip up to her chest again. She gasped against his lips when he squeezed her breast, running his thumb across her.

The ballroom is luminescent, silks and lights all coming together beautifully. Skeeter has already gotten her claws into me, but after some expert flirting, I escaped without truly answering her question about if I had a date tonight.

I don't know.

I've spotted several potential clients that I'll want to talk to this evening, but my hands are sweating, so I don't want to introduce myself now.

I'm waiting for her.

I'm fiddling with my timepiece when I feel the need to look up, like there's a string tugging on me whenever she's near.

A witch in a gold dress stands at the top of the stairs and I glide to the bottom of them. She smiles at me, gathering her dress to descend.

Madame Desrosiers deserves a tip.

I drink her in, ankles appearing under the hem, soft silk slipping over her curves, a bodice fitted and open, delving neckline drawing my eyes to her delicate breasts. I finally move back to her eyes and she blushes.

Eyes on me.

Until a bulb flashes, and Rita Skeeter has drawn her from me. She's four steps away, one foot off the stair, and Rita asks her if she has a date tonight.

She looks to me, anxious.

And maybe this wasn't the start of something. Maybe if she had to define it, it wouldn't be a date.

That's fine. It's more than fine. What we have is more than fine.

I step away so Skeeter can't see me. Can't connect us again. I'll find her later. We don't have to walk the party together, as a team, as a couple.

"I will refuse to answer that incredibly invasive question, Rita, but if you'd like to photograph me walking away with Draco Malfoy, feel free," she sings.

I look up at her, heart pounding, and meet her smirk as she glides down the last few stairs, slipping her hand into mine as the camera flashes.

Like she's mine.

I steer her away from Skeeter, towards the champagne, lifting two glasses.

She's smiling softly, content.

I should compliment her dress. Her hair. I lean in to tell her she looks beautiful, even though that word is meaningless with her looking so good.

And Horace Slughorn is suddenly here with us, splashing his brandy on the marble. He kisses her cheek, and I lift a brow.

"Miss Granger! You are a *vision*, my dear!" To me. "And my favorite Slytherin – don't tell Mr. Zabini."

He chuckles, and I shake his hand. "I wouldn't dream of it."

He proceeds to "collect" us into his Slug Club, and I bite my tongue to remind him I refused to join in sixth year. I need him tonight.

And just like that, he's guiding us toward a woman who works exclusively with the small werewolf population in Germany.

I press my hand to her back, like I used to. Lower, much lower than before, and her muscles twitch under the silk.

From there, Slughorn escorts us over to someone else. If I don't recognize their name, then I must have decided that they aren't worth knowing. But Granger is glowing under the introductions, shaking hands with the vampire bravely and asking her own questions without Slughorn.

I watch the way her mouth moves, her teeth white and flashing. I let my palm drift higher as she shifts, finally kissing the skin of her back. I watch the shiver run her shoulders, skin pulling tight as my fingers brush lightly against the top of her hip.

Like she's mine.

She licks her lips when I do it again, eyes concentrated on the vampire, and I dip my eyes to her breasts to watch her nipples pull tight, aching.

I pull my eyes away, smiling at whoever we're talking to, feeling my cock harden, aching.

Slughorn steers us away, and I'm about to separate us from him to find a quiet corner where I can ask if she minds if I suck on her neck for a while when he runs us into one of the people I intended to find tonight.

Rhett Buckworth. Philanthropist. Retired politician. But most importantly, Townsend's Hogwarts-rival-turned-reluctant-friend.

Thank you, Tommy, for this most helpful information.

Slughorn does the introductions, and I don't even flinch when Buckworth calls me "Lucius's boy," because I'm so looking forward to this.

"Tell me, Mr. Buckworth, do you still keep in touch with Geoffrey Townsend?" I ask. And I feel her look to me in question. He confirms, and I say, "Granger just had a meeting with him last week."

She blinks up at me, pretty eyes trying to figure me out.

I'm *teaching* you, Granger.

I navigate her through the conversation, even daring to press on her back, pushing her to talk more. She follows my lead, playing innocent so well. Because she is – she has no idea what we're doing.

"I'm exactly where I planned to be. Just as I had planned to be here the last time we danced to this song."

She stopped, back where she started. Her pulse buzzing. He couldn't mean...

She watched as he smirked at her, eyes flashing, then turned back to his original partner.

"Hermione?"

She turned, eyes glassy, and saw Viktor reaching for her. She took his hand just as the next movement started.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't—

She stepped on Viktor's toes and he grunted. She let him lead her, twirling, and she let her eyes search for Draco. Trying to spot him amongst the dancers.

Viktor bowed. Was the dance done? It just began. She bent her knees in a most inappropriate curtsey, and told him she needed a drink and would be right back.

She turned, ignoring the Bulgarian voice asking if she would like him to retrieve it for her, eyes running over the crowd.

She couldn't breathe. She put her hand to her stomach, feeling the gold silk, and turned down a quiet hallway.

For years, she'd dreamed about how fate had brought them together for only a moment at the Yule Ball. She'd thought of the way he'd looked at her that night, wondering what it was he was thinking.

She heard her heels click. And then the snap of dragon leather.

She wasn't ready. She... What did he mean?

She heard the dragon leather faster.

"Granger."

She stopped. She was at the end of the hallway, and he was just behind her.

"I didn't mean to... scare you or..."

She heard the frustrated sound of him pushing his hair back. She wanted to look at him but didn't trust herself.

"When did this start for you? Please, tell me," she whispered.

Silence. And she was terrified. Maybe that's not what he had meant.

"Fourth year."

There was panic in her chest, and joy swirled around it. She turned around, and his face was as terrified as she felt.

"I win." She smirked at him.

He blinked at her, confused.

She closed the gap between them, and his eyes darkened.

"Oh, you stupid bint." He reached for her, and she almost laughed as he kissed her.

"I get to help Magical Creatures and Muggle-borns." She took the plunge. "There's a project I'm working on now that might be of interest to you..." She looked up at him through her lashes and saw he was still with her. "Do you know of the Golden Snidgets?"

Ten minutes of light conversation and Hermione had Viktor eating out of the palm of her hand. He nodded at everything she said, and agreed with every injustice against the little birds.

She told him she was thinking of contacting him, to see about some publicity, and he was thrilled at the thought of hearing from her again.

She was about to mention another boring fact about the Golden Snidget population when the string quartet behind her started a new movement. Hermione turned to look, recognizing the tune, and when she looked back, Viktor held out his hand.

"Dance with me again, Hermynown?"

She nodded, and placed her hand in his. He led her onto the dance floor, joining other couples. They faced each other, and Hermione was so glad she had just gone over this dance with Miss Truesdale.

The French Waltz began to play.

Viktor bowed, keeping his eyes on her.

She smiled at him, and curseyed back once it was the lady's turn. She thought Miss Truesdale would be quite proud of how deep her curtsey was.

She stepped into Viktor's arms, one hand on his shoulder, the other in his hand, and they waltzed. He pressed her to him as he lifted her, the silk heating against her skin, and she giggled when he set her down.

This was easy. It was so easy to dance with Viktor Krum, like no time had passed. Like there wasn't a war and Cedric Diggory was still alive, and Sirius and Remus and Snape and Fred and Dumbledore. They turned around each other, and then she followed what she remembered, turning right to meet the gentleman two couples away.

And her heart stopped when it was Draco Malfoy. Again. Smirking.

The same dance. The same song. The same partners.

His eyes flashed at her before he bowed, just like he had five years ago. When he straightened, she smiled, chuckling under her breath. She curseyed as well as she could.

"What are you laughing at, Granger?"

She rose and met his eyes, smiling. "Coincidences."

He held up his right hand. She brought hers to his, but did not touch him, just like she hadn't five years ago. Only now for so many more reasons.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said. They began the turn around each other.

"Oh, really?" She smirked back at him thinking if he only knew...

Buckworth pledges half, and a fruit basket.
"I do love those chocolate-covered strawberries, Mr. Buckworth." I smirk and shake his hand. He laughs boisterously.

She's blinking at the two of us. I run my thumb across the dip in her back. *Ten points to Gryffindor.*

"I have no idea what just happened," she whispers.

Slughorn distracts him for a moment, and I lean in, breathing in the scent of her, brushing my lips across her ear.

"You just secured your fundraising for your first project, Granger."

"I... I didn't do anything, though."

"You were perfect."

I'm about to turn us away so I can whisper more praise into her neck when I catch sight of an older gentleman hanging about the edge of the dance floor.

Dr. Flanders.

I don't take my eyes off him as I whisper to her, "I need to speak with Horace about something, but this gentleman here"—I gesture to my right—"is the youngest Hogwarts governor. He's also Muggle-born."

She looks up at me, understanding.

I introduce myself to the governor, leading to her introduction, and as I leave her I can't help but dance my fingers across her skin, hopefully burning the memory of me there.

"Horace," I say, taking him side. "Do you know a Dr. Flanders? He was at Hogwarts in—"

"Yes! Yes! Henry! I think he's here tonight!"

"I would love to speak to him."

And Slughorn delivers me to Dr. Flanders, leaving us to talk in private.

I spend thirty minutes with Dr. Flanders, explaining the case without giving particulars. He is a very optimistic healer, but tries not to show it. We make a date for him to come into the office to discuss more.

I can feel my skin humming when we part. If I can give her this...

No. That's not what this is about. It's... the right thing.

I found a solution to a problem, and how she thanks me for solving the problem is not the focus.

She rose and met his eyes, smiling. "Coincidences."

I spin to find her among the crowd, and it's easy to do. She glows.

I move to claim her again, but then I see the person she's talking to is Krum.

He's found her unattended. I had hoped I could prevent that.

I grab another glass of champagne while he smiles down at her, watching her mouth. She touches him – placing her hand on the broad plane of his shoulder. And I roll my own back, standing tall.

I pace the edge of the dance floor, watching them. Watching her gesture and smile, her eyes blazing. And watching his dull attention rest on her chest. She can't be daft enough to not notice.

There are couples on the dance floor. And I need her to look at me again.

I cruise the edge of the dancers, watching as her eyes light up at the strings. I wonder if she still remembers it. Krum holds out his hand, making her laugh, and I watch like a predator as they join the circle of couples. I grab a blonde girl – fuck, maybe it's the same blonde girl from five years ago, who knows – and flash my smile at her.

"Do you know the French Waltz, Jove?"

She nods greedily as I force us into a position two couples away from them.

I watch as Krum bows to her, forgetting myself and bowing quickly to the girl. Granger curtseys back at him, a smooth dip of her legs that flows with the silk on her hips.

She slips into his arms, smiling up at him, and I pull the girl into me, waiting.

Waiting.

After an eternity, she spins out, landing in front of me. I smirk at her.

She stops dead where she is, and I know that she remembers. Maybe she plays it over in her head like I do, wishing we could have been partners all night.

I bow, keeping my eyes on hers. She chuckles, and I smile back at her.

She curtseys, like she's been practicing.

"What are you laughing at, Granger?"

Her eyes are mine again, only mine, and she says, "Coincidences," I hold my hand up to hers, wondering if she'll touch me. Wondering if she's learned her lesson about touching me.

She places her hand a breath away and watches my face as I spin around her.

"I don't believe in coincidences." My heart thunders. Do I dare?

"Oh, really?" She smirks at me, shaking her head like I couldn't possibly know what she's thinking.

"I'm exactly where I planned to be," I say. "Just as I had planned to be here the last time we danced to this song."

And it feels like the brick wall in my mind hasn't crumbled. It feels like I've climbed it.

Looking down from the top at what my life could have been.

"Granger." Blaise's voice pulled her to look back at him. She pressed her lips together, trying to keep them from trembling. Blaise raised a brow, and smirked at her.

"I meant you."

She blinked at him, as his full lips split into a huge grin. His eyes crinkled. And he snorted.

"Oh..." She felt her cheeks warm. "Oh, no. Er, Draco and I aren't..."

Blaise laughed. "Oh, you're in so much trouble, Granger..."

"No, I mean... What I meant to say was..."

Blaise bent over, hands on his knees. His laugh was booming around them.

"That's not... um..." Hermione stammered.

Blaise stood, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Merlin, I'm glad I clarified. The first girl in a gold dress you ran into would have been Avada'd on the spot!"

Hermione felt how hot her face was and she shook her head at him. "I didn't mean..."

"Best of luck tonight, Granger." Blaise clasped her shoulder. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He winked at her, and left her sputtering.

Hermione found Draco a bit later, across the room speaking to a wizened and grey man. They were turned in to each other, having what looked like a very serious conversation. Before she had an opportunity to wander that way, she ran into several people that she had met at the New Year's Gala. She spent some time catching up with them.

She was just turning to excuse herself from a particularly boring conversation, when her eyes landed on Viktor Krum, standing three paces from her, waiting to speak with her.

His eyes lit up when she saw him. He smiled and she couldn't help but to smile back.

"Hermione," he said, and she threw her head back and laughed at how things never change. He reached for her hand, and brought it to his lips. He hadn't aged a day it seemed. His hair was still short, his neck and shoulders still broad, and his eyes were still kind. He wore deep red robes, and when he pulled his lips away from her hand, she could see that his eyes were deep brown, like she remembered.

"Viktor, how are you?" She smiled.

"I am well." His eyes danced over her face. "You are still beautiful."

She blushed. "You are still playing for Bulgaria, yes? I know a bit more about Quidditch these days because I know so many more Quidditch players!"

"Yes. I play your Ronald Weasley in two weeks." He looked back and forth between her eyes at Ron's mention, then continued. "You are working with Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes," she said. "I am heading up a branch for Non-Wizard Relations."

"And vat does that mean?" He grinned.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Nineteen



Saturday, July 8, 1995

Father is still at Borgin and Burkes, bartering and intimidating, so I sneak off, finding my way through the crowds to Cornerstone. I haven't seen it since last summer, but Morty smiles when he catches sight of me.

"Young Mr. Maffoy. Welcome."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hindes. How is your summer?"

Morty pushes the mint bowl to me, and I pluck up one, twisting the foil. "Excellent, excellent. Hogwarts treating you well?" His brows dip, and then he whispers, "I did hear about that poor Diggory boy. Did you know him well?"

I shrug. "Not well, no. It's a bit of a fright really, but I hear things like this happen in the Triwizard Tournament all the time." I pop the mint into my mouth, eyes hungry on the stacks.

"Do take care of yourself, Draco," he says, giving my shoulder a pat. "Take your time browsing." He gestures toward the new releases. "Anything you need mailed to Hogwarts, just give to me as you leave."

I browse through the shelves, taking two books with me as I climb a ladder to a nook on the back wall. Morty and Maggie used to have a cat up here when I was younger. The cat died when I was eight, but they still keep a folded blanket here, and I like to think it's for me.

Morty winks at me as I settle in, and I lose myself for a while in the new Lance Gainsworth, *Undesirable No. 6*. He's announced there will be seven. I wrote to him two years ago after the last one came out to let him know how much I enjoy them. I didn't expect anything back, but two weeks later I received a package of five signed copies, and a note promising delivery of the final two upon completion.

I could wait for the signed sixth to arrive... but I don't like to read the signed ones. I don't like to break the spines or leave fingerprints on the silver covers.

I'm on chapter seven, and the two lovers have finally been reunited. The front door squeches open, and something tugs at me to look up for the first time in an hour.

Hermione Granger dances through the door, looking around like she never seen a bookstore in her life.

Her jaw is dropped open, eyes devouring.

"Hello, miss," Morty says.

I pull myself behind the tall shelves, eyes watching her through the gaps.

"Good afternoon," she says. "How long has this bookshop been here?"

"My wife and I opened this shop forty years ago," Morty says, removing his glasses.

Her eyes sparkle. She scans the shelves, and I pull my shoe back when she glances my direction. Her hair hasn't been styled smooth since the Yule Ball, but it's pulled back today. Her neck stretches, and I lick my lips.

She chats with Morty, and he's kind to her. He gives her a bit of a tour, pointing out the new releases, where the fiction section is, where the biographies are.

She does what she does at Hogwarts: carries five or six books in her arms while still looking through the shelves. Like she doesn't have magic to float them. Or a shopkeeper to hold them at the counter. She sets them on her hip, disappearing every so often around the fiction stacks so I can only see her knees through the spaces between books. Her face appears when she pulls a book, and I watch her read the cover. She smiles at the description, and I crane my neck, trying to figure what title it is.

Maybe Morty knows. I look down at the counter, to find him smiling up at me softly. I jump, looking down at the Gainsworth, finding my place again.

The front door opens again, and I look up to make sure she's not leaving.

It's Father. He scans the shop stiffly. He's found me here before, and sometimes I tuck away into this nook and watch Morty lie to him, say he hasn't seen me.

Father sweeps over the stacks, lips in a frown, and he ignores Morty's greeting, prowling towards the fiction.

Towards her.

I stumble down the ladder, leaving the book, shoes catching on the rungs until I'm almost falling down the ten feet.

His eyes catch on my frantic movements, and he pauses just before turning the corner, barely three paces from her.

I nod at him and say, "Finished?"

He lifts a brow at me and I push toward the door, begging him to follow.

"Get the fuck outta here, Melody!" he yells. "There's something important happening out here!"

I watch her face, trying to decide if this was right. Usually people could just fall sleep after, or went home.

Pansy always just went back to her dorm.

"I'll make excuses for you," I say.

She looks up at me, waiting. And I lean in and kiss her.

She steps through the Floo and is gone.

And I think that was the wrong thing to do.

I stare into the flames, wondering if I chase after her.

But we... have an understanding now, yes?

We have feelings for each other.

Don't we?

Did we say it?

My head hurts. I need Blaise.

I conjure a mirror and get myself back together, missing her lipstick the moment it disappears from my skin.

I return to the Ball, shaking hands with a few people, searching for Blaise.

Half an hour later when Slughorn tells me he left, I head to the fireplaces.

I step through to his posh little flat that he bought when he moved back to the U.K. calling his name.

He appears from down the hall, in a robe, holding his wand.

"What?" He looks me up and down searching for injuries.

"I had sex with her. What do I do now?"

"Who?"

I glare at him. "Who do you think?" I sit on his couch.

He scratches his jaw. "It better not be Melody, 'cause she's in the next room."

"Zabini," I hiss. "You signed a *contract*."

His eyes widen. "What the fuck are you talking about?!" You just fucked Hermione Granger!"

We stare at each other for a moment.

"Oh, Merlin—"

"Shit! Draco!" He jumps on me.

"I know—"

"You fucked Hermione Granger?"

"I did."

"Will wonders never cease!" He bounces on top me, knees pressing into my stomach.

"So..." A female voice from the hallway. "Are we done for tonight?"

"See anything you want today?" Morty asks, a smile playing on his lips.
"Er, no," I stammer, looking away from Father. "Thank you, Mr. Hordes."

We walk to the Apparition point, and I apologize when Father snipes at me about running off.

Saturday, February 12, 2000 – later

There are scratches down my back and knickers in my pocket.

The scratches... I have a hazy memory of. Her nails in my skin as she trembled under me.

The knickers... I have a few questions about their appearance.

I finally made it back to the Manor after a difficult thirty minutes of tea with Blaise and Melody, who seemed to know Blaise's kitchen far better than a one-night stand should.

"And you just sent her home?" she'd asked, boiling water in the kettle, a robe wrapped around her that matched Blaise's.

"Should I have taken her home?" I asked.

"Yes."

"No."

Blaise and Melody spoke together.

"Listen, Mel," Blaise had begun pompously. "You don't know the full situation here. Draco would have probably made an ass of himself if he went home with her. Saying I love you, or some nonsense."

Agreed.

"Listen, Blaise," Melody had hissed, hands on her hips. "It was her first time."

The three of us stared at each other.

"Oh, fuck." I said, dropping my head into my hands.

I'd come home, undressed, hissed at the pain of the cuts on my back. After examining them in the mirror, remembering the way she'd moaned, the scent of her skin, I started to shuck my trousers.

Which is why I'm standing here with her knickers in my hand, wondering how I did it. I remember seeing them on the ground near the couch, and then I looked up to hand them to her and she was bending over, grabbing her bra. Her legs long and arse round.

I leave the knickers on the counter, slipping into the tub, letting the suds sting at my back. I stare at them until I decide they're mine now.

~*~

Sunday, February 13, 2000

At 9:57AM, I appear in Diagon Alley with a cup of coffee. I walk through the streets to Cornerstone, pulling the door open right at 10AM.

Morty lifts his head from what he's staring at on the counter.

"Mr. Malfoy!"

I blink at him.

"Mr. Hindes. Wonderful to see you." I search the surrounding shop quickly for her.

"I was just catching up on your adventures last night," he says.

I trip on the last step. "My... my adventures?"

He lifts the *Daily Prophet* and shakes it at me. "The Governor's Ball!"

I watch as Granger slides her hand into mine, gold dress glinting.

"Oh, yes," I say. "It was grand."

He stares at me for a moment. "I assumed you would be sleeping it off."

"Yes, I just..." The coffee cup in my hand steams. "I thought maybe I'd..."

"She won't be in today. Mr. Malfoy."

My stomach twists. Has she run?

He continues, "I told her to take the day off."

"Oh, right. Very kind of you, Mr. Hindes."

He hums, and pushes his glasses up his nose. He eyes the cup in my hand. "Is that coffee for

me?" He smiles.

I press my lips together. "Yep."

I wander Dragon Alley that day, bumping into all sorts of men looking for gifts for their spouses, and I have to remind myself that it's too early to be buying her diamonds. She wouldn't want diamonds anyway. But I want to give them to her.

~*~

Monday, February 14, 2000

I wait with coffee at the front desk. Melody is giving me a hard time, asking me if I need anything with a glint in her eye.

"Malfoy."

I look up and Mockridge is standing in his office doorway, beckoning me. He disappears inside, not waiting for a response. Because it looks like I'm unoccupied. Because I'm standing here, doing fucking nothing.

I look to the clock.

"I'll handle that, Mr. Malfoy," Melody says, lifting a brow.

I sigh and hand her the coffee, heading towards Mockridge while Melody paces to Granger's office.

Mockridge is interested in the Buckworth donation we secured Saturday night, and I tell him I'll discuss it more in depth in the Senior Consultant meeting. I hear the elevator ding. After a

She says yes, but I don't believe her, so I show her what I want to do, snapping forward. She blinks quickly and says yes again.

I grab her hip, pressing my forehead to hers, and bring our chests together. And I fuck her the way I want to.

Not too fast. Just quick enough to feel her walls drag against my cock before I push back in.

I can hear myself sighing on every exhale.

She's watching me. And I want so badly for her to like this. To maybe want this again.

I fit my hand between us, her clit bumping my fingers on every thrust of my hips.

She squeezes me softly, and I can't think. My vision whites before coming back, and *Hermione* is underneath me still. She squeezes me again, this time on purpose, and I retaliate by rubbing hard on her clit, hips jumping faster.

She's so tight. And her breath on my face, gasping as I fuck her.

My fingers curl into her hair, squeezing my fist and tugging her neck open to my mouth.

I'm almost there. My face in her fucking hair.

I grunt into her neck, snapping my hips into her, rubbing her clit with the vain hope that—

And she moans, chest arching into me.

Come on, lover. I kiss her cheek, and return to her neck.

She groans, and I pull back to watch her come while I'm inside of her, pumping into her.

She drifts back to earth, and when she opens her eyes and smiles at me, I can't think of anything but coming. I have to come.

When everything tightens inside of me, and I groan, shaking, and pouring into her, I have one hand on her hip, one fisted in her curls. I breathe against her chest, waiting for the world to come back. But it's just us.

I feel her ribs under me, expanding, trying to breathe against my weight. I drop one last kiss to the top of her breast, tasting the sweat on her skin, and then I struggle to pull out of her and sit up.

Debauched. Fucked into the couch. Hair wild, lips smothered, and smiling at me. If I find my trunks and trousers, I'm still catching my breath as I slide my shirt on.

This is what we do, right? We get dressed and we go home?

She's fiddling with her gold dress, fabric specially crafted by Destrosiers, making a *reparo* very difficult.

I'll buy her another one.

I transfigure it into a robe for her. She grabs her shoes and I take her to the fireplace.

"If you're planning to go back out there," she says, "you'll need a look in the mirror first."

She chases me again, hands in my hair and my hips snap to hers, ready to drag aside her knickers, pull my cock out of my trunks, and thrust up into her.

I hold us both still, eyes squeezed shut.

Not like that.

"Draco, please."

I hold her close as I turn us so she's on her back again. I count to ten before I can look at her; her lips puffing air against my face and her eyes sinking into me.

"Are you sure?"

Because I won't stop. Not once I'm inside.

She murmurs a prayer of yeses.

And then I'm pulling her knickers down, listening to her breath as I push my finger inside of her; then another. Preparing her in a way I'd never needed to with Pansy. Never even asked who'd come before me.

She begs me to just begin, but I tell her to trust me. We have to do it this way.

I touch her clit again, and she grabs my hair, kissing me hard, begging me. And that must be enough, right?

I push my trunks away, hold onto her hip, and press inside of her.

And the centuries spin.

There's a dance playing behind my eyes, and I try to listen to the melody but all I hear is her breath.

I'm inside of her. Fully. And my jaw opens in bliss.

I dare to look down at her, and she's staring at me like I've given her the moon.

"Okay?" I ask.

She nods, and I start.

And there's nothing worse than the pace I set for her. Nothing so torturous as feeling her heat swallowing me every time, her walls so tight and unused, begging me to just say put long enough to get to know my size.

So, I move slow. And I kiss her, eyes closed and tongue insistent. I try to think of anything I can do to make her feel like this. To let her understand this.

Pressing my hand to her chest again, thrumming over her, I twirl her nipple between my fingers. She gasps into my mouth. Her nails drag across my shoulders. I slide down her waist, still unbelieving that she's naked under me. This skin is mine. I swivel down her hips, pulling her knee higher and when I sink deeper into her, I hear her speak.

I close my eyes and think about a slow rhythm, her knee at my chest, her air between us. Opening my eyes, and I look into hers and ask, "Can I go faster?"

few morning pleasantries I leave his doorway, pacing back to the front. Melody nods to Granger's office.

I slip through her doorway, a bit less suave than I could have hoped.

"Granger. Yes, good," I stammer.

She looks up at me with her beautiful eyes, and I remember her face as she came. The way she held me inside of her like I belonged there forever.

"Er, Senior Staff meeting at nine," I say. I want to spend time with her today. "And then we should meet about the Werewolf Policy financials. After lunch?"

"Yes. Great."

I nod. This was wonderful. I'd eat lunch and then I'd feast on her. I wonder if she'll let me bounce her on my cock.

I'm halfway out the door, looking at my timelapse. I can't wait four hours.

I turn back to her door, suggesting we meet before lunch.

Blaise keeps exploding hearts and confetti everywhere he goes, and it keeps reminding me that I should have something for her. Something to give her for Valentine's Day. He bursts into the conference room, spraying glitter everywhere, promising to clean up after himself. She's already seated with her coffee cup.

"How was everyone's weekend?" I ask, taking my seat. She's blushing, not looking up at me. And I wonder what she's thinking about. If she's possibly thinking about us. Blaise says, "I was having a lovely time at the governor's mansion before Granger came in and took all the attention."

"Yes, Blaise, Granger, and I attended the Valentine's Ball on Saturday. Blaise was able to secure a few accounts. Granger had a successful evening as well."

She chokes on her coffee. And I didn't even mean to make a secret joke, but now I'm desperate to get her alone. Now that I know that she's thinking about it.

I spend the next hour focused. We discuss our funding, our progress. I let them know I've chosen Cornelia Waterstone for the Wizengamot position. I see her head rise to look at me, and I know she's pleased.

I tell them about the fruit basket up front, and then I say, "Granger and I will be working on financing now, but I'll be available after lunch for anything."

And if you dare to fucking disturb us, I will hex your bits off.

I wait for her outside the conference room. She takes forever to exit, and then I lead her to my office. Maybe I should get a bed installed in there.

I let her enter first, and I almost grab her ass on the way inside. I shut the door behind us,

"We should talk first, yes? She would want to talk?"

She turns to me, clutching her notes in front of her. Her eyes are bright and anxious. Her hair is down again today. It's been down every day since I ripped out her hairband.

I feel desire licking at me, like an infection I can't stop the spread of.

I hear the people just on the other side of this door, and I wonder if it turns her on as much as it does for me.

"Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet, Granger?" I hum, knowing she can't. Knowing she moans, and cries out. We'll need to work on that so I can have her in every place imaginable.

Her eyes burn out. "Yes." She nods at the carpets. "No, yes, I understand." She clings to her paperwork, and I wonder what she thinks she understands.

I watch in horror as her eyes meet mine, tears welling up. "I'll be able to keep quiet. Keep this to myself. We can pretend it never happened if that's what you want."

Fuck, we're both such idiots. I hate us so much.

"Let me clarify: Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet," I say, smirking at her, moving towards her, "or do I need to silence the room?"

I see it dawn in her eyes. And then she licks her lips, and I'm so glad she understands because we need to be naked now.

"You'll need to silence the room."

I do just that, and then she's rushing into my arms. My hands on her hips and hers in my hair. Her lips pushing against me, starved, and a deep fear that it had all been in my head vanishes.

Her mouth is frenzied and I grip her head in one hand, angling her face. She sighs into me once I've taken control. And I file that lovely thought away.

What a silly little bint, to think I would want to forget this ever happened.

"Merlin, I thought I lost you," I say, moving down her jaw, sucking on the covered bruises.

"You thought? You're the one being so cagey—"

"I was aiming for playful."

"You're always playful—"

I pull her hips to me, and her hands start to unbutton my waistcoat. My cock twitches with the proof that she wants us to be naked, wants me inside of her again. I let her unbutton and remove the vest and then I grab her backside, lifting her. She makes the most adorable sound of surprise, and I look for a surface to fuck her into.

My eyes lift from her neck, and find that window next to the couch. The space she'd filled in the *Prophet* photoshoot. The space she'd filled ever since. She smiles at me when I press her body into the wall, almost like she remembers it like I do.

Single-minded determination. Like brewing a potion. She slips each button through, until she stops.

And I realize she's seen it. *Secumsempra*.

She tries to touch the scar, but I snatch her hands off.

Don't pity me, Granger. Not after all this.

I deserve every scar I have. Every mark. And I'd do it all again.

She looks up at me like she's done something wrong, so I kiss the inside of her wrist. Then again. And again.

She attacks me with her mouth, and we both chuckle at the pain. She struggles underneath me, and I realize too late she's trying to get naked. She slips out from under me, standing and shoving the silk down around her thighs, to her ankles. She takes off each shoe with a balance that has her stomach muscles pulling tight, and she turns back to face me as I take in her body.

Her thighs. I've wanted them around me. Wanted them clutching my waist, or straddling me in a chair.

Her hips. Perfect curve from the top of her legs to her waist, and I almost ask her to turn around so I can see her arse.

Her ribs and breasts. Pulled straight from my imagination.

"Take off your trousers."

I took to her mouth, making sure it really was her who said it. She blushes, and I find it captivating. I have to slow down.

"I mean..." she mutters, "that is where we're going with this, yes?"

She's suddenly nervous. And I love her.

I stand, squeezing into the space in front of her, and I can tell she wants to step back, but meets my challenge anyway.

She breathes deep, and her chest almost touches mine.

I reach for my belt and trousers, and each time I unbutton my knuckles brushes her stomach. I work slowly, watching her eyes, watching her nipples pull tight.

I drop my trousers, and I can't even plan my next move before she's pushing me, shoving me back and climbing on top of me.

Finally in my lap, legs on either side of me. And she's aggressive and in control. She pops the buttons on my shirt. She forces my head back so she can press her tongue into my mouth. She shoves my shirt down my shoulders.

I keep my hands soft on her hips, not trusting myself yet.

She scoots closer, opening her thighs, and rocks against me before I know what's happening.

My cock pressed tight to her, and I'm trying to hold it together when she does it again.

My hands hold her still, begging her please, please don't.

I could be inside of her. I could fuck her into this couch like she was mine. And it still wouldn't be my Everything.

"If you don't tell me to stop," I hum between us, giving her one last chance, "then I'm going to take you, Granger. Right here on this chaise lounge."

I wait. I wait for her to revise her wishes.

"What are you waiting for."

I shove her back, my hands going to her chest, needing her breasts, needing to see her, feel her taste her.

She had her fucking chance.

I rip the dress down the middle until I can see her lace bra, licking my lips at the way she gaps.

"What are you—?"

"I'll buy you a thousand dresses," I promise, leaning down to take her mouth.

She pants against me as I suck and kiss down her jaw to her chest, barely pausing before attaching my lips to her breast. She groans the most delicious sound, and I know I have to hear it again.

She holds my head to her chest, and I lick and suck at the lace, moving my hand under her dress again, sighing when she shivers.

I slip under her knickers, savoring every moment. Her hips jump against my hand when I find her clit.

My tongue and teeth on her chest, and she clutches me closer.

She wants me. She wants me inside of her, pumping into her, making love to her.

I rub harder on her, listening to her breath as she pants. I look up at her. Her face tilted back, eyes squeezed shut.

"Look at me."

Her eyes drift open and her thighs twitch around my hand. I slip down and press one finger inside of her, consumed by her heat, swirling harder on her clit, and I watch her eyes the moment she climaxes, just before they roll back and her hands grip the chaise.

She moans, her neck stretching, her legs squeezing my hand. And I rub large circles against her as she comes down.

She looks at me again, eyes hazy. And I would do it all again. I wouldn't change a single moment in our pasts just to keep this.

She sits up, pushing me off her. And I wonder if that's all.

But then she's pulling her ragged dress off her shoulders and lifting her arms until her bra is off. I have to brace myself when I see her naked chest for the first time. And then she starts unbuttoning my shirt.

I pull her knees around me, locking her legs around my waist. She presses me tight to her and I groan deep my chest. I keep a steady hand on her thigh while unbuttoning her blouse, my eyes dropping to her chest every time I forget to move my lips against hers.

Once I've tugged her blouse out of her skirt and finished with the buttons I peel it wide, drinking in her skin, trying to memorize her tits, giving myself more time than I'd taken on Saturday.

"Er, the paperwork? Are you worried about it at all?" she whispers. I reach up for her chest, filling my hand with her breast.

"The Werewolf financials? No, of course not."

She stutters, and I smile at the way I can make her lashes flutter. I drift my hand on her thigh under her skirt to her knickers. "I—I meant the... contract."

"Contract?"

I want all this lace off her. She moans as I press against her clit and reach for her bra fastenings.

"The Love Contract."

I freeze. That bloody contract. Is she afraid of the repercussions?

"Are you worried about it?" I ask.

"Only in the sense that I signed a document promising not to do this."

And then she squeezes her legs around me, rubbing herself on my hand. The little minx. I continue taking off her bra, and say, "Only in the sense that I *created* a document to keep us from doing this."

She smiles and I slide into her knickers, running my fingers through her.

"And to keep Blaise away from Melody," I toss in, kissing her neck.

"Well, that's not working." She laughs, and the sound tickles my ear, shivering my chest. And I set out to make her quake.

My fingers swirl around her clit, my other arm wound around her back. I can feel her chest against mine, and her breath comes sharply.

"We can discuss it later, I guess," she mumbles. "It's a common contract for businesses, especially privately owned. I've looked it up."

"Sih. You can teach me later."

I imagine her bouncing on me, quizzing me on the Goblin Rebellions, not letting me come until I summarize my arguments—

"Ahh!"

She jerks away from me, and I tighten my hold so she doesn't drop. My fingers had just pushed inside, the warmth beginning to swallow me again.

"What's wrong?" I search her face, watching the tension in between her brows and along her jaw.

"I'm fine." She smiles with tears in her eyes. "Just sore. Keep going."

I stare at her face, waiting. She tells me she's fine again, and tries to kiss me. She's uncomfortable. Sore.

I drop her on the arm of the couch, and she clutches me with her thighs so I can't stand up tall. "Don't stop. I'm fine. I want this."

She brushes her desires against my ear and I almost push into her right there.

I lean my left arm against the back of the couch, and move my right into her knickers. I swirl against her clit and watch her face relax. I push one finger inside of her and she likes that. I keep my thumb moving on her clit, watching her face.

She looks up at me with those eyes and begs me to fuck her. This witch will destroy me.

I try two fingers, hoping... And she winces. She lies, telling me she's ready. I stand up, pulling back from her, wondering what to do with her now. And then she's scrambling, tossing away her bra, unbuttoning my shirt. I watch her chest rise and fall, as I pull my shirt off. She starts on my trousers, and I feel like I'll need to sit soon. It's dizzying, the way she wants me.

She moves button by button, down the front of my trousers, teasing more as she goes, scraping her fingers down my shaft. Her nipples are pulled tight, and she's licking her lips staring at my crotch. I wonder if I could ask her to suck me off.

No.

That's too...

But I think of sugar quills and soup spoons, and I grow harder against her fingers. She's almost done with my buttons and I reach up, running my fingers over her bare breast.

She gasps.

And one day I'll ask her. One day I'll tell her she can have whatever she wants from me if she'll just use her mouth. Just once.

I imagine my cock sliding between her lips, and I tweak her other breast.

She moans and leans forward, pressing her forehead to my stomach. Her lips just inches away from where I want them.

Her tongue would press lightly, unsure, as her eyes stare up at me, asking for guidance. I could teach her how to suck me off.

I've been rolling my fingers around her nipple, absently driving her insane. Her hips are dragging slowly on the couch. She'll be so easy to get off. Maybe a few times. And when she

She moans into my mouth, and I delve between her thighs, pressing my cock tight to her. She squeaks and I can feel her thighs around me, her arms holding my chest to her, nails digging into my shirt.

"Tell me when to stop," I beg her, and then I'm fucking her slowly, the fabric between us, my hand torturing her breast, my hipbones digging into hers. I show her what our bodies could do together.

And she meets my thrust with a moan, and I feel my balls tighten. It's too close. I can't—

I can't—

I need to—

I lift off of her, my cock missing her already. I stare down at her, swallowing hard while my right hand finds her hip, silk already pooling around her waist. I follow the line of her lace towards her center, and I wonder if I'll be able to finish her off before I come in my trousers. I kiss her neck.

Maybe she'll let me use my mouth.

I touch her. Finally. Only lace between us. She bites my ear, and I gasp into her hair. I press against her again, feeling her wet for me.

"God, please, please, please." Her voice washing over my ear. And I force myself to go slow in case she wants to stop.

"Tell me— Tell me when to stop." I'm almost begging her now. I really should have asked at the beginning how far we'll go. Instead of waiting for her stop me.

I'm rubbing circles against her perfect cunt now, and she mumbles, moaning.

"Why would you stop? What's wrong?"

"If you want me to stop..." I pull back to look down at her, a blush running down her neck. Her eyes black. "If you want to stop—" She has to tell me.

"Why the fuck would we stop!" she screams.

And I feel like I missed something.

"Because... because I'm a virgin?" she asks. "Is that why?" Yes? I look down at her, wondering if she doesn't remember.

"That's why you stopped us. Last time."

"I stopped us?" She pushes at me and sit back. She sits up and screeches, "You stopped us!"

"You said you had never— So I pulled away!"

"Yes, I remember," like it offends her. "But I never asked you to stop!"

That is... definitely not what happened. But am I to argue with her at a time like this.

I'd asked her, minutes ago. *Tell me what you want.*

And she'd said, *Everything*.

But she doesn't know what *Everything* means to me.

She wheezes into my mouth – “Oh, god, Draco.” My name on her breath, like she’s begging me to touch her. Like she knows it’s my hand on her; my thumb rolling her nipple, my body hovering over hers. Like she might belong to me.

My jaw clenches with the desire. She yelps. I bite her.

Fuck.

“I’m sorry.” Her lips are too precious. I move to her neck. Skin I can tear into.

I suck the skin into my mouth. The same place I bruised her earlier this week – and was that only days ago?

I taste the makeup there. And set to licking it off. My hand palms her again, thumb pushing against her.

And she touches my waist, both hands on my sides. She doesn’t have to. She can just lay back and feel.

“More. Please, Draco.”

Begging for it.

Begging me.

And I lose my breath, wondering at her voice against my ear while I’m inside of her, while she shivers around me, *begging* me to fuck her, asking me for more. Asking me for something only I can give to her.

She presses her knee to my hip. She wants more.

I stretch my legs out, remembering this from years before. Remembering rubbing and hips rolling. The sensation of sex without being inside the heat.

She sighs against my ear when my torso rolls down to meet hers. Her hips open, cradling me like we fit together. I feel my cock respond to the heat below me. I feel her breasts against my chest again.

“Better?”

“Yes, god,” she moans.

I look at her, her eyes fluttering shut, her lips parted and panting. I press our mouths together, wet kisses between shallow breaths. Her hips jump, pressing tight to mine. Perfect. Perfect girl.

She does it again, on purpose now, like she knows I could come in my trousers, like she wants me to.

Like she wants me to rock against her slowly, pressing my cock against her knickers, and give her the friction she needs—

Slither between us to rub at her breast, to tug at her nipple.

groans, her lips grazing my stomach, I look down to take in her naked torso. Her hands are on my waist, and there, on her left arm, a pale raised scar. I can hear her screaming, and Bella’s laugh.

She moans now...

I blink it away, and I watch her breathing on my stomach. Lost in the feeling of my fingers. Begging me to please her.

Maybe I can erase those memories for both of us. Overwrite them with different sounds. I release her nipple, push my trousers down and kneel in front of her.

I roll down her knickers and she moans. “Oh, god, yes.”

I never got to taste her. Not even suck my fingers into my mouth.

I kiss her knee, looking up at her. Her breasts heaving, her knuckles tightening on the couch arm. I kiss her thigh, and her eyes flutter. I’m pushing up her skirt – the only article she’s still wearing – and pushing her legs apart, kissing the inside of her thigh when she finally tenses.

She’s stammering something but I’ve finally caught sight of her bare cunt, glistening. The air leaves my lungs, and her thighs tremble under my hands. She’s perfect. Just like I always imagined her to be, but better.

She’s going to talk me out of this. I can hear her begin. No one’s ever done this to her. No one’s ever tasted her and I vow to be the first and the last.

I swallow and think of the best way to distract Hermione Granger from her intentions. A pop quiz.

“Granger, why don’t you tell me the history of the Giant Squid in the Hogwarts lake?” She stares down at me, mouth open mid-protest. I kiss her thigh again.

Teach me, Granger. Tell me everything you know.

“It was deposited there in 1306, yes?” I ask, knowing full well—

“No, it was there from the beginning,” she says. Good girl. “The founders—”

I bring my mouth to her, one open-mouthed kiss to her cunt, and she growls a gasp, something that will bounce around my had for years to come.

The taste of her. It wasn’t like I had loads of experience with this, but her taste... Pansy made me good at this. Or good enough for her. It was easier to shut off my mind when my lips couldn’t whisper her name.

“Yes? The founders?” I ask. One kiss for each correct answer. I feel like she’ll appreciate that.

“The founders placed Hogwarts castle on the – the grounds, next to the black lake.” I lean into her, loving the way her eyes never leave me, like she’ll watch me as she comes. “So, the giant squid was there all along—”

Good girl. I part her with my tongue, hands squeezing against the muscles in her thighs as she jumps, and I push my face into her, licking up from her entrance to her clit.

The sounds she makes...

Fucking Merlin...

I do it again, dragging through her, slipping across her opening slowly, and one quick swirl to her clit. Her hands cover her face, like she can't bear it.

"And the squid." I can't be bothered to pull my mouth away. "It's a greenish color, yes?"

She corrects me. And it trembles me. I realize I'm leaking, cock pointing high, and aching for her.

"It's killed people, I've heard," I say, leaning to her again, and I'm dizzy when I taste more of her, pouring from her like honey.

She argues, fights for the squid, gasping the facts and saving the Giant Squid's reputation even as I tongue at her. She starts preaching about the merpeople and I almost moan. I latch onto her clit, closing my lips and sucking until I can press my tongue against it softly.

She grabs my hair, pressing my face into her cunt, and I bring a hand to my cock, squeezing the base so I don't come.

"Oh, god Draco. Please!"

I pump myself once, twisting my hand around the head, and then coming back to tighten around my base.

I release her clit, and mumble into her sex. "What about the merpeople?"

Her nails cut against my scalp as she rattles off dates and facts, things I already know. And since she's correct, I feel like a reward is in order. My tongue swipes over her clit, up and down, side to side, diagonally, and then harder, putting more pressure on her when she pushes my face closer. She tugs hard at my hair and I slide my hand around my shaft again, groaning into her cunt. Her fucking perfect cunt.

She's gasping, rolling her hips against me, moaning for me.

I push a finger into her. She whispers my name into the air, begging her Muggle gods for release and mumbling words about perfection and always.

I let my tongue write my name against her clit, signing myself to her.

She screams. And clutches my head, gasping for me.

I'm dragging my hand on my cock as thick honey pours from her onto my fingers, and when she's done trembling around me, after the final crest hits her walls, she releases my hair, and I slip my dripping hand from her cunt and wrap it around my cock, the slick slide of it tightening my balls.

Finish before she knows. Before she sees what she does to me.

I look back at her swollen cunt, imagining my signature across her parted folds, pink and slick.

Mine.

So, she'll need to tell me what I can have or else I'll just take it from her. She told me I should ask.

"Tell me what you want."

I slide against the silk, dragging one hand over her breast, asking.

"Everything," she moans.

No, no, no, no, no.

Stupid, stupid girl. Why would you do that. I squeeze my eyes tight, breathing harshly.

If she really—

If I can touch her—

Taste—

Maybe even press inside—

If she'll let me please her, if she'll let me drag pleasure from her body, if she'll let me watch as she comes, listen to her moan and maybe my name—

Maybe she'll know it's me.

Not against a wall again. Not like this.

I crush her to me and lift her. She gasps and the laugh – the giggle – she whispers into my ear shoots to my chest and I'm too warm.

I drop her down on the chaise, and the feeling of her fingers on my shoulders, begging me to stay with her...

I'm too warm. A fever in my chest.

I sit up on knees, pulling my jacket off to toss somewhere when I catch sight of her, lying in front of me, waiting for me to return to her. In silk.

Her hair.

Her eyes.

Her breath.

I can do this. I can make this good for her. I can make her moan and come apart with my hands, and maybe she'll let me do it again.

Maybe she'll ache for me, and in another few weeks I can offer myself to her again.

I grip the back of the chaise, and press closer to her, watching her eyes darken. My right hand on her waist, ready to carve her body into my memory, and I whisper against her lips, "Tell me when to stop."

I bring our lips together again, keeping it soft. Slow. Tasting her delicately. My hand drifts up her ribcage, fingers searching for the swell, the lift of her breast against the silk. I concentrate on the handful of her, curl my fingers into her, and find her peak with my thumb. Hard and pebbled through her bra and the dress.

"Oh, you stupid bint," I say, reaching for her, and she smiles against my mouth as I kiss her. Just the same as before. Perfect.

My lips press into hers, finding a slower rhythm than before. A slow dance, as she wraps her arms around my shoulders, hands sliding behind my neck, and my fingers slip to her hips, spreading wide across the silk.

She presses her chest into mine.

I have to touch more of her.

She's surrounding me, pulling me under. And there's no use fighting the current.

I slide my hands down, lower, letting her cheeks fill my palms, delicious silk between us.

She lets me.

I walk us to the sitting room, holding her against the door while I fiddle with the handle. She breathes against my neck, and holds my head close.

The door gives and she's gone for a second as we fall inside, like teenagers looking for a closet.

I shut the door, turning us to press her against the wood. I feel her breasts against my chest. Soft and pressed flat. Will she let me see them? Touch them. Taste them.

I trace her side, finding her ribs against the silk as she breathes. I press my head to hers, and stare into her, pour into her my thoughts and wants.

I could stay like this forever if this is all she'll give me.

She's looking into my eyes, waiting. Then she's checking the room, behind me.

"Did you know this sitting room was here?"

I roll my eyes. "Granger, you led me down this hall, not the other way around." I need to kiss her again. "But, yes, I've been here before. My mother and I had tea on those chairs just last month."

"I miss your mother."

"Let's talk about her later, shall we?" I tease, and she smiles. A true smile.

Like I know the secret to her lips. How to make her smile.

She kisses me, pulling me down to her, and she drags her fingers through my hair, sending shivers down my back. I need more of her.

I reach for her arse again, because she already let me do that. My fingers squeeze her close.

And I imagine slipping inside of her, my hands on her cheeks, pulling them close to me on every thrust. Or bending her over one of these couches, and watching my cock slip in and out, hands on her arse, pushing her down into arm of the couch.

I pull my lips from hers, letting my thoughts drift back into place.

I can't have that.

She made it clear.

I groan, feeling the edge of release, just there. My eyes drift up, past her shucked skirt, up her stomach to her breasts, flushed and plump. I need to take my time there next. Need to give them attention. Up to her face, and I see her eyes watching me, lips open and panting. Her eyes dark and bright and her sweating pink face flushes further. She bites her lip, and my cock swells, ready for her.

I look down at her cunt one last time, and I come all over the black couch, imagining it's her stomach, or her arse, or that the wet squeeze of my hand is her cunt.

I'm heaving air, lightheaded, and sticky now. I drop my head forward, catching my breath on her thigh, my eyes never leaving her center.

She pushes my hair back, and I look up at her, a small smile looking down on me. Mine.

I kiss her thigh, and lift my head, seeing my office again. I vanish the mess, smirking at ruining Blaise's favorite couch again.

"So," I say, and I can hear her come thick on my vocal chords. "Do you think you have a handle on the Werewolf financials?"

She smiles at me, like I'm the only one who knows how to make her. "I don't know. You may have to go over that last part again."

What a fucking tease, this witch. I grin at her. "I'll schedule a meeting tomorrow at lunch."

~*~

Tuesday, February 15, 2000

The woman is trying my patience.

She wore a black bra in today. It's nothing fancy, but it still means that Hermione Granger owns a black bra. And maybe she's wearing black knickers.

But I promised myself I'd give her a few days to recover, so we're on the couch again. I've pulled her into my lap, sitting her on my knee while I kiss her deeply. Her hands landed on my shoulders and I opened her blouse to find this black bra.

She grins at me. I pull her to lay across the couch, and her legs part for me to slide into place.

I slide her skirt up, out of the way, and she shivers. They are black. Simple, but black. I'm staring at her black knickers while she reaches for my belt.

No, no, Granger. Not for a few days.

I think of eating her out again while she's wearing these black knickers, pressing my nose into them while my tongue pushes inside of her. But I want to try something else.

I move her hands away, and lay down on top of her. She kisses me and I press my hips against her center. She sighs.

I move to her neck and drag her leg up, slipping closer to her, feeling that warmth against my cock again. I want to take my trousers off, but I don't trust myself.

I push our hips together, relishing the small noises she makes. She turns her head into my neck, nipping at my ear. I suck a pathway down her chest to her breasts, kissing her over the bra, and trying to keep a rhythm in our hips.

I pull the cup down, and her nipple is tight already. I pull it into my mouth, sucking and pushing my tongue against it.

She sighs, and holds my head to her. Her legs slip around my hips, and then it's just the tent in my trousers pressing against her core, rolling slow waves over the both of us.

I swirl her nipple over and over, moaning into her skin, and pulling at her other bra cup until I have her other breast in my hand. She moans the most delicious sound and I run my teeth across her. Her back presses up to me.

I kiss across her chest to her other nipple, looking up at her face. She's turned to the ceiling, eyes closed and lips open. Her hips are pushing back against me, and I drop my hand between us to press over her clit, over the black knickers.

"Oh, god," she sighs, and her knees press against my waist.

I suck on the skin around her nipple, nipping and biting, pulling the soft skin between my teeth. Her hands sweep through my hair like waves, and I pull my hand away from her center, pressing my cock to her clit again. She breaths against my forehead as I thrust carefully against her.

I suck her nipple between my lips again, fingerling at her other in soft pulls, and she begins to thrust back at me, her chest lifting to push against my mouth and her hips snapping up to meet mine.

I'm leaking into my trousers, and moaning around her nipple. She's twisting my hair around her fingers, and I shift until I'm in a position to just rock into her over and over and over, and she throws her head back, calling my name, and moans a long low growl that sings in the air.

My tongue flicks at her nipple until she relaxes back against the leather cushions, lips open, and then I continue rocking, feeling the wet slide of her knickers against my trousers, my cock remembering her cunt, remembering the wet heat and pushing closer and closer to get inside of her.

I release her nipple and dive into her mouth as I come against her, my tongue sweeping through her mouth and my moans swimming down her throat to be a part of her.

She holds my shoulders as I shiver, hips jerking against her and emptying into my trunks. Her tongue meets mine, and we kiss slowly, our pleasure leaking against each other.

She understands me. The way her mouth opens, and her body freezes. I know she understands me. She understands that even then I wanted this.

I smirk at her and spin away, not bothering to return to my partner, just watching Granger from the side.

She looks for me. She spins in a circle and then Krum is there. Even then she looks for me.

I smile, watching her want me. But then she's stumbling, stepping on toes, and I watch her chest heaving. And the smile melts away from my lips.

She's... terrified. She's hyperventilating. Because of me. I pace the floor, closer to her, and watch as she thanks Viktor and moves away from the dance floor. No longer looking for me. Running from me?

Because I confessed. Because I opened myself and she saw who I've been for five years. I chase her.

She's clicking away down a quiet hallway that I recognize from when I was here with Mother. She speeds up when she hears me. But I can't stop. If she's afraid of this—I have to fix it. I have to go back.

I shouldn't have—

I can't lose her—

"Granger."

She finally stops. She won't face me. I can hear her breathing. "Wouldn't that have been funny, Granger? If five years ago I wanted to dance with you so badly that I forced my way in, that I took it from you?"

"When did this start for you? Please, tell me." Softly into the air.

I can still take it back.

What, Granger? You never thought about me? Even once? And a wink at her.

"Fourth year," leaves my lips. Like Veritaserum seeping into my veins. I shouldn't have danced with her. Now, or then. I shouldn't have assumed I could steal her attention from Krum. From someone she wanted. I don't deserve her eyes on me. And then she turns around, looking at me.

"I win." She smirks.

Something she's won. Her eyes are kind as I try to piece together her question.

When did it start? She's won because it's been longer for her...

She steps into me, coming closer, offering herself to me.

Have we been dancing with each other all these years, without knowing?

"What's wrong?" Hermione pushed her hair away from her face.

Ginny looked over at her. Then reached across and set something down on Hermione's hip. A velvet box that Hermione had seen just last week.

"Oh, Ginny. No." Hermione ran her hands over her face.

"So, it's true?" Ginny's eyes were wide and watery. "This is it?"

"Where did you get that?"

"He told you? This is real?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Yes, he told me."

"When? Tonight at dinner?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "Why do you have that?"

"He's been off," Ginny looked back at the ceiling. "He's nervous and irritable and we're fighting and then I got nervous so I went through his things."

"What? Ginny..."

"Oh, don't give me that moral high ground." Ginny turned to her. "You snooped through your boyfriend's memories."

Hermione blushed at the term, and plucked the box from her hip, held it out to her. "You

have to put it back. Put it back before he notices."

Ginny ran her hands over Hermione's sheets. "I was thinking," she said, "I could keep it with me. Then meet him at dinner and while he's super fidgety and upset, pull out the box and propose to *him*." Ginny gave her maniacal grin.

Hermione blinked, watching an expression on her face that she'd usually seen on a pair of twins. "That's the worst thing I've ever heard."

"No, but it would be *funny*. Or maybe I could show up already wearing it and then he'd—"

"Ginny. Let your boyfriend propose to you. He only gets to do it once."

Ginny swallowed and nodded at the ceiling. A smile spread slowly across her pink lips.

"I'm getting married to Harry Potter."

Ginny turned to her, blush blossoming and running her freckles together. She giggled.

Hermione laughed. "Not unless you get that ring back to him, you're not! He could very well die of an anxiety attack if he realizes it's missing!"

Hermione handed the box back to her, and Ginny threw her arms around her, squeezing tightly.



She gripped her satchel bag to her chest. Hermione stood in the lifts to the office, a bit later than she would normally arrive.

Breathe. The worst thing would be if someone assumed something based on her inability to act casually. This was just another normal day.

Breathe.

The doors opened, and she was assaulted by floating hearts and pink streamers. Fuck. It was Valentine's Day.

Melody smiled up at her.

"Good morning!"

Hermione mumbled something back and quickly turned right to head to her office. She felt tightness in her chest loosen, and she realized that Draco wasn't at the front with coffee, like he had been all last week.

Just another normal day.

She took a breath, and sat at her desk. Before she could decide what his absence could mean, Draco slid into her doorway, like a child wearing socks on a hardwood floor.

"Granger. Yes, good."

She was frozen. This man had been on top of her two days ago. He pushed his hair away from his face.

"Er, Senior Staff meeting at nine, and then we should meet about the Werewolf Policy financials. After lunch?"

His eyes were wide and there was pink on his cheekbones.

Was he embarrassed? Because she was mortified.

"Yes. Great," she said.

He nodded at her and then stepped out. She closed her eyes, rubbing at her temples.

Just another normal day.

"Er—" from the doorway. She looked up, and Draco was back. "Perhaps before lunch is

better. If you're free."

"Yes. Great," she repeated.

He nodded and left. For good this time. She made sure.

Perhaps Walter should join them for the meeting? She couldn't imagine sitting alone with Draco in his office, trying to discuss financial allocations.

She breathed in deeply, and reached for her calendar and her quill. Her hand stopped in the air.

A to-go cup of steaming coffee sat next to her ink pot.

Normal.

Normal. Normal.

At five minutes to nine she and her coffee cup made their way through the disgustingly pink office, passing bowls of chocolates and candies. She slipped into the conference room and found several people already seated. Draco was absent.

There was a little pile of candy in front of every chair at the table and as she sat, Dorothea Bulstrode turned to her.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.” She pushed a little heart-shaped card at her, unsmiling, and then turned back to her chocolates.

“Er, thank you, Dorothea.”

Hermione opened the card, and it said *Have a great day*.

“Since when did every single person celebrate Valentine’s Day by shoving it down your throat?”

On cue, Blaise Zabini stomped into the room, fluttering hearts exploding into the air. “Happy Valentine’s Day, everybody!” Streamers flew, chocolate scattered everywhere, and the magic hearts fluttered like butterflies, zooming around the room.

“I expect you’ll be cleaning this up, Blaise?” Draco entered behind him, careful to not step on fallen chocolates.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, sir.”

Draco moved around the table, and Hermione felt very warm as she watched his body in a way she’d never watched him before. He wore a wizarding variation on a waistcoat, grey with a tie. It hugged him perfectly and Hermione shook the thoughts of his slender ribs out of her head as he sat.

She looked down at her chocolates, and clutched her coffee cup to keep her hands from reaching for them.

Draco took his seat next to her at the head of the table, and she couldn’t tell if he looked at her once, because she refused to look back at him.

“How was everyone’s weekend?” Draco asked as he organized the papers he’d brought in.

Hermione caught herself watching his hands.

A few responses here and there, before Blaise spoke up.

“I was having a lovely time at the governor’s mansion before Granger came in and took all the attention.”

She looked over at him and he was grinning back at her. Hermione brought her coffee cup to her lips to distract herself.

“Yes, Blaise, Granger, and I attended the Valentine’s Ball on Saturday,” Draco said. “Blaise was able to secure a few accounts. Granger had a successful evening as well.”

She choked. Hot coffee, running down her airway.

Dorothea slammed her hand on her back.

Hermione nodded her thanks.

“The Werewolf Policy is now fully funded, and she’ll be working on publicity for the Golden Snidget campaign next,” Draco said. “Anything to add, Granger?”

She looked up at him and immediately blushed.

The store remained busy throughout the day, which didn’t give her much time to let her mind wander to the way Draco threaded his fingers through her hair when he was close, or how he gripped at her hips when he changed the angle, or the low sound of his voice when he whispered, “Look at me.”

Not much time. But she found some anyway.

When Morty came back downstairs just before closing, he joined her at the counter as she finished her notations in the ledger.

“Your life is becoming far too interesting to still be working here, Miss Granger.”

Hermione smiled and closed the book.

“Did Mr. Malfoy get in touch with you?”

She missed the ink pot entirely as she tried to place the quill back.

“I’m sorry?”

Morty cleaned his glasses, and looked up at her. “He was here. About fifteen minutes after opening.”

Hermione’s heart beat stuttered. “What... What did he want?”

Morty slid his glasses back on his nose. “Well, it certainly wasn’t a book.” Hermione’s eyes widened as Morty’s brow lifted.

“I... What...”

“I let him know that you were off today, as I assumed you would take the whole day like I told you to.”

“Oh,” Hermione said. “Well, I guess I’ll see him at work tomorrow.”

She turned from the thin shopkeeper, and tried to process this.

Why had he come? What did he want?

A chill hit her.

Did he want to clarify things? Make sure she knew it wouldn’t happen again? Or how they weren’t to discuss it again?

She thought of how he’d gone to New York after they’d first kissed. How he’d returned cold, and closed off.

Hermione quickly closed shop, and headed home.

The next morning, after barely catching enough sleep to suffice for the day, Hermione was woken by the gentle weight of Ginny laying down next to her in her bed.

“Ginny?” She rubbed her eyes. “It’s four in the morning.”

“Yeah, it’s your turn, Granger.”

Hermione turned on her side and waited for Ginny to talk. Ginny stared at the ceiling with wide eyes. She hadn’t slept at all.

“I’ve done a thing.”

Would there be a next time?

Hermione covered her love bites, both fresh and old, and looked at her reflection.

They hadn't discussed it. How would this work? Or was it not going to? Was last night all there would be?

And before the Love Contract could even cross her mind, a peck at the window revealed the owl with today's *Prophet*.

Wonderful.

She grabbed it from the owl's leg, and brought it into the dining room. She opened the fold. And there she was on the front page, descending a grand staircase and sliding her hand into Draco's.

She sat and tossed the paper across the room, placing her head in her hands.

Thirty seconds later she picked it up again, smoothed it out, and read Rita's loving tribute to the Valentine's Day Ball. Thankfully, Rita had described the two of them as members of Malfoy Consulting Group, and not War Hero Hermione Granger or Ex-Death Eater Draco Malfoy. At least there might be some good publicity for M.C.G.

She sat and sipped her coffee and wondered what to do with her morning. Ginny was gone already, and Hermione didn't have to get ready for Cornerstone until closer to noon, per Morty's insistence.

She'd taken a shower the night before at Ginny's urging. Ginny had started telling her all sorts of... interesting things, like they were now bound by a common knowledge of the mystery of life. Things that Hermione had heard over the years, and had filed away as "adult things," but she was now an adult, she guessed.

"Do you feel different?" Ginny had asked, just as Hermione was shutting the door to the bathroom.

"I feel... sore."

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, going on to explain how she and Harry had to wait a few days before they could try again, and when Hermione's eye twitched involuntarily, Ginny laughed and let her shut the door in her face.

Did she feel different?

Her brain tried to articulate it while the shower washed away the scent of him.



She finally dragged herself to Cornerstone at half past eleven. It was oddly busy when she arrived, and although Morty gave her a disappointed glare that she'd come in at all, he was silently grateful that she could immediately jump on and assist an older gentleman with a few top shelf books.

He turned, and leaned back on the wood, placing his hands in his pockets.

Oh, god.

"Nope," she said. "That about covers it."

"And that was a nice feature Skeeter ran in yesterday's *Prophet*," Wentworth added. "Great publicity for the company and the two of you looked splendid!"

Alright, Wentworth. That was enough.

"Excuse me, Charles," Blaise chimed in. "I was photographed on page three."

The next hour was agony. She had no idea how he was able to lead a meeting, being in the same room as her, without looking like a complete fool. As Draco and Mockridge presented the projected budget for March, detailing areas where they needed to cut back or push forward, Hermione actively kept her eyes off of him.

Off of his hands. Off of his neck.

"And lastly," Draco said. Off of his lips. "We've managed to fill the Wizengamot Relations position, and just in time, as our first Wizengamot date is in a few weeks. Cornelia Waterstone starts next Monday."

Waterstone. That was the woman who Hermione had pushed for, who had great answers about office dynamics and a wonderful background in law.

Blaise pouted. She was also the least attractive woman who had been interviewed.

"Mr. Buckworth, our new Werewolf Policy investor, has delivered a fruit basket to us for Valentine's Day. It's up with Melody, so feel free to grab what you can before the Associates take it all." Draco stood. "Granger and I will be working on financing now, but I'll be available after lunch for anything."

Now? Right now? He said before lunch, but it was 10AM. She blinked at the table.

The senior staff began standing and heading out. Blaise ran around all of them, looking for the fruit basket. She didn't know how to gather up all her materials and her coffee cup in a timely manner with her hands shaking. She tossed her empty coffee cup in the wastebasket.

When she finally exited the conference room, Draco was waiting for her. He gestured for her to lead the way to his office.

Walter? She needed Walter. How in Merlin's name was she supposed to talk finances with him alone in his office.

She looked over to Melody's desk and found half the office surrounding the fruit basket, including Walter.

Perhaps she should suggest grabbing him?

They reached Draco's door and Hermione entered, clutching her notes. She moved to the center of the room and turned back to him, about to ask about Walter, and watched as he closed the door behind him.

He turned, and leaned back on the wood, placing his hands in his pockets.

She pulled her notes across her chest like a shield, feeling the papers crinkle under her fingers.

He leveled his eyes on her, unreadable, but intense.

"Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet, Granger?"

She felt the words like a knife to her gut. That was it. They were going to ignore it, and move forward.

He didn't want her speaking to anyone about this. He didn't want her bringing it up with him...

He didn't want her.

"Yes," She nodded, looking down at the carpet, the space between their feet. "No, yes, I understand." Her stomach felt heavy.

Merlin, he was probably concerned about the Love Contract. Hermione would be, if she were in his shoes. Hermione held the power to destroy him and this company now. Did he honestly think she would?

She continued, "You don't need to worry about me. I won't speak of it."

She looked up at him, hating the way her vision blurred. She swallowed and tried to grin.

He was still, examining her. His eyes darted between her own, and his mouth was tight. There

was a strain in his features that she recognized from Hogwarts.

If he wasn't still standing in front of the door, she would nod at him, grin, and excuse herself to go cry in her office. Perhaps she needed to say more?

"I'll be able to keep quiet. Keep this to myself. We can pretend it never happened if that's what you want." She watched him blink at her. "You don't need to be concerned with any of the legal ramifica—"

"Let me clarify," he said, stepping off the door. "Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet," he repeated, moving toward her, face relaxing slightly, and the smallest smirk tugging at his lips, "or do I need to silence the room."

She blinked at him. He stopped in front of her, hands still in his pockets, and lips twitching. She squeezed the papers in her fingers, across her chest.

He was... They were...

She swallowed, and wet her lips on accident. His eyes darkened.

"You'll need to silence the room."

He smirked at her, eyes flashing. While he muttered the silencing charm and the locking spell, she cast the contraceptive charm. She tossed her notes onto the couch and threw herself at him. He stepped backwards with her momentum, hands coming to her hips as hers twisted into his hair, pulling his lips down to hers.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Two



Hermione's heart stopped when Ginny told her that the Contraceptive Charm needed to be cast before.

Then she started crying when Ginny said she had a potion that one could take for the day after.

Ginny jumped up and retrieved the potion. As Hermione hiccupped and swallowed, Ginny watched her.

"So... that was my last one," Ginny said. "So, we'll need to brew or buy some more..."

Ginny's voice lifted up at the end.

"Of course. I'll pay for a new batch for you." Hermione wiped her eyes.

"Right," Ginny said, watching her. "Should we be buying double?"

Hermione looked at her.

"Or was this the only time you'll be needing a potion for a little while?"

Ginny was digging, and Hermione was too exhausted to figure it out.

"I mean," Ginny said. "For next time..."

Hermione blinked. "I think I'll remember the Charm next time."

Ginny pounced on her, grabbing her shoulders and shaking. "SO THERE WILL BE A NEXT TIME!!!"

As her body was shaken around and her torso mounted and hugged like a doll, Hermione finally realized what Ginny was asking.

Ginny pulled back. "What are you wearing? Where's your dress?"

"He ripped it off of me."

Ginny fell off the bed.

She brushed hurried kisses across his mouth before he finally reached up with a hand and held her face still as he deepened the kiss, parting her lips and tasting her. They both sighed, exhaling into each other.

"Merlin, I thought I lost you," he sighed against her jaw as he worked his lips over towards her shoulder. The hand at her face slid into her hair.

She chuckled lowly. "You thought?" She gasped as he ran his teeth across an old bruise. He must love that spot. "You're the one being so cagey—"

"I was aiming for playful," he hissed into her ear.

"You're always playful—"

He slipped the hand on her hip around to grab her, pulling her closer to his hips. She let her hands leave his hair and travel to the buttons on his waistcoat. As soon as the first button popped open, the hand in her hair gripped her, and even more of her neck was exposed to him. Her fingers worked to remove all the buttons, and once he shrugged out of it, lips never leaving her neck, he moved both hands to her backside, grabbing her and lifting her up. She squeaked, grabbed his shoulders, and had a moment where she didn't understand the point of it. She opened her eyes and they were face to face, and he started walking them towards the couch behind her.

But instead of the couch, he pressed her against the wall next to it. Just where she had stood for one of the poses in the first photoshoot. As he pressed her spine against the wall, moving his hands to the backs of her thighs, twisting them around his hips, she smiled that this was the place she'd been standing for the poses against the window. When Draco had walked in, sliding his jacket on, and seen her for the first time.

He kissed her again. And she found that the best way to keep from falling was to squeeze him and let his hips pin her against the wall. He groaned against her mouth.

One hand came up and began unbuttoning her blouse while the other moved slow circles on her thigh. As it was coming off of her, she thought of today's outfit – how pleased she had been that it was a very professional skirt/blouse combination and how badly she needed professionalism today.

"Er," Hermione said, as Draco popped the last button on her blouse and opened it wide to see her. "The paperwork? Are you worried about it at all?"

"The Werewolf financials? No, of course not." He palmed her through her bra.

She pressed her lips together, and tried to keep her eyes open. "I—I meant the... contract."

"Contract?" The hand rubbing circles on her thigh had somehow found its way between them, now rubbing her over her knickers. The other hand was now travelling around her back to her bra clasp.

She moaned. Then bit out, "The Love Contract."

Both hands stilled, and the hand pressing between them paused mid-rub, pressing over her sensitive spot.

“Oh, god. Why was she talking?”

She opened her eyes and his grey ones were watching her, pink on his cheeks.

“Are you worried about it?” he said, eyes darting back and forth between hers, and she was very aware of the hand pressing against her center, and she wished he would either remove it or move it.

“Only in the sense that I signed a document promising not to do this.” She squeezed her thighs around his hips – accidentally, of course – and somehow it pushed them together, his hand pressing firm to her core. She gasped, eyelids fluttering, and tried to keep herself from doing it again.

When her eyes focused on him, his smirk was back, and the fingers searching for the clasp on her bra continued their journey. He answered, “Only in the sense that I *created* a document to keep us from doing this.”

Her bra snapped open, and his fingers dipped below her knickers.

“And to keep Blaise away from Melody,” he added, kissing her neck.

“Well, that’s not working.” She chuckled against his temple. Her thighs were shaking as he ran a finger along her center, moving up to press against her bud, and her whole body shivered. He circled her, running in different directions, and his other arm came around her waist to support her. Her bra momentarily forgotten, hanging off her shoulders.

“We can discuss it later, I guess.” She mumbled in between gasps. “It’s a common contract for businesses, especially privately owned. I’ve looked it up.”

“Shh.” Against her ear. “You can teach me later.”

She felt him smile against her ear, and she responded with one of her own. She was just wondering if her hands should be doing something, seeing as his were doing *all the things* when she felt two fingers run towards her opening and push inside of her.

She yelped. The pinching was back, but it wasn’t good. It felt so much more tender than it had two days ago. It was like she’d pulled muscles, but they were *inside*.

“What’s wrong?”

Draco pulled out of her. She had her eyes squeezed shut and her hands fisted in his shirt. She remembered what Ginny told her, about needing to wait a few days before trying again. She took a slow breath in and opened her eyes, embarrassed that her vision was wet.

“I’m fine,” she tried, smiling. “Just sore. Keep going.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

and once Madame Michele confirms that she attended all classes, I instruct my solicitor to deposit your inheritance.”

My lungs beg for breath. I see spots in my vision.

“Well, feel free to hold onto those last three payments, Father. She’s done with that now.”

“Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face, Draco.” He waves his hand. “She’s learning so much. She’s so much improved by this.”

“Improved.” Ihiss. “There was nothing to improve upon—”

“We both know that’s not true—”

“She’s an absolute vision,” Ihiss. “She’s the brightest witch this world has ever seen with the kindest heart. She didn’t need to learn how to hold a teacup or organize a dinner party.” I stalk to him, and knock aside my metal chair, listening to it clank against the floor. I press my palms against the table and look him dead in the eye. “You are the only person who thinks she needs to be more. Mother sees her true self. The Ministry sees it. Other women look up to her, envy her even. Even Pansy sees it.”

He laughs, throwing his head back. His hair falls over his shoulders.

“Oh, Draco,” he says. “Surely you don’t think Miss Parkinson came up with the idea to use Miss Granger by herself?”

His eyes glint at me, and my head feels light. I press my teeth together as my brain spins.

He’s poisoned them all against me. Who do I even have any more?

I stand tall, looking down on him, and say, “Thank you, Father... for making it very easy to say goodbye to you.” I swallow, memorizing the face I will aspire to grow apart from. He lifts a brow, and I turn on my heel, heading to a small teashop in London.

His eyes harden, in a way that used to make me shiver.

"No," he says slowly. "I guess our terms are met."

"Wonderful." I stand swiftly. "Then I assume I will receive the final three installments of my inheritance over the next three weeks." I look him over and say, "Goodbye, Father."

I turn to the door, and he sings, "Yes, you should. Assuming all terms are met."

I pause, clenching my jaw, and turn back to him. "As previously discussed, all terms of our agreement have been met, so I don't—"

"Our agreement, yes." He examines his nails. "Miss Granger's agreement, however, is still being worked through."

I feel a hum in my veins.

I have years of experience with this man that tell me this is a trap. This is an excuse and a ploy for attention. But still I cannot help myself when I ask, "Excuse me?"

He looks up at me, eyes bright with mischief. "Miss Granger's agreement with me," he says simply. "Surely you know of it, since you know her so well."

I stare at him, waiting. Waiting for him to play his hand. Waiting to pick apart his words until they are nothing more than intimidation and manipulation woven together with a lilting aristocratic voice.

He continues, so I don't have to ask. "She's been seeing Madame Michele for seven weeks now. Two or three other instructors as well." He grins at me.

I swallow. "I don't believe you."

He laughs. And it ricochets off the damp stones. "You know, Draco, I'd heard that love blinds, but truly you cannot be this daft."

I stare at him, seated so calmly behind his table, just as if it were his desk at the Manor. "With the way you've watched her so closely for the past ten years, I would have thought you'd notice. The little changes? Smoothing out her rough edges?" He drums his fingers on the table. "Perhaps she holds her teacups differently. Or maybe her walk is lighter." He looks at the wall. "I certainly have noticed it, and I'm locked away, watching through *Prophet* photographs."

I feel my blood running cold, like a tap turned the wrong way. She's begun to use her saucer under her cup. Her fingers on the champagne stem at the Valentine's Ball. So different from the way she held the glass at New Year's. The tall heels she wears without unbalancing. Her nails, painted and trim instead of bitten off.

Her curtsey to me during the French Waltz. How it's changed over the years. Almost as if she'd been practicing.

"Are you telling me you've sent her to finishing school?" I ask, voice dead and dry.

He tilts his head. "Are you telling me you haven't noticed?" He chuckles. "She should be at a class just now, actually." He checks the clock on the wall. "She meets her instructors weekly,

"I'm fine," she repeated. She slid her hands up into his hair and pulled his lips to hers. He kissed her, then stepped backwards, moving them off the wall, turning, and deposited her on the arm of the black leather couch.

Her shaking legs thanked him, but she still held him close, worried that they were stopping. "Don't stop. I'm fine," she breathed against his neck. "I want this."

He shivered, and pulled back to look at her. He grabbed her hips, pulling her to the edge, and slid his hand back under her knickers. He flicked her twice, watching her pull her lip between her teeth, before swirling down and pressing one long finger into her.

Yes, this was nice. She sighed as he pumped in and out of her several times, twisting and then pressing on her again, flicking her, swirling her. She pressed against his hand, trying to meet his rhythm.

"Draco, I'm ready. I'm ready, please." She looked up at him. He was holding himself up with one hand on the arm of the couch next to her, leaning down to her level. He watched her as he slipped out, and then tried pressing two fingers back inside.

She bit her lip, squeaking, and knew her eyes were pressed closed. It was like her body didn't want to do this, but it did at the same time. She opened her eyes and nodded at him. "That's fine. I'm ready." She nodded vigorously, clenching her jaw.

He raised a brow at her, suspiciously, and tried moving inside of her. She gripped his arms, surprised that his shirt was still on, and attempted to control her facial expressions.

He frowned at her and removed his hand, standing up tall.

"No, no. Draco I'm ready." She pulled her bra off, tossing it away, and reached up to start unbuttoning his shirt. She watched his eyes slide across her chest, proud of the way he licked his lips. He slipped his shirt off his shoulders once she was done.

She hesitated, then reached for his belt. She watched the muscles in his stomach tighten, and his arms twitched, like he would stop her. Once the belt was open, she looked up at him. His chest was heaving, and she got to run her eyes over his skin.

She started unbuttoning his trousers, trying to ignore the bulge pressing against the front. His hands clenched into fists as she undid the lower buttons, and she knew her fingers were brushing against him.

Good. He'd done something similar to her on Saturday night, and she felt the skin on her exposed chest shiver at the memory of him taking his pants off against her stomach. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her breasts pull into taut peaks.

She purposefully let her fingers scrape down the tent in his trousers as she finished with the last of the buttons, and just when she thought she had the upper hand, he reached forward and cupped a breast. Her fingers stuttered over him as he pulled at her, rolling her, tracing her underside and then rubbing his thumb over her.

Saturday February 19, 2000

It should be a fairly simple visit.

There's nothing left for us really.

I don't even bother to smooth my hair back.

I have fulfilled my commitments. He has fulfilled his.

We will be done.

So, when I pull my chair to sit across from him, and his eyes sweep my scalp, I almost smirk back at him.
He asks me about the client list. He asks me about Waterstone. And then he asks about her.
“She’s wonderful. We have the Werewolf policy fully funded. Rhett Buckworth sends his regards.”

He grins at me. “And how are you and Miss Granger progressing personally?”

“We’re working very well together.” I keep it simple and factual.
I’m so relaxed that I only notice at the very last moment that he’s pressing forward, looking into my eyes.

My bricks sprout high, blocking him out. I frown at him. “Is there something you’d like to ask, Father?”

His lips twitch. “She looked absolutely stunning at the governor’s ball, Draco. I’m just interested to know if you fully appreciated the view. I saw in the *Prophet* that the two of you walked arm in arm for most of the evening.”

“We did,” I say. “She was my business partner, not my date.”

He hums, examining me. “It’s been several years,” he says, “but I assume you still remember the contraceptive charm?”

My eye twitches, and I open my mouth to fight him.

“Or I suppose,” he continues, “this time it might be *you*, who tries to conveniently forget it one night.” He chuckles. “I don’t know her very well, but I would guess she would prefer to be married—”

“No,” I hiss. “You *don’t* know her very well.”

He eyes me, taking in my stiff shoulders. He never took kindly to being interrupted.
“Yes? The founders?” He lifted an innocent brow at her, and waited.

“The f-founders placed Hogwarts castle on the—” He dipped his head, still looking into her eyes. “The—the grounds, next to the black lake.” She could feel his breath on her. “So, the giant He ran his hands halfway up her thighs, still held open.

“Yes? The founders?” He lifted an innocent brow at her, and waited.

“The f-founders placed Hogwarts castle on the—” He dipped his head, still looking into her eyes. “The—the grounds, next to the black lake.” She could feel his breath on her. “So, the giant I clasp my hands. “Is there anything else? Or shall we say our goodbyes.”

If's only quiet for a moment before Pansy starts again.

"Mrs. Malfoy, did I see a late Victorian lamp in the drawing room? It looks so similar to the Rashaan that we have in the summer cottage. I wondered if it was designed by him as well?"

Mother blinks at her. "You know, darling, I have no idea. I would be happy to find out and write to you."

"Oh, no," Pansy says. "I was just curious. Please do not trouble yourself."

I rub at my temples before returning to the rotten soufflé.

"Miss Parkinson," Father asks. "How are your marks? Any favorite subjects? O.W.L.s coming up this year."

Pansy rattles on to Father about her marks. Pansy compliments my mother's taste again. Pansy talks about me an awful lot. Pansy is a nervous wreck.

"She'll do," Father says when Pansy and Mother have settled on the couch after dinner. Father pours me a Firewhisky and says, "You like her?"

I blink at him. "She's fine. She's... a lot."

Father smirks. "That will fade. She's terrified of your mother. As she should be." He drinks deeply from his glass. His eyes land on Pansy again, and then he says, "You know the contraception charm already?"

I cough, sputtering my drink.
"I—yes, Father."

"Good," he says. He looks to me. "You can never be too careful, Draco. If she gets pregnant, you will marry her. End of story." He looks back at Pansy and Mother. "Doesn't matter if you're fifteen or twenty-five, there will be no children outside of a union."

My hands shake as I nod and sip from my tumbler. "I know, Father." There was a brief mention of this two summers ago when he sat me down on the very chairs Mother and Pansy are perched on and told me things I never wanted to know about the female body.

"And trust me, Draco," he says, "Miss Parkinson knows it too." His eyes drift over Pansy again, and he says, "Don't trust her to cast the charm. That one knows exactly what she wants and exactly how to get it."

I frown at him.

"She wouldn't do that. She's masterful, yes, but not—"

"Draco," he says, turning to me and lifting a brow. "There's not a single person in this room that believes you wish to marry Miss Parkinson." He clasps my shoulder. "She will do whatever is necessary. Mark my words."

I watch as he brings two glasses of port to Pansy and Mother.

Pansy smiles brightly at me over Mother's shoulder.
~*~

squid was there all alo- oh!" His tongue. He was... He was pushing his tongue against her. Starting from below and licking upward.

This was... far too intimate. She couldn't...

Hermione brought her hands up to her face, pressing her eyes closed as he started another slow swipe.

"And the squid," he mumbled into her. "It's a greenish color, yes?"

"No, it's r-red." She curled her fingers against her face. "Dark red. Almost purple." Her thighs were starting to fight him now, shaking. She either wanted to close them and push him out, or hold him there. She hadn't decided.

"It's killed people, I've heard."

"No, no." She moaned as he licked at her again. "It's very docile. Helpful even. It's had sev-

eral quarrels with the merpeople but—" And his lips closed around her bud. And sucked.

She gasped, and her hands grappled for his hair, trying to hold on.

"Oh, god Draco. Please!"

"What about the merpeople?"

She dragged her nails through his scalp, pinching her eyes closed, afraid to look down at him.

"In 1497 the merpeople revolted, and – and – and –" He was lapping at her, trying different rhythms, different pressure. "And they – and they tried to –"

She realized that she was pushing her hips against him, dragging his face closer with every flick of his tongue. But she guessed he'd stop her if he cared. She twisted his hair around her fingers and she felt him groan against her. She bucked her hips forward at the vibrations.

"They tried – The merpeople tried to – tried to –"

She was like a broken record, she couldn't go on. She didn't dare open her eyes. She was afraid to see him between her thighs, knowing it would burn into her memory forever.

"Ugh, Draco, please."

And she felt the press of a finger inside of her, his mouth still working above. She began to splinter, reaching an edge, and she could hear her own voice saying a number of things, and making little breathy moans in time with his tongue, and she could feel him grunting and breathing hard against her.

She screamed as she broke apart. She pressed her hips against his mouth, holding him there. She had her hands tangled in his hair, and her thighs clenched closed around his neck. He continued flicking his tongue across her, as she pulsed. When she was done and couldn't handle it anymore, she released him.

He pulled his finger from her, and she almost fell backwards and down onto the couch cushions, forgetting there was nothing behind her. She grabbed at the backrest of the couch to hold herself up, and slowly opened her eyes when she heard him moving.

A quick sound, in time with his breathing. And she saw the top of his head from where he knelt in front of her, hair twisted and slick. His eyes were dark and deep as he ran his gaze from her exposed folds, up to her bare chest, and further to her face. He bit his lip, and groaned, and she suddenly realized that he was finishing himself.

She blinked and looked away, unsure if she was supposed to see. Of course. He *should*. She hadn't really done all that much for him.

A cut off cry, and she knew he was finished. He must have painted the side of the couch. He dropped his head onto her inner thigh breathing harshly against her. The lock of blond hair that always fell across his forehead was misbehaving again, and Hermione bit her lip and decided that she was allowed to push it back for him.

As her fingers brushed behind his ear, his eyes connected with hers. He pressed a kiss against her thigh, and lifted his head off of her.

"So," he whispered, voice hoarse. "Do you think you have a handle on the Werewolf financials?" He smirked up at her.

She couldn't help but smile down on him. "I don't know," she said. "You may have to go over that last part again."

His eyes flashed at her. "I'll schedule a meeting tomorrow at lunch."

Tuesday at lunch, Draco taught her a valuable lesson about the wonders of dry-humping. As she lay on her back on the leather couch, with Draco moving deliciously against her, she thought it was just about time to remove their underthings and get to it.

But Draco brought her right to the edge, and followed her over it. Again, another mess on the couch.

She pieced together that Draco was wary about entering her again. She did them both the favor of trying a few things in the shower Wednesday morning, making her feel like she was quite ready to try again.

On Wednesday's lunchtime "meeting," she attempted telling Draco this without so many words, and even found her way into his pants for the first time. He let her stroke him and try things and he'd tell her what worked and what would feel better. He had her pressed up against the door, barely letting her through it before slamming her back, but now his head was resting on her shoulder as she pulled at him. When he grabbed her hips, squeezing, she knew it was about time.

She released him and shimmied out of her dress, stepping out of her underwear too. He watched her as she dropped his trunks to the floor, and she pulled him against her, biting her lip. She found a way to get back into the position they had been in on Monday, her legs around his hips and his hips about to pound her into the door.

She smiles at me when I return to her, and I pull her hips to the edge of my desk, sucking on her neck as I just say *fuck it*, and push inside of her.

I use every second of those twenty minutes, and she's clenching me and whining in my ear, and I'm pumping into her, slapping our skin together and circling her clit until she shivers and screams something unintelligible into the room. I come only moments after, and I barely have a second to lick the sweat off her skin before Carrie knocks at the door. I pull out of her, and she tumbles off the desk, searching for her shoes. I tuck in my shirt, muttering a spell to pop the buttons through, and close my trousers. I poke my head out, thank Carrie, and take the food.

She probably knows. But bless her, she doesn't make a comment about my flushed face or sweaty hair.

Granger has her blouse closed by the time I shut the door.

She cons me into talking about actual work while we eat, and I suppose that is fine. I ask her if she'll be at Cornerstone this weekend. I sense her hesitate before saying yes.

"Will you?" she asks.

I clean up the mess from my sandwich and say, "Maybe Sunday."

"Is there a book you need?" she teases.

"Something like that." I smirk back at her.

She smiles, and then says carefully, "What do you have tomorrow?" I want to lie. But why would I?

"I'm visiting my father." I stare down at the carpets, and she stutters, trying to ask, so I say, "It was part of his conditions to the inheritance. That I visit him on the monthly visitations in January and February."

I turn to see her poking at the remains of her salad, methodically, like avoiding my eyes. I take the container from her, and bend across her lap to kiss her.

Bleu cheese. Of course. Her and bleu cheese. Disgusting.

"If you'd told me we'd be kissing again, I wouldn't have ordered it." She smiles.

"No, no. It's your favorite," I say, kissing her again until I press her into the cushions.

~*~

Saturday, August 26, 1995

"This soufflé is absolutely decadent, Mrs. Malfoy," Pansy sings. "I would be honored if Remmy could share the recipe with Yolly, my father's elf!"

My mother lifts a polite brow and says, "Of course, dear. I'll have Remmy get in touch."

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy. Draco," Pansy coos, "isn't it divine?"

I hate the soufflé, but I assume that's not quite the point.

"It's lovely," I say. And Father's lip twitches.

I slide out of her, holding her up with my arms, and push back in. Merlin, this sensation. This mind-blowing feeling.

I kiss her slow, lazy and without intent.

She moves, trying to set a pace, and I pull back to wait for her permission. I move faster; still a slow glide, hitting deep inside her, waiting for the pain to reappear on her face. She nods again, and I let my hips move, grunting into her hair.

Her hair, down and wild, swallowing my breath.

I hear a rattle, and we both stop. The door shakes with my thrusts. She laughs and I move us to the next wall. I wonder if the office can hear it.

I wonder if I care. I almost open the door and yell out, Hello all, I'm fucking Hermione Granger.

The thought has my hips snapping. She gasps, and I watch her face. It's faster than it's been, deeper too. She blinks at me with wide eyes, and I twist my arm until I can push at her clit. She rolls her eyes back and I feel her squeezing around me as I pound her hips into the wall.

"Tuck," I moan.

And she's gasping, holding my cock inside of her so tight that I can only roll my hips.

~*~

Thursday, February 17, 2000

We're in her office today, but only because Buckworth is here to finalize things. I can't keep my eyes off her mouth as she talks policy and legalities.

I walk Buckworth out, adjusting myself before standing.

I come back to her office, silence the room, and lift her onto her desk. I take my time kissing her, undressing her. This was our only meeting today, and I told Carrie and Walter to clear our calendars for the rest of the day.

When I push everything off her desk to make room for her long body, she laughs, and looks up at me like I'm the answer to a difficult Arithmancy problem.

~*~

Friday, February 18, 2000

I'm dusting kisses across her ribs when I wonder at how they protrude.

I've now memorized her entire body in ways I can paint, but her skin is thin here.

I ask if she's been sick, and she laughs, reminding me that I've occupied her lunch breaks for the past five days.

I pull back from where I had leaned over her on my desk, ready to feast on her, maybe lick at her cunt again, suck at her tits, and then maybe ask her how she felt about bending over this here desk.

I button up, and go ask Carrie to bring us lunch in twenty minutes. No earlier.

She didn't know much about how to... position oneself.. Nor was she in a great position to start the momentum, but she knew she was ready, and he was still watching her, frowning at her, but hard against her.

She kissed him, trying to rub herself against him again, grabbing at his hair and biting his lips, and he pulled away about to tell her she didn't have to.

She lifted a brow, mimicking him. "Don't be such a Hufflepuff about it, Draco."

His jaw dropped, his eyes wide. She smirked and he kissed it off of her. When he entered her, it was tight again, but nothing like the pain had been on Monday. Once she had convinced him for the third time that he could go faster, the way his hips snapped her against the door had it rattling in its frame.

They paused, listening to the echo, wondering if they could hear it outside the silenced room. He laughed, moving them off the door and against the wall next to it.

On Thursday, she had to sit through an entire meeting with Draco and Mr. Buckworth in her office. She sat behind her desk, with Draco staring at her while Mr. Buckworth and she discussed the Werewolf Policy.

At the end, Draco offered to walk Mr. Buckworth to the lifts. When he returned, he locked the door and silenced the room.

Hermione swallowed.

Five minutes later, she was sitting on the edge of her desk, hooking her leg around Draco's hips, letting him undress her.

He *did* sweep his arm across her desk, throwing everything onto the floor, and they *did* laugh about it.

On Friday, they were back in his office. She started to feel guilty about never discussing work with him, so she tried to talk about the progress on the Snidget project while he undressed her.

He let her talk, sucking at her neck and placing her on his desk.

When she laid back, she realized that everything was already cleared from his desk, and decided to just let the cool marble sink into her sink as he worked off her laced shoes.

Once her shoes were off, he kissed her heel, and then her calf, and continued to drop sucking kisses up her legs, ghosting over her knickers, and then sliding up her stomach. He dipped to the right, and tried to place a kiss on each rib.

The marble was digging into her fingers as she grabbed the edges of the desk, and he was halfway up her chest when he pulled back, staring down at her.

He frowned.

"What?"

He let his hand run across her ribs, looking down at her strangely.

"Are you sick?"

Her brows came together. "Sick?"
"You're thin." He pressed a finger lightly in between two ribs.

She blinked up at him. "Thank you?"

This was the time to discuss this?

"Thinner."

She laughed. "I haven't had lunch in five days." She chuckled, reaching for him.

He blinked at her.

And that was how Hermione found herself eating a salad in Draco's office.

He'd straightened his clothes, and poked his head out to ask his secretary – *Carrie*. Carrie the Secretary. How had it been that easy? – to order them lunch from the café around the corner.

He'd come back to her, made her scream, and then instead of getting her clothes on, fixing her hair, and making her way across the floor back to her office, they'd sat on the leather couch, eating the food delivery.

It was... awkward. Almost like a date. When the silence and crunching had gone on long enough, she started talking about work. He was much more amenable to a back and forth now, and they ended up making a plan for the first week of Wizengamot hearings in March.

"Will you be at Cornerstone this weekend?" he asked her as he crumbled up the wrappings for his sandwich.

She chewed, pushing at her cucumbers and wondering what the right answer to this question was.

"Yes." She pressed her lips together. "Will you?"

"Maybe Sunday." He brushed a few crumbs off the couch and vanished them.

She bit back a grin. "Is there a book you need?"

"Something like that."

She looked up at him and he was smirking at her. She started organizing her remaining tomatoes with her fork.

Her smile fell as she thought of the way he disappeared to New York, or the cagey meeting he had with Slughorn at the governor's ball, or the response from Noelle that she was still waiting on. She wanted to know things about him still, wanted to know how he spent his time. "What do you have tomorrow?" She couldn't fight the blush that rose on her neck.

He paused before answering, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the carpet.

"I'm visiting my father."

Oh. No, never mind. There were some things she didn't want to know.

"Is... is everything alright? Or...?"

"It was part of his conditions to the inheritance. That I visit him on the monthly visitations in January and February." His voice was clipped and his jaw clenched.

My cock takes forever to soften as her tongue pushes into my mouth, drinking me down. Her breasts stay tight and hard against my chest, pushing up into me as her body rolls in slow waves.

I could probably make her come again, but we have a meeting in ten minutes.

~*~

Wednesday, February 16, 2000

She's reached into my trousers.

And I'm watching her fingers close around my cock.

I look up at her panting, and her eyes are wide, brows lifted.

Perfect.

"It's perfect," I assure her.

She blinks, nodding. She strokes me softly, up and down, like a tease.

"You can... I..." I stammer, never imagining that I would need the words to explain to

Hermione Granger how to stroke my cock. She pauses, and I say, "Squeeze a bit more."

She does as instructed, and I sigh against her forehead. She pulls at me, fist tight, and I tilt her face up to kiss her, which is more of a breathy gasping against her tips.

She's leaning back against my office door, tugging at my cock, and when she switches the angle of her wrist I choke.

"Is it...?"

"It's good," I sigh into her neck, dropping my head forward. I reach down and close my hand around hers, giving her a pace, and then twisting her wrist at bit at the end. The first time she does it on her own my legs shake.

I grab her hips, wheezing on her neck.

She pulls back, and slips her dress off her shoulders. I watch as it flutters to the ground. She pulls down her knickers and carefully tugs my trousers and trunks to the floor.

She maneuvers up into my arms, legs around my waist again, like she wants us to try again. We really should give it a week, yeah?

But she's stroking my cock again, kissing me suggestively, biting at me.

I pull back, before I lose control with her.

"Don't be such a Hufflepuff about it, Draco."

A *Hufflepuff!*

I'm about to drop her on her arse when she smirks.

I'll show her *Hufflepuff*.

I push her against the door, tongue sliding into her mouth and cock sliding against her. She moans, and I guide myself into her, pushing slowly, feeling the tension in her body. Once I'm surrounded by her heat again, I look to her and she nods.

"On the contrary," he said. "It was probably one of the easiest decisions my mother has ever made."

"Good, excellent." She looked down. "I... I'm very happy for her. And you." She grinned at him and he grinned back. "I am shocked at Skeeter's gall though. It's quite private business, even if it is excellent gossip. I do feel sorry for your mother."

"Don't," he said, shrugging and looking briefly at the door frame. "She was the one to give Skeeter the heads up."

Hermione could feel her mouth opening and closing. "Oh," she finally got out. "I thought it said your mother wasn't available for comment."

"Yes," Draco said, lifting himself off the door frame. "That was my mother's one condition. That she not be available for comment." He gave her a secret grin and left her standing in her office, wondering at the chess game Narcissa had set up.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione headed to the conference room for the senior staff meeting. When she got there, she was shocked to see a new face at the table, before remembering that Cornelia Waterstone started today in the Wizengamot Relations position. She was sitting at the end of the table, in the seat that had remained empty since the beginning. When Hermione walked in, the woman turned a no-nonsense look on her, and gave the slightest grin.

"Miss Granger, yes?" Cornelia Waterstone stood and shook her hand. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Likewise, Ms. Waterstone. We're very glad to have you here at Malfoy Consulting." Hermione felt very studied, under Waterstone's eyes. "I'm looking forward to working with you on the upcoming Werewolf Policy case."

"Yes, I've already gathered some information on that, profiles for the Wizengamot members and their feelings regarding the werewolf community. We should discuss sooner than later."

This woman's face had not moved once except for her mouth. Even that was so thin and tight that it hardly moved as she spoke.

Hermione grinned at her and took her seat as the rest of the team came in behind her. Draco welcomed Cornelia, and gave her an opportunity to introduce herself to the staff. Blaise looked very put out the whole time she spoke. After everyone had given an update on their current projects, Draco stood and cleared his throat.

"I've said from the beginning that I do not wish to be cagey about our finances. We've had a bit of a change that I want you all to be aware of," Draco looked down at the table quickly and Hermione felt a like stone dropped in her stomach. "Our weekly income that was to last us another three weeks has been cut off early. I will be doing everything I can to renegotiate the contract between this investor, or to recruit a new investor to offset some of the strain, but you

should know that Melody's assistant Ranji and several other temporary positions have been put on hold for the next few weeks."

Wentworth sighed. Mockridge tutted. Waterstone frowned. And Blaise narrowed his eyes at Draco.

"And what happened to that *investor*, if I may ask?" Blaise said.

"The terms of our arrangement were unsuitable." Draco looked Blaise directly in the eye, with a stare conveying the end of the discussion.

Hermione felt her heart drumming against her ribcage. She stared at the woodgrain on the table. She knew she should have gone to the hosting class yesterday. This was a mistake. No matter what Draco said, these classes were necessary.

Whatever was going through her mind must have been displayed openly across her face, because when she looked up from the table, Blaise was watching her, one brow lifted.

She looked away and quickly refocused on Draco, who was detailing the needs for the next few weeks in light of their financial burden.

Mockridge cut in and said, "I thought you had mentioned that these weekly installments were safe. They were promised without conditions."

Draco swallowed and met Mockridge's eyes. "There were conditions after all."

Mockridge tutted again. "So, what is your plan, as we approach pay day at the end of this month?"

Hermione felt her stomach twisting. She tried to tune out the contingency plans they needed to place and looked up at anything else around the room. Her eyes landed on Cornelia Waterstone, whose first day was met with this conversation. Hermione realized that Waterstone's salary for February was a new expense to be paid. If they had known about the inheritance, Waterstone wouldn't have been hired until March.

This was out of control. She felt a pressure behind her eyes, frustrating her. She would need to talk to Draco, and continue with the classes.

When the meeting was done, and everyone's moods had spiraled downwards, Hermione stayed at the table as everyone stood and rushed back to their desks, tasked with finding ways to cut corners and possibly generate a bit more revenue over the next three weeks. She tapped her quill against the parchment, watching the blots form. Draco was still at the head of the table, pretending to gather his notes.

"Granger."

"This isn't fair. Not to those who've lost their jobs." She bit the inside of her cheek.

"They haven't been fired, Granger. Their hours have been cut."

She began stacking her notes, and stood to leave. "We can push back the Golden Snidget project. And I'll look for ways to cut corners on the Werewolf budget so we can reallocate those funds..."

"We can't reallocate those funds. The donations were given with a specific understanding of what the funds would be used for."

"So mine is the only department that isn't going through budget cuts?" She flung her arms out to the sides. "How is *that* fair?"

"Yours is the only department fully funded by fundraising, not by the inheritance." He walked around the edge of the table to stand in front of her. The door was still open, but she wanted him to touch her. Like they were partners, lovers. Like they comforted each other.

She squeezed the papers in her hands.

An idea came to her. "But the salary for my department members is paid by the inheritance. Walter and me," she said. He narrowed his eyes at her. "You can cut my salary. Practically in half, really."

"No, Granger. We aren't cutting your salary." He almost rolled his eyes at her, stepping back to push his chair in and take his notes.

"No, truly. The amount of money I make here is obscene. For February's pay, you can cut my salary, or even take all of it," she whispered. "No one needs to know." She watched as he pressed his lips together, readying his argument. "Besides, with Pansy covering the costs of my wardrobe and without the classes burning a hole in my pocket, I'll have very few expenses."

His hands stopped moving through his paperwork. His jaw clicked. He looked up at her. "The expense for the classes was placed upon you?"

She saw the same fire in his eyes from the alley on Saturday.

"I wouldn't let him cover it. I refused his money." She blinked up at him. He moved his eyes across the table, thinking, planning his father's death, probably. She touched his elbow to bring him back. "Draco, just for February. Cut my salary. The only person who will notice is Dorothea and I'm sure she won't say anything."

"No. That's not how we're going deal with this, Granger. I got us all into this mess, so let me get us out." His jaw tightened and he looked at her before heading to the door.

As he left, she wondered how in Merlin's name *he* was the one who got them into this mess. She looked down at her blotted parchment.

One thing was for sure. She was going to Madame Michele's tomorrow night. Draco could deal with it.

Cornelia Waterstone ended up crashing Draco and her "lunch" date. And not in the fun way.

Who's to say how this came about or if Ms. Black's decision was caused by a specific incident. Stick with this reporter, and I'm positive we can get down to the bottom of this together.

Hermione couldn't believe the words on the page. She couldn't decide if she was more shocked at Narcissa, or shocked at Skeeter for publishing such an article.

She filed away the information that Rita had been able to procure the visitor records from Azkaban, and therefore knew that Hermione had visited Lucius in November. She'd have to consider that later.

No, what she truly couldn't wrap her brain around was a pure-blood witch of such social standing filing for divorce.

She wondered what the pre-nuptial agreements were like in the wizarding world, if any, and hoped Narcissa had financial stability moving forward.

Hermione finished sipping her morning coffee, checked her shoddy makeup work in the mirror one last time before heading to the office.

As she stood in the elevator heading to Malfoy Consulting Group, she wondered how Draco was taking it. From what she understood of their messy family relationship, there would be no tears shed most likely. But it still must feel like the end of something.

The elevator doors opened and Draco stood at the reception desk, coffee cup in hand.

He winked at her.

And she suddenly remembered she was shagging this man. She blushed in a particularly telling way and stepped off the lift, taking the offered coffee cup and whispering a "Good morning." "Senior staff meeting at ten, then we should meet this afternoon about the Golden Snidget campaign." Draco walked her to her office door like normal. "After our lunch, of course."

She looked up at him, and his bedroom eyes in the middle of the office floor made her feel reckless. So, they would be having "lunch" again this week.

"Lunch," she said. "Yes." Hermione looked over his shoulder and found Walter busy with a file. "And what were you planning to order today?"

His lips twitched. "I have a few ideas," he said. "But I'm open to suggestions." His eyes flashed at her, and she looked down at the carpets to keep from devouring him.

He pivoted away from her, but before he could get more than a few steps, she called out, "Er, Draco?" When he looked back to her, she nodded her head towards her office and stepped just inside the door. He joined her in the doorway, leaning against it. She lowered her voice.

"I, er... I saw the papers this morning. I just wanted to make sure you were... alright."

He gave her an even look, lifting a brow, and said, "Excellent."

"Yes, good," she stammered. "Just wanted to... make sure... I mean, I do know that sometimes these situations can feel difficult, so I just..." She trailed off, checking his face for any kind of reaction.

"Oh, no rush, dear."

Hermione looked up and Narcissa waved the air with her hand.

She continued, "I was thinking you could come by this Saturday and exchange them for others." Narcissa tilted her head at her, and her long blonde hair fell down her shoulder.

Hermione realized her mouth was still open, so she closed it.

"If you have the time, I could have dinner prepared as well." Narcissa flashed her teeth. "I know Mippy would love to see you again."

Hermione stared at her. She collected herself and responded, "Yes, that's... that's so kind of you, Narcissa. I would love to come for dinner this Saturday."

"Good." Narcissa grinned. "Then it's settled."

Hermione blinked several times before realizing that she was still holding the bag with Narcissa's book, and quickly jotted the notes in the ledger, feeling Narcissa's eyes on her.

"I'm so glad you're reading this author," Hermione said, attempting small talk. "Percival Hawk is truly coming into his own. Have you read his earlier work as well?"

Hermione looked up and Narcissa was watching her hands move over the ledger book.

"Yes, I have. I have always been a fan of his."

"I like this new one a lot," Hermione said as she placed it back in the bag. "He's improved so much as a writer. I know he's really been trying to better himself, studying quite a bit from his contemporaries and taking classes at the Muggle universities. I think it shows."

"That's lovely to hear," Narcissa said. She reached for the bag. "But Mr. Hawk had a lovely following before he tried changing himself!" Narcissa raised a brow at her. "I know I always liked him, even without the... classes."

Hermione blinked as Narcissa nodded her head in goodbye, hiding a secret on her lips.

So she did hear about the lessons.

"NARCISSA MALFOY FILES FOR DIVORCE"

By Rita Skeeter

Narcissa Malfoy (née Black) will be Malfoy no longer. A very uncommon thing to do in pure-blood marriages, the youngest Black sister filed for divorce Monday morning.

Ms. Narcissa Black was not available for comment, but the paperwork filed in the Wizengamot cited "irreconcilable differences" with her soon-to-be ex-husband. Lucius Malfoy was convicted in 1998 for his support of You-Know-Who during the Second Wizarding War.

4-kaban visitor records show that Narcissa has visited her husband on his monthly visitations consistently for the past two years, until their son Draco was released from Azkaban, taking her place as the primary visitor. Records show that the last time Narcissa Black visited Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban was December 1, 1999.

Cornelia had seen on the office calendar that Hermione and Draco spent some time before lunch discussing her cases on a daily basis, and had decided to join them to get caught up to speed on the Werewolf Policy.

This meant that Hermione had to go grab her notes for the Werewolf Policy, as she originally had no intention of doing anything but wrapping her legs around Draco's hips in this "lunch" meeting.

When she returned, Draco and Cornelia were already in deep conversation about the Wizengamot members themselves, and Cornelia's plans to connect with each of them regarding the upcoming proposal.

When Draco's secretary (Carrie – the name was Carrie) interrupted at 12:30 to ask about Draco's lunch order, he very politely invited Cornelia to join them, but Hermione could see the tightness in his lips, the hope that she would decline.

"Oh, thank you, sir. But I have a friend down the street that I have scheduled to get lunch with." Cornelia left with a curt nod, and after Carrie took their order, and shut the door behind herself and Cornelia, Draco silenced the room and waved his hand to send everything on his desk flying onto the floor.

"Get on the desk."

He was halfway out of his shirt when her brain caught up.

"Draco, we only have maybe fifteen minutes before Carrie brings back the lunch—!"

"Is that a challenge, Granger." He raised a brow at her as he started on his belt. "Don't think I can get you off in fifteen minutes?" His eyes were hot on hers.

She blinked at him, feeling her blood warm. He was halfway undressed already.

"Well, definitely not twice." She raised a brow back. And smirked.

He narrowed his eyes at her. And tossed her on the desk.

Sixteen minutes later, Draco and Hermione were sitting on the couch again, eating their sandwich and salad.

He asked her a few questions about the Werewolf Policy, she assumed so that they could count this as working.

She brought up a few points for the Golden Snidget project, and offered again to stall it due to the financial situation.

"As long as it is fundraised, there's no need to stall it."

She nodded, then said, "I'm meeting with Viktor on Wednesday." She swirled her lettuce around the carton. "We're going to lunch and I'll pitch the Golden Snidget campaign. Hopefully once he's on board we can get Skeeter and Mr. Lovegood to cover the project." She stabbed a

tomato and brought it to her lips. "Does the magazine 'Seeker Weekly' do articles? Or just talk Quidditch rubbish?"

She looked over at him, and he was watching her. He smiled. "Yes, they have articles."

"Oh, good. We can see if they'll do one too." She popped the tomato in her mouth and munched happily.

He finished chewing his sandwich, and said, "Good news that Krum wants to be involved." "Yes, he was very interested at the governor's ball." She aimed her fork at another tomato when she heard Draco chuckle.

"I'm sure he was," he sang. He looked over at her with suggestive eyes. She frowned at him. "No, not like that."

"Mm-hmm. I'm sure just like that." Draco raised a brow as he crumbled his sandwich wrapper. "You can't honestly believe he's interested in the Golden Snidgets' welfare."

"He is." She felt her shoulders tense. "He is *very* interested in the Golden Snidgets, and I'll prove it to you when I come back from lunch with his full support." She stuck her nose in the air.

"Sure, Granger. Try wearing a burlap sack this time instead, and we'll see where his true interests lie."

She glared at him. He smirked back.

She turned back to her salad he said, "I hear you're having dinner with my mother on Saturday."

She glanced up at him. "Yes, that's right." She speared a crouton and asked, "Will you be there?"

Quick as a curse he grabbed the crouton off her fork and popped it in his mouth. She glared at him. "Possibly." He crunched and winked at her.

She glared as she picked the last crouton and tossed it in her mouth. She was just closing the carton and placing it in the plastic bag for their trash when he spoke.

"Would you consider staying the night? After dinner?"

She looked up at him from her bent over position over their trash bag. He stared at her, pressing his lips together.

"At the Manor?" She sat up, blinking at him. He nodded. "In your room?"

"Or Mippy's room. Wherever you feel most at home," he deadpanned.

"Would... would your mother be alright with that? Isn't it... improper?" She laughed tightly. Draco shrugged. "She doesn't have to know." He leaned across the couch cushion to whisper in her ear. "We'd have an entire wing of the Manor to ourselves." He kissed her ear. Then her jaw. Then her lips. "And if she catches us I'll just tell her to have breakfast prepared in the morning too."

She was still grinning at the counter as a customer left and the door admitted Narcissa Malfoy. Hermione blinked at her – long royal blue robes, hanging off of her like water, delicate fingers letting the door close behind her. She looked up at Hermione, and smiled. It was like a piece of Hermione's soul had been out of alignment for months, and it had just clicked back into place.

"Hermione, my dear," Narcissa said from the doorway. Her eyes sparkled as she ascended the steps and arrived at the counter.

"Hello, Narcissa." Hermione couldn't clear the smile off her face. She had the sudden thought that Narcissa had no idea that Hermione had been shagging her son senseless for the past week, and she hoped she wouldn't mind terribly.

"It's wonderful to see you." Narcissa floated to the counter and settled a knowing stare on her.

Perhaps thinking about shagging Draco right now was not the best idea.

"Are you here for the book on reserve?" Hermione turned away from Lady Malfoy and tried to shake her head clear of the image of Draco above her.

"Yes, thank you, dear," Narcissa said. "And of course, to visit with you, as long as the shop stays relatively calm."

Hermione turned back, holding the reserve bag, and found Narcissa's kind eyes on her. And Hermione wondered if she knew about the classes. If Draco had told her.

"Of course. How have you been?"

"Quite well, thank you," Narcissa said, and Hermione studied the quirk of her lips and considered if Narcissa used the makeup brands that Pansy used on her. "I saw the pictures from the governor's ball last weekend. You looked magnificent."

Hermione focused on keeping any blush off of her cheeks as she responded, "Thank you. I was happy to be representing Malfoy Consulting with Draco that night. We made some wonderful connections."

"You know, Hermione, dear," Narcissa began, and Hermione felt her heart leap at all the different possible directions this could go. "You must be done with those books that you borrowed in the fall."

Hermione looked at her, eyes wide and frozen. The books that should have been returned in December. The books that should have been owled back to Narcissa the moment she fled from Malfoy Manor after the visit to Azkaban. She was done with the books. And it was completely inappropriate for her to still have them in her possession. It was improper.

"I – yes. I have actually finished with them." Hermione could feel the heat fighting its way up her neck. "I apologize for holding onto them for so long." She looked down at the counter. "I will owl them back to you this evening –"

His eyes were hot. And they were glued to her. More specifically, to her behind.

His gaze flipped to her eyes, and he smirked. "Mind if I take a look?"

She pressed her lips together, and nodded. "Be my guest." She turned back to the shelf, keeping her hands pressed against the counter, her hips pushing out, and her spine straight and long. She heard him coming around the counter. He slipped behind her, brushing his hips against her backside. She bit her lip too keep from making a sound.

"How strange," he said. She saw his larger hand rest next to hers on the counter. She felt the other rest on her ribs as he leaned down over her, pressing his chest against her back. He placed his face next to hers. "I could have sworn something back here was mine."

She let out a short laugh, and then pressed back against him, feeling his hips just behind her.

The hand on her ribs, skirted up and pressed firmly against her breast over her shirt.

She knew the sign said *Closed*. She knew that Morty rarely came downstairs to check on her after six. And she knew that the foot traffic at this time of day was light. And it was all warming her blood.

His fingers tweaked her through her bra, and she gasped. He pressed firmly against her backside, and she could feel him hard against her.

"I think we could find what you're looking for in the non-fiction section," she whispered, turning to look at him as his lips were about to start in on her neck.

He grinned. "The customer service here is impeccable."

On Sunday morning, Hermione had written to Madame Bernard to letting her know that she needed to reschedule the hosting class she usually had with her on Sundays. She made sure to use the word "reschedule" and not "discontinue." Also on Sunday, the announcement of Harry and Ginny's engagement was in the papers as well. Hermione had convinced Ginny to let Harry propose at dinner on Valentine's Day, and she hadn't seen much of the two of them since.

Harry had been rather proactive with Skeeter. He contacted her to set up an interview on Saturday for Sunday's paper, to prevent any tabloid responses. It had resulted in a lovely, in-depth article about the two of them (and a bit about the history of the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Died-And-Lived-Again).

Hermione smiled down at the article at Cornerstone on Sunday.

She smiled for many reasons that day, one of which was the book on reserve behind the counter that had been there when she'd opened up. Draco must have written to Morty early this morning to have the book on reserve for him, and while the two of them had made no plans to see each other today after parting the night before, she was giddy thinking of him coming by again.

He kissed her lips lightly again. She smiled. "Alright. Yes." She bit her lip, then added, "But do tell Mippy that I sleep on the right side of the bed."

He bit back a grin. "I'll make sure she accommodates you." Before she could even begin to fathom what spending the night in Draco's room would entail, he continued, "Also, I'll be out of town on Friday. Personal trip." He shifted on the couch, facing forward while she had her body turned to him.

"Oh." That's all she could think of to say. "Are you going back to New York?"

His eyes flipped up to hers, then away. "No."

She nodded, like he'd said something she'd understood. She bit the inside of her cheek before mustering her bravery.

"What was in New York?"

She watched him clench his jaw. He'd come back tense, and aggressive, and non-communicative, and she, for some reason, wanted to push his buttons on this issue.

"New York was a mistake."

She regretted ever bringing this up. She felt like whatever he was about to say, was going to be ten times worse than not knowing.

Draco stared at his hands, then finally took a breath. "There's a woman there." His jaw clicked.

Hermione felt like a hot spike had been shoved inside her chest. Her very active imagination began picturing Draco in all sorts of positions with a faceless American girl. Large breasts, small waist, blonde beach hair. She heard him take another deep breath beside her, readying himself to spill his secrets, and she almost stopped him, wanting to hear no more.

"She's a Legilimens."

Her head whipped to face him. A sexy Legilimens?

"I needed... I thought I needed her assistance." Draco swallowed, picking at the crumbs of his sandwich.

"Assistance with what?" she whispered, afraid she would break this spell of honesty he was under.

Draco took a breath, sliding his palms over his knees, readying himself to speak. "I'm a very skilled Occlumens. Between Aunt Bella and Severus... I had some remarkable teachers." Draco scratched his jaw, keeping his eyes on his carpet. "I've been compartmentalizing for years. Separating memories, thoughts, emotions..." He paused, like he wanted to add something else to that list. Hermione couldn't look away from his face.

She thought of him in her childhood bedroom, a deep breath in and then a blank stare. Him at his fireplace, as she screamed behind him, his mother's hand on his own. A deep breath in and then a blank stare.

She'd known it was Occlumency, but she hadn't known how deep it ran. He continued. "Severus used to help me. Used to poke around until I'd regrouped. Until there were resilient walls again..."

Again, it felt like there was more. But Hermione was afraid to move. Afraid he would stop.

"But without him..." He swallowed. "Before going to New York, I had been slipping. For months. I couldn't get the walls in place. Couldn't separate." He moved his hands over his knees again. "Blaise has tried to help, but he's shit at Legilimency." Draco chuckled, and the sound grated at her, so nervous and unnatural.

"I thought I needed someone to... test me. To poke around until it was all regrouped." He ran a hand through his hair. "So, I got in touch with someone in New York who is one of the greatest Legilimens of our time. I offered to pay her handsomely to meet with me, and set up a portkey that night."

Hermione was no longer afraid of a buxom blonde who had had Draco's body. Now she was considering someone who had access to his mind, his secrets, the hidden places she wished he'd share with her. The pain in her ribs choked her.

"Is that..." She cleared her throat. "Is that something she does for a living? Is there a profession in that?"

"No, no." Draco shook his head, still looking down at the carpet. "She refused my money. Refused to meet with me, really." He chuckled again. "I had to beg her. She's a normal witch. A widow."

Widow. Hermione didn't want to know much more about this woman, but she was secretly glad there wasn't some twenty-five-year-old, small-waisted, large-breasted blonde in the states who knew every one of Draco Malfoy's secrets.

"Did it help?" she asked. "Did you get what you wanted?"

She thought of the dinner with Mr. Townsend. How cold he'd been and how removed he'd been from her afterwards.

A small, sad smile ran across his lips. "No." He turned to look at her. Finally. "I kissed you again, didn't I?"

Hermione swallowed, watching him, reading him. His eyes were kind, but he was rotting her from the inside.

She tried to match him and smiled sadly back. "Actually, I kissed you."

He smirked, and it was like Draco had returned. "Yes, you went and ruined everything, didn't you." He lifted his hands from their place on his knees and brought them to her face. He leaned in to kiss her and mumbled against her lips, "Thank Merlin she didn't let me pay her. What a waste that would have been."

They stared into each other's eyes, raindrops falling on their lashes. He pressed his lips against her forehead, kissing her eyebrow, her temple, her cheekbone. He made a path toward her lips. And they kissed in the rain.

He escorted her to Cornerstone for the rest of her shift. She was ready to say goodbye to him at the door, but he followed her in, shaking the rain off the umbrella he'd transfigured.

Morty greeted him and they chatted briefly as she got behind the register again. When Morty bid them a good afternoon and headed upstairs, Draco stayed.

He browsed the books and watched her help customers. He eyed the hag warily, but he mainly stayed out of her way.

By four o'clock as the people who had waited out the storm by staying inside the bookstore were just starting to leave, she was far more aware of his eyes on her. She filed books, passing his chair and feeling him watch her. She'd look over at him though, and find him reading, eyes on his book. She'd make notes in the ledger book and feel the hair on her arm bristle.

By five o'clock he wasn't even reading anymore. There were only two other people in the shop, most people put off by the bad weather, and he sat in his chair and watched her move about the shop. She'd look over at him, as if to catch him, and he just stared back at her. It started to make her warm.

At fifteen minutes to closing, the last of the shoppers were making their final purchases, and he came to lean against the stacks near the counter. His eyes were dark whenever she looked over at him. She stumbled through the last transactions, and once the last shopper had waved goodbye, she pointed her wand at the *Open* sign, turning it to *Closed*.

She swallowed, and looked over at him. He leaned his left hip against the book stacks, legs crossed at the ankle. He had his arms crossed over his chest, one hand at his chin, thumb against his lips. She watched his lips part and his thumb dipped inside.

She took a deep, steady breathing, and tried not to lick her lips.

"We're closed for today, Mr. Malfoy," she said. "Is there anything I can put on hold for you, for tomorrow?" She bit back a grin as he lifted a brow at her.

He prowled toward the counter.

"Are you quite sure there's nothing on reserve for me back there?" He tipped his head to the side as he leaned forward on his elbows in front of her.

She smiled at him. "I can check." She turned around, knowing full well that the reserve shelf was empty. She bit her lip, hoping she was doing something slightly attractive, and bent at the waist, bringing her head down to the shelf, and straightening her back to push out her denim clad backside. She braced her hands on the counter.

"Hm. Nothing here for you." She turned her head to look at him, a grin on her face.

we were together. Had been for ages. I—I corrected him, of course,” she said. She wanted to cross her arms, or pick at her nails, but she refrained. “But then later, he had photographs of... the Marcus Flint incident.”

She looked up at him, afraid to bring that up, but he already knew that too. He wasn’t surprised one bit that Lucius had photographs of them grabbing at each other in an alley way, not so different from the one they were currently in. She filed this away for later as a raindrop hit her cheek.

“He was disappointed that I’d lied to him about us.” She sniffed. “And he said he wouldn’t release your inheritance if I didn’t go to those classes.” She looked over his shoulder. She felt so small, admitting this weakness. Admitting to being blackmailed.

“What was on the list?” he grit out. His eyes were dark with anger, but she knew it wasn’t directed at her this time.

She recited them. She found herself stuttering over some of them, the ones that were clearly meant for a wife, not a girlfriend, or whatever it was they were doing. *Financially knowledgeable. Obedient. Skilled in hosting. Trained in décor.* Her face flushed as he listened, watching her, unmoving. “He said the only thing he could part with was pure-blood.”

And Draco laughed. The sound shook her, and the sky thundered with him. He stepped away from her, chuckling, bringing his hands to rub his eyes. He turned his back to her and she saw his head shaking as he laughed. He took a shaky breath in.

“Why did you do this, Granger.”

She stared at his back, still marveling over his reaction.

“I’ll finish these next three weeks, Draco, and then you’ll be done with him. You’ll not owe him anything. You’ll be rid of him.”

“No, no.” His voice bounced around the bricks and she saw him pull his hands across the skin of his face. “I’ll never be rid of him.” He turned to her. “He’s got his hooks in you, now.”

She shivered, unsure. “What do you mean?”

“I’d seen it, but I ignored it.” He stepped back to her, eyes sad. “You’re different. The way you drink your coffee is different. The way you walk. The way you dance.” He placed his hand on her cheek. “You’re changing. And now every time I see you lift your saucer with your cup, I’ll think of him. Think of this. When you curtsey. When you shake hands.” He brushed his thumb across her lip. She felt a tear drop leave her eyes. “Why did you do this.”

She sniffed again, seeing the light rain drops hit the crates behind him. She wished she had the Gryffindor courage to tell him why, to tell him it was for him. So, she settled for the next best answer.

“It was the right thing to do.”

She smiled against his lips as he kissed her. He pressed his tongue against hers and she let him consume her slowly, but she was screaming from the inside. She needed to ask him now, before the moment vanished.

He pulled away to tilt his mouth against hers again, and she brought her hands to his, pausing. He opened his eyes to look at her, and she saw the boy who had stared open-mouthed at her bedroom, checking every corner with his eyes before they filled with tears and he collapsed over. She heard the gasp as his aunt electrocuted her, and she heard his mother’s voice – “What would Severus say” – as he caught his breath and pressed his eyelids closed. She saw the grey eyes that glared at her in the courtroom, that stared deadly at her his first visit to Cornerstone, that asked her how long she had been dating Aiden.

“Did you go to New York to forget about me?” she asked.

He looked back and forth between her eyes, and brushed his thumb across her lips.

“No,” he said. “To put you back in your box.”

The harsh whisper crashed over her, and she opened her eyes. She focused on the packing crates and old boxes in the alley.

‘N-no. Nothing like that.’ She felt a cold chill that Draco could even wonder...

Draco threaded his fingers through her hair and tugged until her neck was open to his mouth.

His lips moved across her jaw, up to her ear.

“Have you been to see him since you went in November?”

The hand on her hips squeezed as his breath insisted over her neck.

“No, we’ve written – He’s written letters.” She hummed. “Threats.” Could she call it threats?

Draco attached to her neck and began sucking and biting on his favorite spot. She felt his hips press into hers and the hand on her hip start to slide. She saw Muggles walking by the alley entrance, completely unaware of them due to the repelling charm.

“Tell me about the letters. Tell me what he said to you.”

Draco bit down on her neck a bit too hard. Claiming her. Marking her. Hermione winced and reached her hands up to his face.

“Draco, stop.” She pulled his face back to look into his eyes. They were clouded, still hot but there was an aggression there she didn’t recognize. “I know what you’re doing, Draco, and stop.” She rubbed her thumb across his cheek, calming him. “This... what we have is very special to me and you’re turning it into something ugly.”

She watched as he closed his eyes, pressed his forehead against hers and tried to relax. She was curious to know why Lucius affected him so much, but she was also scared to find out.

He placed a soft kiss on her lips and pulled back, lifting his hips away from her.

“What did my father say to you in Azkaban?”

She breathed in deeply, wishing to be talking about anything else. She heard thunder.

“He gave me a list of things. To work on.”

She looked up at Draco, arms-length away from her, hands still resting lightly on her hips. He narrowed his eyes.

“For what?”

Oh, god. She felt the blush spreading up her jaw. “To be... to be seen with you. To be worthy of you.” To be a Malfoy bride...

His frown deepened. “In November?” He looked to the side, thinking. “You weren’t even with the company yet.” His hands dropped from her hips and she felt like she could breathe again.

“Yes, but we were being pictured together so often. And... and he knew about the Auction.” She watched as Draco’s eyes flipped to her. He wasn’t surprised. He looked wary, if anything.

She continued, “He knew that you’d gone to Narcissa’s mother. He knew that – that you would have saved me.” This caught him off guard though. His left eye twitched. “He thought

"You're not the only one who had a deal with him, Granger." She heard his voice shake. She watched him swallow as they darted around a group of children. "You shouldn't have gotten involved in this."

She skipped over a few curbs to catch up to him as he powered through the street.

"How did you find me there?" She tried sticking to the easy questions.

"I asked Madame Michele for your schedule."

She looked down at her quickly moving feet. He'd gone to Madame Michele first, disturbed her morning, and then tracked her down. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to calm him. She heard him chuckle, and watched him shake his head at something running through his mind.

"You're done with those classes," he hissed.

She reached for him, but stopped herself. They were on the seventh block. One more before they could Apparate. The crowd thinned as the Muggle-Repelling Charm shivered over them.

"What about the money, Draco? The next three installments?"

"I told him to shove them up his ass," he snarled.

They approached a small alleyway before the end of the block. If she could get him to calm down before they Apparated...

"We need that money, Draco. Malfoy Consulting is barely afloat as it is. I need to keep going to those classes —"

"No!" He grabbed her elbow and brought her into the small alley, just shy of the Apparition point. The rest of the Muggles continued on with their day, pulling out umbrellas. He pointed a finger in her face. "You are not to step foot in that tea room again, do you hear me, Granger?" His eyes were burning into her.

"The business is more important than some insane classes, Draco!"

He grabbed her shoulders, just firm enough to press her against the brick.

"*Nothing* is more important than you."

She lost her breath as he sucked in a shaky gasp. His fingers twitched on her shoulders and his eyes danced back and forth between her own.

And then he kissed her. Both hands up her neck to her face, tilting her head back for him as he stepped closer to her.

She was shaking as she brought her hands up to his sides. She let him dominate her mouth, taking time to breathe when she could, but his body pressed her against the alley wall and his hands held her still as he moved his lips against her.

She felt him slide one hand down her cheek, down her neck, across her ribs and grab her hip, as his mouth kissed her holly on her jaw.

"Did he ever touch you?"



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Four

On Tuesday evening, she stepped through the fireplace to arrive in the tea room. She bit the inside of her cheek, wondering if this was the right decision, but ultimately knew that if she could secure the next three installments of the inheritance, then it would all go away.

She took a seat at one of the nearby tables and waited until 7:59PM when the door to Madame Michele's office opened.

The small woman examined her through her glasses. Hermione stood.

"Mz Granger. I waz told you would not be taking anymore classes."

Hermione swallowed. "There was a misunderstanding. I'm afraid. I intend to finish these classes, and continue the deal I had with Lucius Malfoy. I would appreciate if you would relay that to him."

Madame Michele raised a wiry brow at her. "Very well, Mz Granger. I will do my best."

Hermione had owled Monsieur DuBois on Monday to reschedule the interior design class

Draco had crashed, and Madame Bernard, whose hosting class Hermione had postponed on Sunday morning.

Monsieur Bernard had agreed to meet at 9PM on Tuesday directly after Madame Michele, and Monsieur DuBois had said only Wednesday at 7AM would work for him.

She had a feeling that they all planned this.

She arrived to work on Wednesday morning at five past eight, yawning. Draco was there when the lift opened, and he raised a brow at her as he handed her a cup of coffee.

"Rough night?"

“Yes.” She didn’t bother coming up with any kind of excuse. She sipped the coffee as they walked to her office, like every morning. As she pulled the cup away from her lips, she saw Kelsey, Mockridge’s Associate, look at the two of them and smile down at her desk.

Hermione blinked. Were they too obvious?

“I’ve decided on a plan for lunch,” Draco said, and Hermione focused on him. “Something to get our privacy back,” he whispered to her.

Cornelia Waterstone had crashed lunch yesterday as well. And yesterday, Waterstone had accepted when Draco offered for her to have lunch with them. They hadn’t had sex since Monday, or even touched each other. Which was suddenly very apparent to Hermione as Draco guided her to her own doorway, hand low on her back.

Draco continued, “I’ve booked a meeting on the Muggle-born Integration Program for this afternoon. We won’t be needing any Wizengamot council on that.” He raised a brow at her. “And, I guess, we could actually talk about it.” He winked at her, and because his back was to the office floor, she was the only one to see.

She killed the smile on her lips. “I have the lunch meeting with Viktor today, remember?” She watched the dream die on his face. “Ah, yes. Viktor.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“I have a meeting tomorrow at lunch. And then I’m out of town on Friday.” He frowned at her. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

She blinked at him. Tomorrow night? As in... a real date? And not just hanky-panky during the lunch hour?

“Er... I guess so.” Dance class! “I mean, er, no. I’m not, actually.” She looked away from him. “But I am free tonight.” She looked back at him. She had no idea what it was he had planned, but she if he wanted to see her in any official capacity, she would do it.

He pouted. “Tonight is no good for me.” He glared at the door frame. “I’ll figure something out.” He looked back at her, and touched her hip lightly before he walked away. She was sure no one could see, but she still melted a bit.

A few hours later she was headed out to her lunch with Viktor. They met at the same café she and Katya had gone to, and Hermione wondered if it was a Bulgarian thing.

He was already waiting for her, and he stood from the table when she entered. “Hemmyowne,” he said, and she thought that was pretty darn close. He pulled her to him and kissed her on each cheek, brushing close to her lips.

They sat and chatted and laughed, and she found the perfect timing to bring up the Golden Snidget campaign. Luckily for her, having Viktor’s support on this cost both Viktor and M.C.G. very little. He would need to be interviewed for *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet* during their

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Three

“Miss Granger will not be able to finish her lesson today.”

She swallowed.

“Oh,” Monsieur DuBois pouted, looking back and forth between them. “I do hope everything is alright.”

He turned his eyes on her, hot and aggressive. “I’m afraid not.”

She took a shaky inhale, and began moving her napkin off her lap. Draco placed a handful of galleons on the table, apologizing to Monsieur DuBois, and promising to say hello to his mother.

As she stood from the table, gathering her notes, Draco’s hand came up to guide her elbow around the gate, and onto the sidewalk. He waved a jaunty hand at the interior design teacher before escorting her in the direction of the nearest Apparition point.

They had eight blocks. There were storm clouds in the sky.

He dropped her elbow after the first block. She struggled to match his pace. He started popping knuckles and cracking his neck after the second block, narrowly missing getting hit by a cab.

“Draco —”

“How long have you been plotting with my father?”

She looked up at him as they stopped at a busy corner. His eyes were hot, scanning the streets, and darting around her.

“You say it like we’re working together,” she said.

“Aren’t you?” He heaved a breath in. Then walked when the signal turned.

It took her a moment to comprehend. He left her on the curb, and she struggled to catch up. “What did he tell you? If he defines it as anything other than *blackmail* then he lied to you —”

She sipped her espresso.

Monsieur DuBois pulled out a book of Renaissance decor, and started discussing the styles, the architecture. He began detailing the proper maintenance of a Renaissance mansion, and what a proper remodel would include.

The sun had just started slanting into Hermione's eyes as Monsieur DuBois explained the truly disastrous remodel that the French Minister had attempted. He began chuckling at things that Hermione couldn't possibly understand. She grinned as best she could.

The waiter's shadow falling across her face when he returned to their table shook Hermione out of her trance a bit. She waited for her soup to be set down in front of her, grateful for the shield from the sun.

When Monsieur DuBois stopped speaking, and no soup was set before her, Hermione looked up at the person shading her from the sun, and her blood ran cold to see Draco, jaw tight, but smiling down at Monsieur DuBois.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Monsieur DuBois chirped. "My, you look splendid. Would you like to join us?"

Hermione felt the caffeine in her stomach turn and tumble as she watched Draco grin at the older man, shaking his hand. She concentrated on forcing her lungs to expand.

"I apologize, Monsieur, but something has come up actually," Draco said. She watched his face tighten and twitch even as he smiled. "Miss Granger will not be able to finish her lesson today."

Lesson.

There was no way around it. He knew. Lucius told him.

She swallowed.

"Oh," Monsieur DuBois pouted, looking back and forth between them. "I do hope everything is alright."

She watched Malfoy blink at him. He turned his eyes on her, hot and aggressive. "I'm afraid not."

"How was your date?"

She ignored the phrasing and said, "Excellent. He'll be joining us next week for the media coverage. And he's very interested in the project, thank you very much." She lowered her voice and continued, "I didn't have to show him my tits or anything."

She felt Draco still next to her, and she smiled up at him innocently.

"Great news, Granger."

Viktor was making his way back to Hermione.

"Hello, Malfoy."

"Hermah-nee, I must be going."

Viktor looked up at Draco and gave him a tight smile.

"Hello, Malfoy."

"Krum," Draco said, extending his hand to shake. "We're so glad to have your support."

"Yes," Viktor said, pulling his hand away from Draco. "Anything for Harmany." Despite the mispronunciation, Viktor managed to very confidently take Hermione's hand and give her knuckles a kiss.

She smiled at him and offered to take him downstairs. She walked him out, past the deliveries door, and onto the street.

She promised to follow up with more details about the media day next week, and he let her know with deep eyes that she could contact him for anything she needed.

media campaign next week, and as they got closer to the court date, he would need to do a few ads against Golden Snidget hunting.

Viktor was very open to discussing it. He was attentive to everything she had to say, even if he did interrupt her every few minutes to tell her how beautiful she looked, or how her skin glowed when she was fired up about Snidget rights.

She tried to push down what Draco had said about Viktor only being interested in her and not the Snidgets.

At the end of the lunch, she offered to show him the new M.C.G offices, and let him meet some of her coworkers, including Walter, who had tried his hardest to suppress his Viktor Krum fanaticism that morning.

Viktor walked with her across the street, and they took the service elevator up. Melody's eyes grew wide and greedy, and several girls in the cubicles did a double-take on Viktor Krum. Walter appeared out of nowhere and began shaking Viktor's hand, discussing some Quidditch-related thing. Hermione smiled politely as Wentworth poked his head out of his office and the three of them started in on some old World Cup story.

She stood at the front, watching as Melody tried to keep her eyes off of Viktor a few feet away, and sorted her mail.

Blaise almost knocked her over in the rush to get to Viktor Krum. As she righted herself, Draco appeared on her shoulder.

Hermione blushed and went to hug him. Viktor kissed her left cheek, then her right, and just as Hermione was pulling away to say farewell, he kissed her lips, soft and insistent.

She blinked at him as he pulled back. He gave her a dashing smile and walked away. Hermione wandered back inside, stood with buzzing lips in the lifts, and when the doors opened and Draco was still there, pretending to sort mail, she tried to pass him.

"I don't like your Bulgarian," he said.

She looked up at her, checking her reaction. She steeled her eyes on him.

"I had to put up with yours. I lived," she said.

She raised a brow at him, and flounced away, into her office and out of sight.

The picture of Viktor kissing her on the lips was in Skeeter's society section on Thursday. Someone had followed them from the café, getting shots of them sitting together over croissants.

Ginny was very confused, but Hermione reassured her that it was nothing. Just a European thing.

Ginny pointed at the picture just as Viktor pressed his lips against hers, more than a peck, and said, "Yes, looks positively 'French' to me."

Hermione frowned at her and headed out the door.

When the lift doors opened, and Draco was not there with coffee, Hermione realized how many people read Skeeter's society section. She headed to her office, ignoring the stare from Kelsey, the intuitive associate, and closed her door behind her.

"Old Flames Burn Brighter." A voice from her desk, and she looked over to see the *Daily Prophet* hovering in front of Draco's face as he read the title of the Skeeter section. He folded the paper over itself, and eyed her over the top. She noticed a cup of coffee placed on her desk next to her ink.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Malfoy?" She gave him a smarmy grin, as she hung up her coat and scarf on the coatrack.

She looked back at him and he was still leaning on the edge of her desk, reading the paper. He was smirking down at the words, but his eyes weren't moving and his lips were tight.

She walked over to him slowly, pulled down the paper from his face, and leaned up to kiss him. She pressed her lips over his, and he relaxed, bringing one arm to wrap around her waist. She moved her lips across his, lightly, coaxing him until he kissed her back firmly. He brought his hand to her cheek, dipping his tongue into her mouth.

She pulled back and smiled against his lips. "I like our flame better."

It wasn't the *only* conditions...
And she wondered when it was that he visited Lucius in January.

Hermione nodded, like Draco had just said something she agreed with, and continued to build huts with her vegetables.

Her salad container was taken from her, and she looked up as Draco was moving it to the floor, and moving to kiss her.

She smiled against him as he leaned across her to press their lips together.

"Ugh," he said, pulling back. "You taste like bleu cheese." He wrinkled his nose.

She laughed and held onto his shoulders. She knew from watching him in the Great Hall that he hated bleu cheese dressing. "If you'd told me we'd be kissing again, I wouldn't have ordered it," she mumbled against his mouth.

"No, no. It's your favorite."

He kissed her. And her chest was warm.

He'd watched her in the Great Hall too.

Monsieur DuBois had her yawning. She was doing a fantastic job of hiding her gaping mouth every time he brought up Renaissance artwork and how it clashes terribly with Venetian rugs. They met every Saturday afternoon at a Muggle cafe that seemed to be Monsieur DuBois's favorite place. They knew him by name there. Hermione ordered an espresso drink that day, because her eyes could not keep open. She was just letting the breeze from the outdoor patio they were on lull her, and the sun across her forehead warm her.

"Da Vinci was, of course, a Squib —"

This caught Hermione's ears. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Monsieur DuBois raised a calculated brow at her. "I said, Leonardo da Vinci was a Squib. His great grandfather was the Italian Minister of Magic in 1414."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I... had never heard of that. Do you happen to know of any books on the topic that I could look into?"

"Well," Monsieur DuBois shifted in his chair, crossing his legs and turning slightly away from her. "I've seen it on a family tree."

"Hmn." Hermione pursed her lips.

The waiter came over, flirted a bit with Monsieur DuBois, and took their food order. Hermione truly hated the salads at this cafe. She had now tried every salad on the menu and not a one of them was filling or tasty. She decided on a bowl of soup today.

She glanced at her timelapse as inconsciously as possible, but it wasn't good enough.

"Do you have somewhere to be, Miss Granger?"

She looked up at him. "No, no. Just... checking the time, Monsieur."

She pushed at his shoulders until he was on his back. He laughed at her, and she crawled on top of him. Her hair was around her shoulders and she pressed her lips against his, forgetting that he tasted like her. She gasped as he pushed into her mouth.

She pulled back and kissed down his chest. One of his hands came to her head, moving through her hair. She looked up at him and his eyes were dark. She kissed one of his nipples and his lips quirked at her.

"Alright, not so sensitive there."

She dipped her head, continuing down, and he gasped when he figured out her intentions. She looked up and his eyes were wide and watching her. She kissed him again, lower, and his jaw opened. She watched as his breath came out heavier the lower she got.

She started pulling at his trousers and he sat up, grabbing her arms.

"You don't have to."

She sat up and looked at him. "You don't want me to?"

His mouth opened. And closed. And he didn't say anything. She looked down at his waist again, and saw how ready he was. She kissed his stomach, and Draco laid back.

"Oh, Merlin," he whispered.

She pulled his trousers over his hips, and swallowed as she stared at the front of his boxers. She didn't know what to do. She saw his stomach muscles clench, and she looked up at his face, eyes on her.

"We don't—" He reached for her, sitting up again. "There's so many things I want to do tonight. Every night. We can try that later."

His hands slid down her arms, and he kissed her, pressing his tongue inside and she tasted herself.

"Can we do something else instead?" he asked.

She tried not to feel ashamed, and inexperienced. So, she just nodded.

He moved her off of him, and took off his trousers completely, followed by his boxers. She was so glad they didn't go with plan A, as she truly got a look at him.

He pulled her knickers down to her knees and she finished taking them off along with her heels. She reached for her bra, and he stopped her. "No, I never want you to take that off." He smiled against her lips and she smiled back. He pressed over her, him completely naked now and her still in her bra.

He opened her knees wide, pressing against her, and kissed her on the mouth again. Once she pulled her knees up, pressing alongside of him, he turned them, flipping onto his back. Her hair fell around them as she pulled up.

"Can we try like this?" he asked, looking up from the pillows.

Plan A might have been easier. She didn't know how to... move like he did.

"I... don't know how to..."

He smiled up at her and licked his lips. "Let's figure it out."

He brought his hands up to her hips, and pulled her gently down on top of him, sliding against her. She pressed her lips together, her bottom half still very wet from earlier.

She brought her hands to his chest, pressing against him as she raised up, and let him guide himself into her. He slipped in easily, and she tried to relax, closing her eyes, and lowered down onto his hips. She thought he was all the way inside, but he was still stretching into her. Her muscles clenched on him, trying to accommodate him, and he moaned.

She opened her eyes and found his squeezed closed, breath coming quickly.

She didn't know what to do next. She tried reversing the motion, and lifted up again, letting him slide almost all the way out of her and then coming back down again. His eyes snapped open to watch her.

She pushed her hair out of the way, over her shoulder, and he must have liked that because his hands squeezed her hips.

She raised up again, trying to go faster, but knowing that this pace was going to be difficult. She could feel her thighs shaking already.

She was just about to ask him to take over. She looked up at his face and found him panting, devouring her with his eyes, licking his lips, and squeezing his fingers on her hips.

She tried a few more strokes. He reached up and pulled at her breast. She gasped, and found one more stroke in her. She leaned her arms on his chest again, putting her weight on him, and the angle changed. She caught her breath as both his hands came up to her chest. Squeezing and lifting and tugging at her through the bra. Her hips bucked against him, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

She tried it again, and he groaned.

Well, this she could do. And it was starting to feel okay for her too. She slammed her hips forward. Short, sharp movements, and he panted, grabbing at her ribs.

She came down again, placing her hands beside his head. Her hair fell over her shoulder again and she left it there as his eyes darkened. She thrust her hips in this angle and she could feel the base of him on her sensitive bud. She did it again, and bucked again. And she picked up the pace.

"Yes," he hissed.

She looked up at his face and it was tight, and eyes pressed closed. She rode him again, forward, and forward, and down, down, down. And his hips rose up to meet hers. He groaned.

"Granger, yes. Oh, fuck yes." He moved one hand to her hip, pulling her forward as his hips snapped up, and his other hand moved between their bodies, and the extra pressure made her gasp.

She watched his face, hovering over him, as he started to take over the pace. She didn't care. His hips rose to meet her as his hand pulled her down on him. She spread her knees wider, and it brought her closer, opening more, and she held her breath as he started moving his fingers fast on her. Over and over and she didn't know she was able to come again. She thought this was for him. But she felt herself getting lighter and lighter. She kissed him, and he growled into her mouth, her hair tangling between their lips.

Her hips were barely moving now, just rutting quickly, pushing against his hand that was on her clit. She was clenching against him, and he was panting in her mouth. She pulled up, raising back up, tall on his hips. She felt like she could do this now.

She moved her hips quickly from here, forward, forward, forward. His eyes watched her, and his hips found a rhythm again. Up against her, up, up, up.

She brought her hands to her breasts again. He groaned deep in his throat and he started pounding upwards, quicker. She watched him, his eyes rolling in his head and his lip between his teeth. He was sweating hard, and she knew her chest was damp too.

She tried to move up and down again instead of forward. She bounced on him twice before he let out an "oh, yes."

She clenched her thighs, trying to keep a rhythm of up and down and up and down. His fingers started moving on her clit again. She gasped and bounced two more times before she started clenching around him, her muscles fluttering and grabbing him, she couldn't bounce anymore. Couldn't do anything.

She was falling. Her back hit the mattress and she realized he had flipped them. She was still clutching him, moaning and screaming and grabbing his shoulders, and pushing her nails into his back, but he started pounding her into the mattress. His hips moved aggressively but she didn't care. He was groaning in her ears. He was panting, and cursing and she was still clutching inside and she didn't know when it would stop. She ran her hands into his hair and he bit down on her neck as he stuttered, rhythm failing. He yelled something against her skin and snapped his hips four more times before pressing forward and holding himself against her, straining. She found another ledge to fall over.

She screamed and felt her inside muscles massaging him, pulling him closer and closer. She felt the stars behind her eyelids and felt his skin breaking under her nails.

She panted against him. He was heavy on her and she couldn't catch her breath.

"I can't... oh, my god. I can't breathe."

He lifted up, and looked into her eyes. He stayed inside of her as she caught her breath. Every few seconds her muscles would hold him again. And she had no idea what it felt like for him but for her it was like never ending agony. Perfect agony.

He finally pulled out of her, and she felt another wave hit her without him inside.

He groaned against her again and the sound sent waves through her. She grabbed at her breasts, pulling and pulling and another fluttering in her abdomen.

"I think... I think I'm... Draco."

He looked up at her, and his eyes landed on her hands on her breasts. He made a sound against her again, and it moved through her.

"Tuck," she whispered.

The hand holding her knickers open, quickly moved to her entrance. He kept his eyes on her as he flicked her with his tongue, quicker and quicker, and she started to pull in different directions.

Two of his fingers finally entered her, pushing all the way in, and she clenched around them, and started to whine. He held them there, not moving, just pushed up inside, and sucked hard on her clit.

She felt her muscles clamp down, pleased to have something to hold onto. And she screamed, as she flew over the edge.

On the way down, she could feel his fingers, pumping slowly, lazy. And his tongue working small listless circles. She opened her eyes and found him watching her, tongue on her.

"Fuck," she said again.

He laughed against her. He raised up onto his hands and crawled up her body, kissing her stomach along the way. He dropped light kisses onto each of her breasts through the sheer bra, and she smiled and bit her lip.

She could feel him hard against her hip as he hovered over her mouth and asked, "Can I kiss you like this?"

She blinked at him, not knowing what he meant, and then realized where his mouth had just been, and how her orgasm was still all over his lips.

"Um," she stuttered. "I guess so."

He smiled at her and shook his head. He grabbed a tissue from his side table and wiped his mouth. He kissed her jaw, her neck.

She was so happy. And almost sleepy. But he pressed against her stomach, firmly, grinding.

Should she... Should she return the favor?

She'd never... done that before.

She was suddenly wide awake.

Maybe he would talk her through it?

She reached down for his pants and started to unbuckle him. He sighed against her neck.

He pulled back and helped her, sitting back on his knees, and staring down at her, licking his lips.

Well, that didn't take long. She was hot again.

"Say it again."

She looked down at him, panting, and felt the words hit her panties.

"Draco..."

He shook his head at her, smirking. She felt the muscles inside of her flutter around nothing. She wanted him inside, something to clench down on. He still held her open, his hand on her thigh, starting to squeeze her.

"Fuck," she tried.

Draco smiled at her, and lowered his head, kissing her again. She moaned.

"Oh, fuck."

He laughed against her, and the sound and the air hit her right where she wanted him. He moved the hand off her thigh, and pulled her knickers to the side. Her eyes widened when she realized he wouldn't just take them off of her. He dipped his head, eyes watching her eyes, and let his tongue swirl down on her. He slipped inside, licking and pushing, then out again.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," she gasped.

He groaned, with his tongue inside of her, and she grabbed his hair, pushing him down, forcing him closer. He lowered down on the bed on his elbow, and wrapped his arm under her thigh, opening her more, pushing her leg higher, her knee up and open.

She raised her hips. It was a sudden movement. And it brought him further inside. He moved his tongue faster against her. Quick lapping motions against her entrance. She raised her hips again.

"Oh, fuck, Draco."

Draco dragged his lips to her clit, moving the fabric aside with his hand, and moved quickly against her. She bucked against him again, pushing his face into her with her hands at the back of his head.

This was heaven. This was bliss. To feel him devouring her, not being able to breath and not caring.

Not being able to breath.

She released his head, moving her hands to the sheets again, and moaned. He came up for air quickly, sucking it in. He looked up at her.

"Let me know when you're close."

She watched as he pressed into her again, his tongue dancing across her. She didn't know how she would know when she was close. It happened so suddenly sometimes.

She brought her hands up to her breasts as he lapped at her. She moaned as she played with herself through the thin bra. She imagined his hands, tweaking and pulling.

She felt her muscles move inside of her. She wanted to close her legs on something. He had her wide open, and she wanted to clench down and ride something.

"Ugh, no. Please come back." She grabbed at his shoulders. He laughed. She bit her lip, still trying to figure out if she was still in the middle of an orgasm.

He pressed his head against her chest. He kissed each of her breasts over and over, alternating kisses. She just watched him, waiting for another wave that never came.

"You're the most perfect thing in the world," he whispered against her breast. She felt the air pass the fabric and if he asked her, she would go again. Right now.

He turned over to lay on his back, and dragged her body with him. She laid her head on his chest, and was struck by how much better a sleepover was than an office tryst or a chaise lounge in a governor's ball. She got to lay here. With him.

And he had invited her to stay the night, so there was no need for any awkward gathering of clothes and "see you next time."

He pulled the duvet up around them. She sat up and took off the bra, tossing it in a random direction. As she laid back down, his eyes were taking in her bare chest. She pressed against his side, laying on one hip, draping her leg across his.

"I'm coming back. For the bed," she announced. She smiled and closed her eyes.

His chest rumbled. "Just the bed?"

"And your mother, of course. The bed. And your mother."

"And the library."

"And the library. The bed, your mother, and the library."

He ran a hand up and down her arm lightly.

"My mother was very glad to have you over," he said.

She smiled against his chest. "I'm very glad to be friends with her again. I missed her."

Draco sighed. "That was my fault, I'm afraid." She lifted her head and looked up at him. He stared at the ceiling. "I told her to stay away from you. After your visit to Azkaban. After she miscalculated her control over my father." He swallowed. "I'm sorry. I told her not to contact you again."

She blinked at his face. "Oh." She thought of Narcissa and her last conversation before the estrangement. The way she'd frost at her when Hermione said she would not be marrying Draco. She wondered if that was something Narcissa told him... "I'm actually quite glad to hear that. She's the closest thing I feel I have to a mother. So, I'm glad to hear she hadn't given up on me."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

She turned and kissed his arm where she lay on it. She felt lazy and exhausted for the first time, and the hand rubbing down her arm was delicious.

"Have you ever gone down to Australia?"

And she was wide awake again. "To... to see my parents?" He nodded. "No. No, I don't... I don't really think I'd want to see them if they didn't remember me." She let her eyes drift across the room. "If I had to pretend to be someone else..."

He continued his strokes on her arm. She counted them as they lay in silence. On the fourth one he said, "Have you looked into counter-curses?"

She felt her eyes drifting closed. "A little bit. There's not been any success with reversing memory charms that deep. Removing an event is easy. You can recover it over time. But removing a person..." She swallowed and opened her eyes, not knowing they were closed. "It's too many events."

He nodded. She could feel it. He waited six strokes of his arm this time, before saying "I'm sorry you had to do that."

Her eyes couldn't open. But she nodded a bit. "I know."

"And I'm sorry I was on that mission. The one at your house."

"It's fine," she hummed. "You wouldn't have hurt them." She heard her voice drifting. "I saw it on your face."

She counted nine more strokes against her arm before she fell asleep for good. After another three, his arm stilled.

She woke up in the dark. She turned to cuddle into Draco's side, and fall back asleep again, but he wasn't there.

She sat up. And looked around the dim room. Was he in the bathroom?

As her eyes adjusted, she found his form, sitting on the edge of the bed, at the foot. His back was to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked, voice groggy.

She watched as his back moved with every breath, slow and steady.

"Did Potter help you?"

She blinked. She pulled the duvet up around her chest. "What?"

"Potter helped you get to the memories?"

The room was cold. She was very awake. And he was very far away.

"I... I don't know what you—"

"It's just like Hogwarts, isn't it? You and Potter running around under an Invisibility Cloak, doing whatever the fuck you want, while the rest of us have to play by the rules."

Her throat was tight. She'd said something. As she was falling asleep. It was so clear now that it was the wrong thing to say.

"Draco. I'm... I'm sorry—"

She looked up at him and he was standing, moving to the side of the bed so she could get on it. His eyes were running over her body, up to her face, and then back down.

She smiled. Hermione moved to the bed, feeling the cool air against her skin, and feeling his eyes on her. She heard the small test intake of air when she passed him, and he saw for the first time that her knickers were thong style. She saw his hand reach up and grasp the post of his bed.

She bit her lip, and decided to tease him. If she could.

She leaned down, bringing one knee to the bottom of the bed, and began to crawl to the center. She knew her barely covered ass was on display for him, and she tried to push her hips out even higher. She could hear him breathing.

She reached the center of his giant bed, and twisted her head to look at him.

"Like this?"

His eyes were on her backside. He swallowed and looked up at her face with hot eyes. "Lay down."

She smiled and twisted around so she was laying with her head on his pillows. She stared up at his canopy bed, and grinned. She brought her knees together demurely, as he moved to the foot of the bed, and kicked off his shoes. He pulled his sweater over his head and tossed it somewhere, and began to crawl up the bed, like she had. She raised up on her elbows to watch him.

When his head reached her knees, he kissed each of them, over and over until they parted against her will. She could feel her breathing coming quicker now, and as his eyes watched her face, he kissed a path up her thigh, toward her pretty green underwear.

She bit her lip. He'd only put his mouth there the once, in his office, when she'd rambled about the giant squid to him. It was good. Very good. But he had distracted her then, and she knew she was already wet, and his eyes were devouring her green underwear as his lips got closer and closer.

She was about to maybe grab his head, pull him away from... down there, when he planted his mouth right on her, over her fancy green knickers.

She gasped, and found his sheets in her fists, her head landed on his pillows, and her knees tried to close, tried to keep him out, but he pushed her open with his hand on her thigh.

He kissed her over the fabric twice, once close to her entrance, and again just on top of her clit, and she growled something. She felt his tongue, swiping from bottom to top, over the fabric, pressing firm at the top, and the fabric and his tongue and the pressure—

"Fuck... Draco."

He lifted his head. She looked down at him and his eyes were glazed over and hot. His mouth was open and panting over her, she could feel the air hit her every time he breathed.

She approached the closet door, and turned to ask permission. He nodded. She opened the walk-in closet and found mostly black and grey. She laughed again. She wandered in, and felt him come to lean in the doorway. She ran her hands over his clothes.

"We need to get you into some oranges and pinks." She winked at him.

His lips twitched, but he was still watching her. Nervous almost. There was a set of drawers in the corner, and she almost asked permission to shuffle through them. She let her fingers run over the wood, and Draco shifted in the doorway. She turned to him and found that tense expression on his face again.

Hermione moved to him, wound her hands up his chest and into his hair, and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her waist, squeezing her to him. She parted his lips and tasted the wine from dinner on him, smiling against his mouth as he let his hands wander down and grab her backside. He pulled her close to him and sighed into her mouth.

"Like your bedroom, Draco."

His eyes fluttered open, dark and heady. He smiled down at her and kissed her again. She pulled back and looked down at his chest, shy suddenly.

"I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, really?" His voice teased her.

"Yes, I think... I think you'll like it."

"When do I get my surprise?" His hands were still cupping her backside, and he squeezed, then massaged, rubbing figures into her flesh. She felt a hot pulse of pleasure move through her; and she thought of how ready she had been to have him inside of her when they were in the library earlier.

"You'll need to, um... give me some space," she stuttered. He smiled down at her, and exited the closet, moving to sit on the edge of his bed. He smirked at her, and she felt a shiver go through her.

She stood in front of him, and reached back for the zipper on her dress. She got it down, and looked up at him as she pulled off one shoulder, then the other. When the fabric pulled past her bra, his eyes flashed at her.

It was a deep green color, with black lace on the edges. It was very thin, so thin that she knew he could see her nipples through it.

She pushed the dress down her waist, and let it slide down her hips, where she revealed green knickers to match.

He swallowed.

She stepped out of the dress, and stood there in only her bra, knickers, and heels. She pressed her lips closed, trying not to cover herself.

"Get on the bed."

"Do you know how difficult it was for me to release those memories to the Wizengamot, Granger?" His back was still to her. His voice was cold but quiet. "You know how hard I work to keep people out of my mind."

She squeezed her eyes shut, begging to go back to sleep. This was so much worse now that she knew about his Occlumency.

"I wanted to know you," she said. "I wanted to understand you." She knew she should have better explanations than this. "I needed to know why your blood was on my living room walls."

"I told you why," he hissed. "You asked and I told you."

"Never the whole truth. You always leave something out."

He stood, very suddenly and whipped around to look at her. "Who says you're entitled to the whole truth?"

His eyes were bright and hot. He'd put his boxers back on, and she was still naked in his bed, clutching the sheets to her. She pressed her lips together.

"I don't know how to apologize for this," she said, and her voice broke.

"Which ones," he said.

"Which?"

"Which ones did you watch? Or did you grab some popcorn and play them all?"

She took a deep breath. "No. Just two. The one at my house. And the night the Snatchers brought us to Malfoy Manor."

His face twisted. "Why?"

She felt the tears blinding her. "I needed to know why you saved us. I needed to understand—"

He growled to her. "Why do you keep using that word?" He came around the side of the bed. "I didn't save you, Granger," he snarled. "I did nothing." His eyes flickered. "You were screaming on my drawing room floor and I stood there."

She took a shaky breath. "That's not how I saw it."

"Oh, I'm so glad we both have seen these memories so now we can debate them," he snapped.

She clenched her jaw. "You did your best, Draco. You tried to help us then, and you would have helped me if there was an Auction. That's all I wanted to know about." She edged to the end of the bed, holding the sheets to her. "When you told me about the Auction for the first time, you told me you'd sell me for a profit. But your father told me something completely different."

Draco clenched his hands into fists and paced away from her.

"So, I had to know!" she called after him as he moved through the room. "And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me."

"There's that word again," he spat. He turned back to her and stalked to the bed. "You think I would have *saved* you at that Auction, Granger? You think I gathered all available funds, reached out to all relatives and contacts, so that I could set you free? Sent you running with a stolen wand?"

The breath heaved in her chest as she watched him, his eyes glinting at her.

"The room we passed on the way to mine? The first door? That was your room." He stopped in front of her, sneering. "You were never getting out of here." He smirked, shaking his head. "I don't know why I bothered lying about recognizing you that night. You were always going to end up a prisoner in Malfoy Manor."

Her neck was hot. "So, you're telling me that belonging to you would have been the same as any other Death Eater?" His eye twitched and she pressed on. "I would have served your dinner and been your entertainment at parties. *Crucio d* when I disobeyed – at best. Passed around like a whore?"

His eye twitched again and he had to look away from her.

"I've had plenty of time to think on this, Draco, so let me know when to stop –"

"Stop."

She shook her head at him. "You would have saved me. It wouldn't have been freedom, but it would have been the best you could have done. You would have saved me from that life—"

"Do you think I would have been able to keep away from you?" He glared at her. "That you would have lived out your days here and remained untouched."

"Yes," she said. "Don't try to scare me, Draco. I know what kind of person you truly are."

"Ah, yes. You've seen the worst of me, haven't you, Granger." He sneered at her. He prowled to the doors to the balcony. "Just needed to tip a memory into a basin and it's like we've known each other forever."

She pounded her fists into the bed. "I'm sorry, Draco. I'm sorry. I didn't think I had another choice. I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you—"

He spun around. "Then ASK, Hermione. Don't take!"

She felt the syllables of her given name hit her across the face, as if he'd actually slapped her. Practically the same words she'd used against him a few weeks ago, about not assuming things about her. And asking permission.

She felt the first tear fall.

"I'd like for you to leave." He whispered it into the ground. She heard it bounce around the room. "Get out."

She didn't have anything else to say. She had no leg to stand on.

Draco turned, and headed into his washroom. He shut the door.

When she said her goodbyes to Narcissa, thanking her and promising to see each other more often, Draco was already standing, waiting to "escort her out."

He walked her down the hall, passing the library, and out into the entrance hall. He turned at the bottom of the stairs and started to climb. He took her hand in his, and lead her up. Once on the third floor, they twisted through a few hallways, passing tapestries and statues. Hermione was ashamed to realize that Monsieur DuBois would be quite proud of her as she recognized many famous paintings and styles.

The moonlight shone in through a window they were approaching. Draco's fingers were warm on her skin. The window overlooked a small pond, and the white peacocks could just be seen in the dusk light. She stopped dead, looking out the large window, and Draco's hand was pulled from hers.

"Wow," she murmured.

She came to the window, practically pressing her nose against it. She turned back to look at Draco and he was watching her. She smiled and let him lead her down the hall.

They passed a few doors, and stopped in front of an ornate wooden one. There was a dragon carved into the surface.

He looked at her, then took a steady breath and opened the door, pushing it aside so she could enter before him. She stepped inside.

It looked exactly how one would expect Draco Malfoy's bedroom to look. Canopy bed. Green curtains. Book shelves and armchairs. Fireplace. Plush carpeting. Doors leading out to a balcony.

Hermione giggled.

"What?"

She looked up at him, smiling, and saw he was watching her closely.

"It's just all very predictable. I love it." She laughed. He rolled his eyes and closed the door behind them.

She strolled around the room, twice the size of her bedroom at home, possibly the size of her entire apartment with Ginny, if you count the closet, ensuite bathroom, and balcony.

She went to the bookshelf, documenting the titles that Draco liked to have close to him. She let her fingers trail across the shelves.

She poked her head into the bathroom, finding a huge marble tub. She touched the curtains, letting her eyes pass over a picture of Draco with Crabbe and Goyle, taken about fourth year.

He followed her as she explored, giving her a few feet of space, and she could feel his eyes on her.

He slipped a finger inside of her, slowly pushing in, and she gasped. He pushed his hips against her firmly, holding her up between his hips and the hand inside her knickers, and she felt him hard against her backside. The hand at her chest ran across to her other breast, trying to fight the fabric of her dress to let him under and inside. He pushed his hips against her again, and he flicked his thumb over her bud.

"Oh, god. Draco."

He added another finger inside of her and she could feel him huffing against her jaw, kissing her forgotten as he pushed in and out, pumping a slow rhythm while he moved his thumb against her quickly, his hips starting to grind.

She dropped the book. She ran her hands over his arms, trying to find something to hold onto.

"Put your hands on the shelves." His voice was gruff against her jaw. And her hands shot forward, leaning slightly, changing the angle of her hips that made the both of them moan. She felt him moving his hips quickly, faster as he rubbed at her, faster as she clenched around his fingers as they thrusted into her.

"Fuck," he hissed against her, straining. "I've wanted this..." He gasped against her ear. "Wanted this every time I saw you in the Hogwarts library."

She groaned, started to squeeze him. "Please, Draco."

The hand in her bra snapped down to her hips, holding her still as he rutted against her, the fingers inside of her slowed, but his thumb kept moving on her. She began to ride his hand, hearing him gasp as she moved against him.

A crack from behind them. A squeaky voice.

"Mippy is telling you that dinner is ready."

Hermione's hand slapped over her mouth, as Draco stilled behind her, one hand still inside her knickers. Her eyes were wide as Draco carefully slipped his fingers from her, moving his hand to her thigh.

He cleared his throat.

"Thank you, Mippy. We'll be there shortly."

A crack.

They were still.

Hermione laughed. She felt his forehead drop onto her neck and a curse whisper against her back. That made her laugh harder.

Dinner was lovely. In comparison to the first time she'd had dinner with Narcissa and Draco, it was a walk in the park.

She sat there in his bed for two breaths. She stood, naked, and grabbed her dress from in front of his closet. She slipped her panties on, pulled the dress over her head, and grabbed her shoes.

She wanted to knock on the door. To beg him. To sit with her back against the wall until he came out and forgave her.

She left his room.

She had no idea where she was. She looked at the tapestries and walked to the end of the hall, looking both ways, wishing she already knew the layout of his wing. She turned and found a door, the room next to his.

Her room.

She swallowed. "Mippy."

A crack.

"Miss!"

"Can you help me get out of here? Find me a fireplace?"

"What is Miss doing here so late!"

The little girl elf stared up at her with wide, sleepy eyes. Hermione felt more tears on her cheeks, and didn't bother stopping them.

"Just..." She shook her head, closing her eyes. "...ruining everything."

And for the second time in a handful of months, she found herself making a dramatic exit from Malfoy Manor, and the boy inside of it.

"Not much is known of Nicolas Flamel. I have tracked him over my fifty-four years, and I have made discoveries that I wish for the modern world to know of..."

Hermione paused when Draco's hand left the book and joined his other on her waist, both now rubbing circles against her dress.

"Go on," he whispered. And his lips dropped to her neck again.

"I have been to France, at the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. I have—" His kisses were so light on her skin, that she almost wished for him to press harder. "I have spoken with the remaining portraits who may know of Flamel and his wife Perenelle. They have told me many tales of young Nicolas..."

Hermione's eyes closed for a moment. Draco's hand moved up the left side of her ribs, counting them as he travelled. His hand stopped before reaching her breast, letting each finger fit between a rib, and his thumb round the swell of her. She waited for him to touch her, eyelids fluttering, with his right hand still drawing circles on her hip and his lips painting patterns on her shoulder.

"What did the portraits have to say, Granger?" he mumbled against her skin, and a shock pulled through her stomach, squeezing her thighs together, and pulling at the skin on her chest until she knew her nipples were poking through the fabric.

She whimpered. "Um..." She opened her eyes, blinking to clear them. "...tales of young Nicolas and his adventures at school. But some of them had seen him since. Some of them..." She focused on the book as Draco's thumb started whispering across her breast, inching closer. His fingers lifted, cupping her, and his right hand slid down, down, gathering the fabric of her dress to get underneath. "Some of them had seen Nicolas Flamel and his w-wife as recently as 1798, putting the Fl-flamels at around four-hundred-years-old..."

Draco brought his right hand under the dress, and she felt the fabric flutter back down, ghosting across her knees as his fingers danced across her thighs. She knew she'd already made a mess of her new knickers. The knickers that Draco would see her in tonight, and she smiled, biting her lip as he brushed his hand against her. He bit down on her neck and she moaned. His left hand finally gave her what she wanted, moving over her breast, and then plucking at her, pulling and teasing through her dress, through her bra.

"Four-hundred-years-old is very old, isn't it, Granger?"

"Mm-hmm." She gasped. "Yes." She hissed.

The hand touching her over her knickers, moved up to her belly, and dipped under the elastic, running over and down, slipping through her.

She leaned into him, almost dropping the book.

"What else does it say," he whispered, then kissing against her jaw, sucking on her.

"I—I can't, Draco. Please."

"She tried." He crossed his arms. "But she also told me to enjoy the beautiful things in life, so I find it a very difficult contradiction."

She blinked at him, and felt herself blush. She looked back down to the Nicolas Flamel book, flipping open the cover.

"Interesting finds?"

"Mm-hmm. In fact, I'm almost positive that if I'd had access to the Malfoy library over the past ten years, Voldemort wouldn't have had a chance." She grinned down at the table of contents.

She heard him stand tall, and move closer to her. "Well, the next time a dark wizard comes along, I'll make sure you have everything you need."

Hermione gave a small smile, her mind wandering to her earlier thoughts about who might have access to this library in the future.

"What are you reading now?" She felt his voice over her shoulder, felt the heat of his chest behind her as she stood facing the stacks.

"Nicolas Flamel. Alchemist. Philosopher's stone." One of his hands moved her hair off of her neck. "This book was written in the 1800s, before much was known about him." His left hand rested on her hip, over the light dress she'd worn. "So – so it mainly has conspiracy theories and possible sightings."

She felt his face near her own, his cheek brushing her ear. He looked over her shoulder at the book and hummed, "Mm-hmm." The sound sent shivers through her, and she knew he noticed.

"Probably not all that factual," she said, and the hand on her hip started rubbing small circles, his thumb just below her ribs, his fingers splayed across her hipbone. "But – but that's always a very interesting place to start... with research." She was regretting now how thin her dress was. She could feel the heat of his hand on her like there was no fabric at all. "Starting with the things that had been disqualified or proven wrong."

He hummed in her ear again, and her fingers squeezed on the book. She pressed her lips together, as he lowered his head to her neck, brushing his lips across her skin. She leaned back against his chest, and his right hand ran down her arm, leaving goosebumps along the way. She closed her eyes, thinking that the last time they'd truly been together was when he'd thrown her across his desk, her fingers squeezing the stone as he pounded his hips against her own, sucking on her skin.

His right hand finally reached her hand, holding the book. "Why don't you read me the Preface?" He flipped the page for her. She swallowed.

She took a deep breath, and tried to focus her glazing eyes on the pages in front of her.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty

Tuesday, February 17, 1998

I feel like I've been at the Manor more often than Hogwarts these past few weeks. Severus wakes me once a week and instructs me to get dressed because I have been selected for a mission.

That's how I find myself here tonight, playing Exploding Snap with Looney Lovegood.

She flips over a Toad Card on top of mine, and my arms jumps, chest seizing to slap my hand down before hers—

Slap!

She's beaten me, giggling.

Fuck."

"I think that's eighteen to fourteen, yes?" she says, shuffling the cards again. The cards have only exploded twice so far.

"You cheat," I say, childish even to my ears.

"You're the one with the wand," she says. "Mr. Ollivander usually beats me. He's quite quick for an older gentleman."

I glance over to the empty space beside a stone pillar, rumpled blanket and spare socks next to a book.

"They took him yesterday," she says, without needing me to ask. I don't need to ask much with her. She just supplies. "How is school?" she says.

"Awful." I take the cards she deals me and stack them neatly. "The Carrows have moved onto *Imperio*."

She nods. "But you can resist that, yes? As an Occlumens?"

My eyes snap up to her. She flips the first card. And waits for my turn. She looks up at me and her blue eyes are almost white.

"Yes," I whisper. "It can be easier. Are you...?"

She tilts her head at me.

I stare into her eyes, sending my thoughts forwards.

A Legilimens.

I watch the words slide on a silver thread between our eyes, slithering into her pupils and disappearing inside.

She bites the inside of her cheek. "Mm. I don't think so."

I laugh. A barking sound full of relief and mirth. She literally just read unspoken words from my mind.

She leans in, like she's about to tell me the secrets of the world. "I just know how to keep the wrackspurts away."

She winks. And I'm about to laugh at her, about to flip my card over when the door to the dungeon bangs open.

I stand, pulling my wand.

Ollivander's pale, thin body crashes down the stairs, hitting step after step on the way down. Lovegood moves to go to him, and I grab her elbow.

Two pairs of boots follow, and then Dolohov and Rowle are there. Rowle kicks Ollivander's side, but Dolohov stops when he sees us. His eyes scan to the apple cores and playing cards. He slides his thin black eyes up to me, and smirks.

"Are we interrupting something, Malfoy?"

Rowle looks up, catching sight of me. His feet trip and replant. He might be drunk.

I take a breath, and everything locks into place.

"Not at all. Just keeping watch over our prisoner," I say. "Per my father's instructions."

Dolohov smiles, and moves lazily towards us. "So, old Lucius thinks this little bird needs a private guard?" His eyes rake over Lovegood. "She special? A locking charm on the door won't keep her!"

Rowle gives a wobbly laugh. Ollivander lays still and silent at his feet.

I lift a brow at them, give a long-suffering sigh, and say, "Well, to be honest, Professor Carrow is testing us tomorrow on the Imperius Curse." I glance at Lovegood. "I've been practicing. Winning card games and making her jump around a bit."

I look back at them, shrugging. And that should be it.

But then Dolohov's lips part, crooked teeth devious.

"Let's see then..."

in turn, am cashing in my chips." Narcissa turned back to her. "It's nothing Lucius didn't see coming."

Hermione nodded at her coffee cup, trying to understand the complexities of the Malfoy family drama.

"Well, dear," Narcissa said, "you have about an hour before dinner is served. Let me leave you to browse." Narcissa stood and Hermione followed suit. Narcissa pointed a finger at her. "And don't let me catch you leaving here with less than ten new books!"

Hermione laughed and thanked her. Narcissa produced the same basket that Draco had brought for her the last time she'd looked for books, and said, "Draco should be home in time for dinner."

She left her, standing in the middle of the library. Hermione smiled at the books, determined to discover something new today while she wandered. She forced herself to pass the instructional texts and old spellbooks, moving deeper into the stacks. She hadn't seen the back wall of the library before, so she started to feel a bit overwhelmed at the sheer size of the room. Hermione had a passing, innocent thought that she would give anything to have free reign of the Malfoy library, to have amassed this collection, to be able to add to it, to be able to read every book in it.

And just as she found the back wall, complete with a window seat overlooking the gardens, Hermione realized that Draco Malfoy's wife would. Lady Malfoy would get not only control of the library and its contents and care, but the whole house. The renovations, the design, the gardens.

The interior design lessons with Monsieur DuBois. The hosting classes with Madame Bernard.

Hermione swallowed, searching out the window, and finding the gazebo.

She shook her head, turning away and focusing on the stacks. Focusing on the books. Solid and uncomplicated.

She took her time, examining the shelves, looking through old texts for hidden secrets. She placed a few that she wanted to take with her on the window seat, but again, she needed to consolidate. Her fingers had just ghosted over a book on Nicolas Flamel, one that she was almost positive would have aided the three of them in their first year, when she felt the air shift in her corner.

She looked over her shoulder, and Draco was there, leaning casually. Watching her. He smirked.

Her blood warmed in her veins as she gritted back at him. "Didn't your mother ever teach you it isn't polite to stare?" She raised a brow at him.

Mippy beamed. Narcissa coughed behind her, and Mippy nodded at her and moved to the side. Narcissa was there with a welcoming hug.

"Hermione, dear. I'm so happy to have you here."

She felt arms around her shoulders holding her close. She didn't realize that she missed Narcissa's smell.

"Thank you, Narcissa. I'm so happy to be here."

The older woman pulled back to smile at her, and said, "Let's get you set up in the library for a bit, should we?"

Mippy took the old books in Hermione's hands and popped away with them, as Hermione turned to follow Narcissa down the hallway, passing the busts. She kept her eyes off Lucius's stone face peering at her, and focused on where Draco's bust would one day stand, just to the side of the library doors.

Narcissa opened the library doors. It smelled just like she remembered it.

"Shall we sit for a bit?" Narcissa asked. "I don't want to take up too much of your browsing time."

"No, not at all. I would love to catch up."

Mippy, as if she had been waiting for those magic words, appeared holding a tray.

"Coffee, dear," Narcissa asked. "Or we have decaf as well?"

Though it was a bit late in the evening for caffeine, Hermione thought of the small amount of sleep she planned to get this evening, and hid her blush as she asked for caffeine.

Mippy poured, and she and Narcissa sat. So many things had changed and shifted since their first date in the library. Hermione wondered what Narcissa's grand scheme had been then.

They talked books. They talked Malfoy Consulting. They talked charity balls and the Chimaera that now resided in Gringotts and small anecdotes of Draco as a child. Every time Hermione brought her saucer below her cup, she caught Narcissa staring, lips pursed, and Hermione wondered if there were things she needed to un-learn.

Narcissa kept finding delicate ways to bring the conversation around to Draco – her biggest talent. Hermione was desperate to know if she knew about the two of them, but she was also sure that Narcissa's powers of perception were more impressive than she could have imagined.

"Narcissa," Hermione began, "I know this probably goes without saying, but I was sorry to hear about the divorce proceedings." Hermione looked down at her coffee. "Draco assured me that this was a good thing, but still, I wanted to express my sympathy for what you're going through."

She looked up, checking in with Narcissa and found a delicate smile on her lips. "That's very kind of you, but yes, Draco is right. Everything is just as it should be." Narcissa replaced her cup on her saucer, and set it on the side table. "Lucius broke a deal with me. So I,

I feel a cold sweep through my limbs, and any hope of leaving the dungeon easily drains out of me.

I turn to Lovegood, my wand crushed in my grip. I raise my arm, and look into her eyes.

She gives me that small grin that I remember from months ago, when I had my wand turned on her in a classroom, ready to sizzle her nerve endings.

"*Imperio*."

She sways on her feet. And then hops onto one. And I don't know if I'm actually cursing her or if she's reading my mind.

She hops to the other foot. And then – something I did *not* ask her to do – she does a jumping jack.

I drop my wand and she relaxes. I look back to Dolohov.

His eyes glitter an ugly color and he says, "Is that the best you've got, Malfoy?"

I shrug. "I'll probably pass the exam."

Rowle hiccups, leaning on the stone wall. "You wanna – you wanna really see if you're good at it, you should have her strip."

He laughs into his chest, head lolling to the side.

There's an icy shard digging into my lungs that tastes like fear. I feel Lovegood's heat next to me. She's still.

Dolohov raises a brow at me, waiting.

I sneer at him, looking over Lovegood briefly before snapping at him. "She's barely fourteen," I exaggerate.

Dolohov smiles at me, like he sees right through me. Rowle says, "Even better." He laughs and stumbles a bit.

"Not very inventive, either of you," Dolohov says, stepping forward, challenging me. "I'd test my skills by having her on her knees, sucking me off." He stops in front of me. He's reaching distance from Lovegood. I stare into his eyes, breathing slowly. "That's a real fun game. 'Cause if you let up on the *Imperio*, if you get too... distracted," he says, chuckling, "she might bite your cock off."

He chuckles. His eyes slide over to her, and I see the same expression he had looking at Granger in the paper, talking about an Auction. The same expression he'd worn a few weeks back when we broke into a Muggle jewelry shop on one of our many missions to look for a tiara, but he'd told me to wait outside while he "dealt with" the shop girls.

"The risk's a bit too high then," I say, pulling his eyes back to me. "I'll stick to hopscotch, thank you." I look to Rowle and Ollivander. "You've delivered your prisoner. I'll ask you now to leave my house."

Dolohov takes one step closer to me. I'm as tall as him, so his breath hits me right in the nose.

"I'll be watching you, Malfoy." He smiles. "You're weak, like your father." He reaches up and straightens my collar. "You'll make a mistake one day, and I'll be there. I'll make sure the Dark Lord knows how much of a coward you are. And I'll enjoy watching him end you."

I give him a small grin and say, "Looking forward to it, Antonin."

He steps back, looking over Lovegood once more, and drags Rowle up the stairs.

I'm steadying my breath still when Lovegood runs to Mr. Ollivander, pouring water into his mouth and asking what the weather is like outside.

I watch the two of them for a bit as I clean up the cards and slice up the apple I brought down for the wandmaker.

"You did very good, Draco," Looney says.

I frown at the floor, about to head upstairs again. I want to lighten the room. I don't want to leave them in the heaviness.

"What colors are they, do you suppose," I say, nodding upstairs to where the two Death Eaters disappeared.

"Hm." She looks up at the ceiling. "They don't have any." Her fingers twist around a curly strand. "My colors shy away from the darkness."

Saturday, February 19, 2000

There was something that wrapped around my heart, something that still clung to the belief that she would never. That Lucius was lying.

And that something unravels and falls away like a scarf in the wind when I see her sitting at a café table, ankles crossed, coffee cup hovering over a saucer as she sips.

And everything feels raw. The sun is too bright. The people are too loud.

I recognize the man from a handful of meetings with Mother years ago. He might have even been the one to redecorate the drawing room—

And I hear her screaming, cutting above the buzzing street. I see her writhing on the floor, and I think of how soft she's made me. How years of my soul stretching to touch hers has pulled me too thin.

Weak for her.

And as I approach the table, as she looks up at me in terror. As I smile at Monsieur DuBois, I think of all the little ways she's lied to me.

I guide her around the gate, escorting her out, and I wonder why she wouldn't tell me about her trip to Azkaban when I asked. How many times did I have to beg her to tell me about it.

He looked over her shoulder, trying to fight his smile. "I have a meeting in five minutes, or else I'd offer to pound you into this desk."

"Hmm." She blushed. "That's a shame." She reached around him, pressing against him on purpose, and grabbed her coffee cup. She smirked at him as she sipped.

"This week's installment of the inheritance transferred yesterday," he said, and she let the smile melt off her face. "It's usually on Tuesday evenings, but it was yesterday, at 8AM." He searched her face. "You don't know anything about that, though, do you Granger?"

She swallowed her coffee, and shook her head. "Maybe your father wants to give it to you after all?"

"Maybe," he hummed, searching her eyes. He moved her hair over her ear, and then kissed her on the cheek, then moved to the other cheek, and she was smiling before he could finish the same path Viktor had displayed in the papers. He kissed her lips.

He slid out from between her and the desk, and gave her a flirty grin as he left. She wandered to the door when she heard him greet someone at the elevators.

She leaned against her doorframe, and found Draco shaking hands with the same man from the governor's ball – the one Slughorn had introduced him to. She watched as Draco led him back to his office, and shut the door behind them.

Saturday couldn't come soon enough. Hermione wrapped up the books she'd previously borrowed and placed them next to her bag.

She checked her hair, dress, and makeup in the mirror again. It was very difficult to find something that was appropriate to wear to dinner with Narcissa Malfoy, and yet thirty enough to drive her whatever-he-was wild with desire. She'd settled for a Narcissa Malfoy approved dress, with some recently purchased Draco Malfoy approved undergarments.

She hadn't seen Draco since Thursday morning. He'd been swamped at work and then out of town on Friday. So that was now a total of five days since they'd had sex.

To put it mildly, she was *ready* to spend time with Draco tonight.

She took one last look in the mirror and stepped through her Floo to the Malfoy fireplace, into the entrance hall. At the base of the marble staircase, Narcissa Malfoy stood in long robes with her hands folded. Hermione took a moment to smile at her, feeling like she'd come home after a very long trip.

Before she could even get out a greeting, Mippy appeared in front of her.

"Miss! Mippy is happy to see you! Mippy has made an excellent soup for tonight, but Mippy could not find pumpkins! They're not in season! Mippy wanted to give you pumpkin soup!"

The elf's bright, round eyes shone up at her. Hermione smiled and said, "Thank you, Mippy. I'm sure whatever you've made is wonderful."

She bounces on the loveseat like a child and says, "Can we please have her over? Next weekend?"

I roll my eyes, and say, "Fine." She smiles. Then I press my lips together hating to ruin this lightness, and say, "If it's no matter to you, I'd like for you to play your last move with Father." I look at her, and find her brows drawn together. "He has been sending her to Madame Michele. I found her today with Monsieur DuBois, learning about Renaissance architecture."

The smile fades from her face, and she is still as a statue when she says, "Did you now?"

I nod. "He told her the inheritance wouldn't be released to me unless she conformed." My mother is an absolute vision when she's angry. Most people flush, fire igniting in their

eyes, blood boiling. But Mother ices over.

"Draco, darling," she says, gazing out the window at the night sky. "Your father and I are getting a divorce. I hope that won't disturb you too greatly."

She plucks up her book and resumes reading.

~*~

Sunday, February 20, 2000

My Italian is a bit rusty, but I'm able to find my way to the correct villa. I knock at the door, and an old elf immediately pulls it open.

"Draco Malfoy to see Miss Parkinson," I say.

He says something back in Italian, and I recognize schedule or appointment. He looks me up and down. Elves can translate any language, so this one's just being an asshole.

"I do not have an appointment."

He frowns at me and gestures for me to wait in the entry hall. It's a small cottage, with large windows and ivy on the exterior walls. I'm examining the sitting room from its doorway when I hear heels on stairs.

"To what do I owe this surprise?"

I look up and Pansy descends the stairs in a dressing gown, her hair not fully combed, but her face already on. It's been maybe eight years since I've seen her without makeup.

She sees it in my face, stopping on the last two steps, the light leaving her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

I jump right to it, feeling a similar fire from yesterday deep in my chest.

"Have you been in contact with my father?"

Her brows meet her fringe.

"Recently? No. Why? Is there something the matter?"

I slide my hands into my pockets to stop this ache to squeeze something.

"And what about 'not recently'?"

She blinks at me, eyes searching mine, dancing over my tight shoulders and closed jaw.

"He saw my design on the Argentinian Minister last June, and wrote to me from Azkaban." She crosses her arms over her chest, in a rare motion of insecurity that draws my eyes. "He... he's followed my work. Sending me congratulations, or..." She swallows. "He put me in contact with several people—"

"And you never mentioned this?" I snarl, losing whatever ounce of control I thought I had over this.

She snaps her mouth shut, eyes narrowing in a way I remember.

"Perhaps I did. It might be in one of the sixty-seven letters I sent to you while you were away."

"It wasn't." I laugh. "I read them all."

Her cheek twitches and she looks away from me.

"What does this have to do with anything?"

I prowl to the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her. "And what of 'The Modern Business Witch?' Ihiss. "Did my father have anything to say about that?"

"Of course," she snaps. "He loved the design—"

"And what did he have to say about the model?"

Her lips close, and something darkens her eyes. "What did he say to you now?"

I pace, looking away from her, trying to remember who she is. Who we are. "Whose idea was it to use her?"

"Mine," she snaps.

"Really?"

"Yes," she straightens. "All decisions regarding my line are made by me. If it has my name on it, I stand by it. I'm sure you can appreciate that, Draco."

I look up at her, inches taller than me on the stairs. And I wait. She draws a careful breath through her nose.

"He wrote to me last month. After the New Year's party," she says. "He included a *Prophet* clipping of Granger, in her white dress and elegant styling, and suggested her." She laughs, and I wince at the sound. "I told him there was no universe in which Hermione Granger would consent to that kind of torture from me, but thank you. Then he let me know about her new position at Malfoy Consulting. And he reminded me of the needs she might have in the future..." outside of her employment."

She looks at me, eyes catching on my scowl.

"The decision was mine, Draco. Lucius only gave me a boost of confidence that if I asked, she might say yes. If you asked," she said, "she might say yes."

My throat is closing, trying to decide if I need to hit something or cry.

"You used her—"

"We're all using her," she says, shrugging. "That's what we do, Draco." She bites her lip, smearing her lipstick. "And I won't apologize for keeping in touch with your father. He's the only Malfoy who would talk to me, and he's the closest thing to a paternal guardian I ever had. He always treated me like family."

I look away, chewing on my cheek, sniffing, and feeling the icy chill of useless anger. "Because you're pure-blood, pure-bred, and flawlessly beautiful," I bite back, sneering at the qualities.

"What else is there?" she snarls.

I look back at her, and she's lifting a brow at me, asking me, a glistening sadness in her eyes that I haven't seen in years.

She steps down off the stairs, and comes to stand in front of me, smaller now. "He asked me to make her one of those three things," she whispers. "And I know you never needed all of that to see her as 'flawlessly beautiful...'" Pansy smiles welly at me. "But you dragged her into your world without even thinking of how difficult it would be for her. To be lacking in those three weapons."

She straightens my shirt collar, like we're on our way upstairs to a wintry Great Hall in our formal robes.

I swallow and say, "Lucius sent her to Madame Michele." I wait for her to scowl, to ask, to react at all.

"I know."

My eyes snap to her, rage building again.

She continues, "It was obvious. To me, at least." Her hands brush my shoulders, dropping to her sides. "She was such a *commoner* at school," she chuckles, "It was clear to me that she had been working with someone."

I step away, grinding my teeth, glowering at her sitting room.

"If you want her in your world, Draco, there are things she needs to learn," she hums next to me.

I close my eyes, thinking of the list.

"If she's willing to learn them, that says something too," Pansy says at my shoulder.

I turn my head to see her looking down at our feet.

"Why would you consent to that insane idea?" I ask. "I know how you feel about her. The Pansy I used to know would rather toss her business model in the rubbish than assist Hermione Granger's career or personal life in anyway."

She looks out the window. "People change, Draco." And then flatly: "I'm referring to *her*, of course. I'm as perfect as I've always been." I smile. "And it wasn't her I was helping." She looks

I find Mother in the new drawing room, glaring down at her book coolly. "I almost sent out a search party," she says, eyes on the page. I was supposed to be home for lunch. The Selwyns were coming over.

I lean on the doorframe, looking down at the new carpets that cover the spot where her blood is still etched into the stones.

"Tell me again about the day she went to see Lucius."

She closes her book and looks up at me. She considers, looking toward the new fireplace, and says, "He agreed to release your inheritance if he could meet her. I must admit that he already knew of your feelings for her. And I feel that agreeing under those circumstances was my mistake."

She looks at me, waiting for a reaction. I have none to give.

"Hermione went to see him... She was very nervous. And when she returned she was quite out of sorts."

I feel my teeth grind together. I nod for her to continue.

"Her first priority upon returning was making it clear to me that the two of you were not courting." I feel the sting, but I was prepared for it. "She was convinced you would not want that, though I am unsure if your father was the one who planted that idea..."

No. It was probably me. With my acid and ice. With talks of Auctions and virginities. With Katyas and Noelles.

Mother pauses. I narrow my eyes at her.

"And I asked her. Quite bluntly. And she said she had no interest in marrying you."

The words close my throat, but I've heard them before.

No interest in marrying me. No interest in becoming Father's idea of a Malfoy bride. Until the inheritance was tied to her. Then she stepped forward like a knight with a shield, facing down the fives.

"Have things changed?" she asks, softly.

She's eyeing me with a strange hope in her eyes, and I see a ballet of grandchildren spinning above her head.

"We, uh..." I clear my throat. "We have made some... progress."

Mother smiles an obnoxious grin, and I roll my eyes at her.

"I do hope you're being safe."

"Mother!" I sputter.

"Or, actually," she ponders, "do be *unsafe*, won't you? Just be engaged by the time the little one is born."

"Mother, that is quite enough out of you."

I press down, changing the angle a bit. She moans, and I thrust faster, snapping my hips into her, her body unable to wiggle against me while I push on her waist.

"Oh, Merlin, Granger..."

"Is it good?" she whispers.

"It's fucking perfect," I hiss, slamming my cock inside of her, feeling her clamp down on me with every thrust. "Can I go faster—"

"Please."

I drive into her. Hermione Granger, bent over a chair in a bookshop, with her denim jeans around her fucking knees.

I watch her fingers curl in the pillow, her head turning into the fabric.

"Turn your head," I say.

She waits a few thrusts before complying. She faces out, hair falling over her neck and cheek. I reach forward and move her curls, twisting them softly and feeling my cock pulse.

"Look at me."

She turns back, panting. And I have to close my eyes to keep from coming.

"Oh, god..." I hear.

When I open my eyes, her mouth is open in a silent scream, and her cunt grips me as I fuck into her. I can hardly get back inside like this, but I try to stay still for her as she gasps. Fuck I love you so much.

Her muscles start to release, and the warm wetness starts to flood between us, and I know she's not fully done but I can't wait—

I lean forward, gripping her curls in one hand, pressing her waist down with the other, and I fuck her with grunting gasps, cock sinking deep and barely leaving her heat before slamming forward again.

I look down at her arse one last time before I let go, and then I'm gazing into her eyes again as she breathes little sighs into the air, watching me come.

I tug at her hair, and squeeze at her skin, and stay buried inside of her for what feels like hours until I can breathe again. My legs tremor as I bend over, pressing kisses against her back, folding over on top of her to kiss her lips.

I feel her cunt clench me as I rest my weight on her, dipping my tongue into her mouth and smoothing my hand through her hair.

She's still in there. And she's mine.

~*~

I Apparate home, landing on the soft grass just beyond the gates of the Manor. I walk against the February wind, tugging my cloak tighter around myself. The gates admit me, and I pace my way across the path to the large front doors which open at my approach.

up at me. "You may remember my feelings for her, but you must have forgotten my feelings for you."

Her eyes shine up at me, and I feel a pressing weight behind my eyes. She threads her arm through my mine, turning to stare into the sitting room with me.

"There's still a small group of us who would do anything for you," she says. "Quite irritating really."

My eyes find the window, and I stare off, trying to figure out what I can contribute to this.

"Why did you never answer any of my letters?" she whispers. "You read them, and never wrote me back. Once a week I wrote to you, for fifteen months."

A bird lands on the branch outside. He shivers his wings.

"After the first few month in Azkaban, I stopped believing that I would be released. I didn't want you hoping for anything."

She huffs a small laugh. "Contrary to your ego, Draco Malfoy, I did not spend the past two years longing for you." I feel her flip her hair over her shoulder, posturing. "I've had a grand time, thank you very much." And then she adds, "I had a torrid affair with Theodore."

My brows pull together. "Theo? He's..."

"Yes, I know that now. Let's not discuss it."

She pulls her arm from me, turning to go fetch us tea as long as I'm visiting. I feel a grin tugging at me with this new information.

"Does Blaise know?" I call after her.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, please don't tell him."

She helps me by shimmying out of the denims, but I don't let her get them past her knees before pushing my hand into her knickers, slipping through her and searching for her clit. She gasps, and her hands search for something grab, landing on the back of the armchair. I swirl designs on her, slipping down to press inside of her, finding her perfectly wet and already squeezing me as my fingers slip inside. I groan against her ear.

"I want you to bend over this armchair," I hiss into her ear.

She tenses, breath catching.

And I say again, "And if you don't like it, we'll stop."

She nods, and I grip her knickers, pulling them down to her knees. She breathes heavily as I guide her slowly to lean over the arm of the chair. I pull the decorative pillow to rest on the seat, guiding her down to her elbows.

I pull back, looking down at her perky bum pressing up to me. I'm already leaking in my trousers.

I slide my hands along the skin of her back, rolling up her t-shirt, slipping over her arse. Her body is tense, but I massage circles into her cheeks. I hear a moan and I think it came from me.

I pop the last of my buttons and take my cock out of my trousers.

"What's... What's different about this?" she asks quickly, voice high. Probably wondering what my intentions are with her arse in the air.

"Nothing," I say. "It's the same as we've always done, just with you turned a different way."

Though, of course, as I say it I am stroking my cock, looking down at her arsehole.

"Alright," she whispers.

I reach between her legs and press my fingers into her again. "Just like this."

"Alright."

I push my cock between her legs, pressing forward, and she sighs into the pillow. I watch myself disappear inside of her and I mutter, "Fuck."

"What is it?" she says. This loss of control, loss of seeing everything, isn't really her cup of tea, I know.

"I just watched my cock slide into you, Granger," I whisper, pressing further. She gasps. "And I've been dreaming about this arse for years. Watching your hips all throughout school."

She squeaks when I push further, my hands gripping her hips tight.

I start a slow rhythm like this, watching as I enter her, feeling how tight she is like this. I ask her several times how it feels and she just responds with a breathy, "Good."

I move my hands to her waist, planted right on top of the arm of the chair, sliding my fingers along her skin, following the dip of her waist to her full hips. Her backside is so soft and full against my hipbones.

I look up at her, and she's grinning. "Mind if I take a look?" I say.

She nods. "Be my guest." And she stays there. Ready for me.

I need to learn a spell to disappear denims. I'm sure Blaise knows it.

I slip behind the counter, and slide into the space behind her, my hips cradling hers as my cock pushes against her arse. I bend over her, pressing my hot breath against her ear, and sliding my hand along her ribs.

"How strange. I could have sworn something back here was mine."

She laughs, and presses into me, like agreeing with me. Mine.

Oh, we better fuck in this bookshop, Granger.

I glide my hand higher, cupping her breast and feeling for her hard nipple. She gasps and I press forward, letting her feel my cock, starting a slow roll against her backside.

I lean forward to kiss her neck, and she turns her head and says, "I think we could find what you're looking for in the non-fiction section."

There's that fire in her eyes that always spells disaster for my self-control, and I smirk back her and say, "The customer service here is impeccable."

She straightens, pressing up against me, and takes my hand, leading me around the counter to the right, towards a walled-off non-fiction section. The windows are covered with book shelves, and if anyone wanted to look inside, they would be hard-pressed to see anything in the darkness.

And then she dims the lights down.

Oh, what a saucy girl.

She turns and wraps herself around me, pressing our chests together, and slamming us back into a bookshelf, and I almost laugh into her mouth at the reverse of my own fantasy.

She tilts her head up to me, moaning as my hands slither down her waist to grab at her arse – the same arse she'd just presented to me, like it belonged to me.

She slides her hands down my chest and grabs for my belt, and I breathe heavily against her mouth as she unbuckles me like we only have ten minutes in her office before lunch arrives.

My eyes slide over to a comfy armchair in the corner, and I pause her hands on my buttons. "Can we... Can I try something?" And if you don't like it, we can stop?"

She pants against my face, and says, "Okay." And I kiss her like a man dying of thirst because she trusts me. Because she doesn't hesitate with me. And she makes me feel like I'm going to be different than my father in that regard.

I drag my tongue through her mouth, drinking from her and memorizing her tongue against mine. When I pull away I grab her hands and take her to the chair. I spin her to face the arm, and my hands reach around her hips to work open her jeans. She slides her hands up and down my wrists.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty One



Sunday, February 20, 2000

When I get home from Italy, Mother is sitting with Rita Skeeter in our drawing room. I walk in just as the Quick-Quotes Quill is taking down my mother's recent Azkaban visitation dates. Rita is sitting on the edge of her chair, rocking slightly, but pressing her lips together in a firm line, as if opening her mouth would ruin this momentous occasion.

"Hello, Draco," Mother says when she's finished. Rita turns to me quickly, eyes glittering.

"My son and I have no comment," Mother finishes.

Rita snaps her jaw closed, and takes a deep breath. She collects her Quick-Quotes Quill from the air, and stands. "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Black, if you please, Rita."

Rita's eyes grow wider. She nods quickly to me as she heads for the fireplaces. I hear the flames burst.

"Well, that didn't take long," I say.

Mother sips her tea and stares at the new curtains. "It shouldn't be a shock to him. I told him this would happen if he interfered." She presses her knuckles to her lips, and I frown at her. "I saw her today. She's not much different, but there are small things, aren't there?"

She looks to me and I nod.

"It's not very noticeable, but it's there." She circles a finger around the rim of her teacup, and says, "She's coming to dinner on Saturday." Mother looks at me with lifted brows. "Do be discreet, Draco. At least pretend she's not staying the night."

I feel the blood rush to my cheeks, and I look over her shoulder and nod, escaping the room before she asks me something completely inappropriate like if we need a fertility potion slipped into her wine glass.

On Monday, the paper announces the divorce on the front page. Skeeter's done a wonderful job of keeping it intriguing but vague.

I stand at the front with Melody, holding a coffee cup when the lift doors open, and I can't help but wink at her when her eyes brighten at seeing me there.

She takes the cup with a lovely blush and I fall into step beside her on the way to her office.

"Senior staff meeting at ten, then we should meet this afternoon about the Golden Snidget campaign. After our lunch, of course."

She looks up at me and I let my eyes rove over her. Just the mention of our "lunches" has me wondering what her knickers look like today.

She looks nervously over my shoulder, and says, "Lunch. Yes. And what were you planning to order today?"

I smirk. This witch...

"I have a few ideas," I say. "But I'm open to suggestions."

Fuck, I think about bending her over her desk, sliding into her while looking down at her arse again. And I wonder what dirty little things she wants from me that she has yet to tell me. If I can pry them out of her.

She blushes down at the floor, and I take my cue to walk away before I do something to her here on the office floor.

"Er, Draco?" she calls me back and beckons me into her office. We stand just inside the door when she says, "I, er... I saw the papers this morning. I just wanted to make sure you were... alright."

"Excellent," I say. Strange that it would affect me at all.

She stammers her way through what she really means, which is a loose translation of "I hope you feel alright," and as she suggests that divorces can be difficult, I say, "On the contrary. It was probably one of the easiest decisions my mother has ever made."

"Good, excellent." She stutters over a mix of condolences and congratulations, and I wonder when she'll come to understand how the Malfoy family works. Will it take years? "I am shocked at Skeeter's gall though. It's quite private business, even if it is excellent gossip. I do feel sorry for your mother."

I shrug at her. "Don't. She was the one to give Skeeter the heads up." And I explain to her what Skeeter really means when she prints "They were not available for comment." I watch as her mind tries to absorb that kind of trickery. I can tell it's not easy for her.

In the meeting that morning, I introduce Cornelius Waterstone. Just as I felt when I brought her in for a second interview, I feel like Waterstone is someone the Wizengamot will not want to argue with.

Beautiful. Fashionable. Level headed.

She smiles softly, still speaking to the woman at the register.

Financially knowledgeable. Obedient. Trained in décor.

I watch her fingers flit with the ledger book.

Practiced dancer. Intelligent. Cool tempered.

And something worse twists itself around my head, some small idea voiced with an aristocratic hiss and a lifting sigh.

You can have your Mudblood. But I want ten weeks.

Perhaps... Perhaps there was truth there. I could have her. I could marry her, even. But he needed to ensure that she had the proper training to handle the job.

Don't botch the proposal, Draco. he'd said, joking.

She looks over at me again when the customer leaves, and she busies herself once she's seen I'm already looking back at her.

It wasn't that simple. There is always something else with Lucius Malfoy. I let go of any hope for my father, remember that only this morning he stabbed me with words he didn't need to use. Just to make me hurt.

I clear my mind, pushing Lucius behind a wall now, and bringing Hermione forward.

By the time the shop is closing down I'm thinking of all the different ways I can touch her again. We can go to hers or mine, and I can lap at her again, begging her to teach me about the house elf wars or some rubbish.

She's saying goodnight to the final customer, and I've come to stand at the stacks, waiting. Watching her as she squirms under my gaze. I don't hold back anything, sending my desires forward in ways I haven't been able to for five years.

She flips the sign to *Closed*, and turns to me with a smile.

"We're closed for today, Mr. Malfoy," she says. "Is there anything I can put on hold for you, for tomorrow?"

Shopkeeper roleplay? Whatever else are you hiding from me, Granger?

I move to lean on the counter, gravitating closer to her. "Are you quite sure there's nothing on reserve for me back there?"

"I can check." And she turns, leans forward, and those tight denims pulls so deliciously close to her skin as she wiggles her arse for me. What a vixen she is.

She says something, but all I'm focused on is the dip of her back under her shirt, the round cheeks pressing forwards to me. And I feel my cock harden when she turns her head to look back at me, just as if I had her bent over my desk.

We haven't discussed those positions. I didn't want to frighten her off with how badly I wanted to see her bent over, or bouncing on top of me, or on her hands and knees—

I'd seen it here before, browsing but never interacting with her. I hear it shuffle to the other side of the stack, and I watch as it pokes its head out again, jumping, and retreating.

I've never seen it buy anything.

I've never seen it communicate with anyone.

But it's kept its eye on her. And on me.

A thick sludging feeling pours over my chest as I watch it pull a book with a bony hand, waddling down another set of stacks.

Granger's busy with a customer. I close my book, placing it on my chair, and move to the stacks, sliding down the shelves until I'm just behind the lumpy creature.

I see it look through the gaps in the shelves and jump when it finds me gone from my chair. It spins to go on a search for me, and it finds me directly behind it, like some kind of horror story.

It lets out a startled "meep" sound, and I glare down at it with all the Lucius Malfoy I have left in me.

"Your service to my father is complete. Leave this store and never return. If I find you within one hundred meters of Hermione Granger again, I will eviscerate you slowly with all the Dark Magic I have in me. Is that clear?"

Its black eyes gape at me. Then it drops the book and scrambles to the exit.

I listen for the door opening, and Granger says a "Stay dry!" as the shuffle of flat feet tumbles out the door.

I release my shoulders, feeling relief and anxiety swirl together. I hear my father's snug voice.

I've been having her watched since the moment she left Hogwarts.

I don't remember how many times I've seen that hag here. It was inconsequential to me. But I'm suddenly positive that every visit I've paid to Cornerstone Books has been carefully documented. Even months ago, when I couldn't stay away from her, flirting over giftwrapping. And Lucius just asks me softly, *How are things progressing with you two?*

When he knew.
He'd known before her visit to Azkaban. Before the *list*.

I shake my head, trying to dispel some of the aches that trying to outthink my father create. I reshelf the dropped book, wondering if Lucius knew he couldn't control me any longer, so he went through her.

Graceful. Table manners.

I grab up a few more books with no intention of reading them.

Skilled in hosting. Witty. Charming. Social leader.

Moving back to my chair, I drop back, and the movement pulls her eyes to me, like she's been wondering where I'd got to.

I also need to announce the current state of finances in the meeting. Granger keeps her head down, and Mockridge keeps his gaze digging into me.

"I thought you had mentioned that these weekly installments were safe," Mockridge questions. "They were promised without conditions."

I face his displeased expression. "There were conditions after all."

I feel Granger shift next to me.

I hate announcing this on Waterstone's first day. I hate cutting our interns' hours. I hate that I asked Mother for a loan this morning, so that I could cut my own salary by seventy-five percent.

But more than all of this, I hate that her shoulders have curved in on themselves, like she's somehow failed the company. Like she's the problem.

She stays at the end of the meeting, creating blots in her parchment.

"Granger." Out with it.

"This isn't fair. Not to those who've lost their jobs," she bites out.

"They haven't been fired, Granger. Their hours have been cut."

She stands, a sudden determination. "We can push back the Golden Snidget project. And I'll look for ways to cut corners on the Werewolf budget so we can reallocate those funds—"

"We can't reallocate those funds," I stop her. "The donations were given with a specific understanding of what the funds would be used for."

"So mine is the only department that isn't going through budget cuts?" She's fuming, gesturing wildly. "How is *that* fair."

"Yours is the only department fully funded by fundraising, not by the inheritance," I explain.

I move closer to her to... calm her or take her hand. But we're in public with the door open. So, I just breathe her in.

She sparks and says, "But the *salary* for my department members is paid by the inheritance. Walter and me. You can cut my salary. Practically in half, really."

She's too bright. I look away from her, shaking my head. "No, Granger. We aren't cutting your salary."

"No, truly. The amount of money I make here is obscene," she whispers as I gather my things. "For February's pay, you can cut my salary, or even take all of it. No one needs to know." I'm about to stop this silly idea when she says, "Besides, with Pansy covering the costs of my wardrobe and without the classes burning a hole in my pocket, I'll have very few expenses."

Like a shard of ice pressed deep into my stomach. My fingers freeze and my breath huffs an incredulous sigh. "The expense for the classes was placed upon you?"

I watch as she shakes her head. "I wouldn't let him cover it. I refused his money."

That's... that's not good enough. That's absolutely... despicable, that's what it is. And Madame Michele allowed it? She knew where the money was coming from and she still—

"Draco." She appears in front of me, and I feel it fade. "Just for February. Cut my salary. The only person who will notice is Dorothea and I'm sure she won't say anything."

"No. That's not how we're going deal with this, Granger." I move to the door, thinking of how else to challenge our budget. "I got us all into this mess, so let me get us out."

I stalk to my office, and I'm not even surprised to find Blaise on the couch. I feel like telling him what's happened on that couch, but knowing him, he would just snuggle in further.

I shut the door, and he says, "What's going on?" Concern on his face.

I lean back on my door, closing my tired eyes. "He's sent her to Madame Michele." I look up at the ceiling. "Once a week since the New Year, she's had interior design lessons from Claude Dubois, dance with Truesdale, and hosting and etiquette with that awful witch Bernard." I sigh. "Every week the inheritance deposits into my accounts once she's completed her lessons."

I wait, unable to look at him. Waiting for him to say he noticed it already, like Pansy did. Waiting for his shrewd judgment to come in and ask if my pride is worth this financial duress. "So," he whispers, "he'll actually let her marry you. Wow."

I snap my head to him, feeling my neck crack. He's looking at the wall over my shoulder, mind turning. I wait.

"Why would she need all of that if she's not going to become Mistress of Malfoy Manor?"

His eyes flip to me, brows pulled together.

I stare at him. Similar thoughts floated to me on Saturday. But I had to shove them away.

"It's... pointless," I say. "She's not interested in that. She's been clear."

"She has?" Blaise lifts his brows. "How?"

"With my mother, she has been clear," I explain. He frowns. "Then why has she been seeing a Charms Mistress for eight weeks?"

I swallow. And look away from him. "It's... the right thing to do, she said." And before he can push any further I say, "I have cut off the classes, so the inheritance will be cut off as well." He looks at his hands and nods. "I'll write a few notes, see if we can move up some meetings. I'll tell my staff we have to buckle down." He runs his palm over his face. "Fuck, I hate this part. These... adult things."

He looks absolutely miserable. And I just can't hold it back any longer.

"Pansy slept with Theo last year."

His hand drops from his face, and he looks at me with an open mouth and wide eyes.

He blinks, and says, "Thank you. So much. That's the best thing I've heard all day." He stands swiftly and moves to my Floo. "I have to give her shit *right* now."

She goes back to work, and I find a few books, planting myself in a large chair with a view of the counter, and cast *Oculus Dolus*.

I spend an hour watching her. Watching the way she moves. It's still her. She still fumbles with quills and parchment, like she's trying to decide the quickest way to write down her thoughts. She still shifts her weight from one hip to the other – and I wonder if she's used cushioning charms on her feet; she really should use them if she's going to insist on standing for sixteen hours on Saturday and Sunday. She still sucks on the end of her quill, even without the blue sugar to tempt her. Her lips still pull tight on the end of the feather, cheeks straining, and eyes on the paperwork in front of her.

And most important in all this, she still watches me.

Still, she lifts her eyes and finds my location in a room. Still, she looks away too quickly, even though I'm not "looking back" at her. Still, she tilts her face to the counter and lets her lashes flutter up, thinking she's the sneakiest of spies while her eyes graze over me.

Watching me at the Ministry. Watching me at Hogwarts even. I never used to think she looked at me. Never thought she'd glanced at me when I wanted her to, but maybe it's been a dance for years, spinning to different partners and turning heads away from each other.

I want to ask her what she meant when she said, "I win." How long has she been watching me.

She grabs a few books and marches into the fiction section to reshelf them. The way she walks... It's not that different, is it?

She passes the hag that's been wandering for an hour or so, steering clear of me. She smiles brightly at it. The hag jumps and turns, waddling over to a different section.

I watch her eyes come to me again, resting on me while I pretend to read. She drinks in my hair and my face, sliding over my body in a way she really shouldn't do in a place of business, but then finally resting on the book in my lap, tilting her head to try to figure out what I'm reading.

Hermione Granger and books.

I release the charm on my eyes, and when she brings her gaze back to my face, making eye contact, she jolts and blushes, turning away. I feel a grin blossoming on my lips, and she looks back at me. She smiles back, like I've just asked her to dance.

Maybe I have.

And I decide not to use *Oculus Dolus* any longer. No need to deceive her of anything in the future.

The hag pokes its head around a book stack again as Granger walks back to the counter, a little sway to her hips. The hag looks directly at me and pulls back when it meets my eyes.

wife who would put up with me. Not even Mother can compare to this impossible list. And Father knows it.

"He said the only thing he could part with was pure-blood."

I feel a grin split my face.

He says I can have her, but only if she strips it all away to be someone un-her.

He says stay away from her, but do use her, son, if at all possible.

How are things progressing between you two?

She's so much more like this, don't you think? Much more like a Malfoy wife.

Pushing me into this, even as I try to crawl away.

I'm laughing. I'm cackling into an alleyway with half a Golden Girl about to cry.

"Why did you do this, Granger?"

It's barely a question because I know it's him. It's him who served her to me on a platter, a shell of her.

"I'll finish these next three weeks, Draco, and then you'll be done with him," she says. "You'll not owe him anything. You'll be rid of him."

"No, no." I rub my face, feeling my skin buzz with the rainstorm. "I'll never be rid of him.

He's got his hooks in you, now." I look at her and confess, "I'd seen it, but I ignored it. You're different. The way you drink your coffee is different. The way you walk. The way you dance." I touch her to remind myself that she's real, that she's still here. "You're changing. And now every time I see you lift your saucer with your cup, I'll think of him. Think of this. When you curtsy. When you shake hands."

She cries, this Pygmalion doll of mine.

"Why did you do this?" I whisper against her lips.

"It was the right thing to do," she says, painting across my skin.

There she is.

Her brown eyes flicker between mine, searching for justice and equality, fighting for herself, fighting for others, fighting for me.

Maybe she's still in there. I lean into her mouth, wondering if I can breathe her back to life.

~*~

She tells me she has to get back to Cornerstone, and everything besides the two of us comes back to me as I pull away from her lips.

We Apparate to Diagon Alley, and when we arrive in a downpour, I transfigure a large umbrella for us. She looks like she'll say goodbye when I open the door for her, but I just dry us both with a spell and say hello to Morfy. He grins at us with a secret smile that I remember from years ago, sitting high behind the counter.

At 11:58AM, Granger knocks on my office door, and I'm so glad I didn't start undressing early, because it's not Granger.

Cornelia Waterstone wants to chat about the Werewolf Policy. It's almost worth the expression on Granger's face when she enters my office, and realizes she needs to grab her notes.

Waterstone leaves us with fifteen minutes before Carrie comes back with lunch, and I'm already hard as I close the door on the tight-lipped woman.

I lay her out over my desk, and ask her to undress herself so I can get started, slipping inside of her and bunching her skirt up her thighs. When her fingers finally open her blouse, I dip down and lap her tits. She holds my head to her, and I thrust against her shallowly until she comes. As she's still squeezing me, I stand tall, hold her hips still, and fuck her quickly into her wood, listening to the desk scrape across the carpet with each snap of my hips. She holds onto my wrists, and tries to catch her breath as I tumble over, pouring into her.

We sit on the couch, eating lunch together, and one of these days I want to sit with her naked. Get Carrie to deliver lunch before we fuck and then just lock the door and watch her eat her tomatoes with her breasts bared to me. Maybe I'll eat her out while she eats her salad.

We talk work a bit, and it helps to center my mind on anything but fucking her again. She screamed so pretty for me today.

She's proposing ideas for the Golden Snidget Campaign, and I truly don't care much for it, but it's great publicity for us.

"I'm meeting with Viktor on Wednesday," she says. No, I really don't care for it. She continues, "We're going to lunch and I'll pitch the Golden Snidget campaign. Hopefully once he's on board we can get Skeeter and Mr. Lovegood to cover the project." She munches on her lettuce and says, "Does the magazine 'Seeker Weekly' do articles? Or just talk Quidditch rubbish?"

Quidditch Rubbish. She's remarkable.

"Yes, they have articles." I feel my lips smiling at her as she speaks, crunching, and pressing a napkin to her lips. I wonder if she's happy. If the sex relaxes her like it does for me. If just being near me makes her feel content, like for me.

I finish my sandwich and say, "Good news that Krum wants to be involved."

"Yes, he was very interested at the governor's ball."

I remember. Eyes on her chest. Hands on her body.

"Mm-hmm. I'm sure he was," I tease.

She pouts. "No, not like that."

"I'm sure just like that." My voice lilted and I see her bristle. "You can't honestly believe he's interested in the Golden Snidgets' welfare."

"He is," she snaps, and I almost laugh. "He is very interested in the Golden Snidgets, and I'll prove it to you when I come back from lunch with his full support."

She presses her lips together, peeved at me, and maybe I've changed my mind. Maybe I want to feed her the salad. Or a decadent dessert, lifting the spoon and watching as her lips part, licking it clean. Her eyes rolling back in her head at the pleasure of it.

"Sure, Granger," I say, looking back at my paper wrappings. "Try wearing a burlap sack this time instead, and we'll see where his true interests lie."

She glares at me, and I think yes, I want to feed her. Or lick something off her. Or dip her in something sweet. Make her bathe in it. Maybe soon.

"I hear you're having dinner with my mother on Saturday."

She looks up at me, caught. "Yes, that's right." She stabs a crouton. "Will you be there?"

Feeling lighter at the possibility of having her alone for a whole night, I grab the crouton, plucking it off her fork and crunching it. "Possibly." I wink at her.

She scowls, digging for the last crouton and munching it quickly before I can steal it. I smile as she closes her container and bends for the trash bag.

"Would you consider staying the night? After dinner?" I ask, and it wasn't supposed to be a difficult question, but the crouton sticks in my throat.

"At the Manor?" She blinks at me. "In your room?"

"Or Mippy's room," I quip. "Wherever you feel most at home."

"Would... would your mother be alright with that? Isn't it... improper?"

If she only knew...

I shrug and say, "She doesn't have to know." Her wide eyes almost look interested, excited and now that she's done eating I'm ready to tempt her again. I lean into her. "We'd have an entire wing of the Manor to ourselves." She shivers as I kiss her ear. I press against her jaw, smelling her neck, and then a soft kiss to her lips that has her eyes closing. "And if she catches, us I'll just tell her to have breakfast prepared in the morning too."

Again on her lips, because I can. Because she lets me.

She smiles and quips about sleeping in Mippy's room again, and I grin at her, promising her comfort.

I should slip this in, quickly, lightly. "Also, I'll be out of town on Friday. Personal trip."

I turn forward on the couch, and I wonder when I lost the ability to lie.

"Are you going back to New York?"

My lungs jump. And I look to her, but she's only curious. "No."

Her eyes flicker between mine, and then she does.
"He gave me a list of things. To work on."

I stare at her, waiting for more.

A list?

"For what?"

"To be..." she stutters, "to be seen with you. To be worthy of you."

In November? By that time, he'd made it quite clear that I was to stay away from her so why...

"You weren't even with the company yet," I say, looking down at the cloud-darkened stones. "Yes, but we were being pictured together so often," she says, lashes fluttering so pretty.

"And... and he knew about the Auction."

That fucking Auction.

I knew he told her. I knew it.

I wait for her to put me in my place. To spew into me the correct way to have handled this. To give me notes on my behaviors.

I wait.

She just looks at me with open, trusting eyes.

"He knew that you'd gone to Narcissa's mother." And now she does too. I wonder if she truly understands what it would have meant...

And then:

"He knew that you would have saved me."

Saved her. Funny to phrase it that way when I would have kept her locked away in her pretty little room. But her face is begging me for something, and she continues.

"He thought we were together. Had been for ages. I – I corrected him, of course," she says, looking away.

Yes, of course, please do correct him. We weren't together then and we hardly are now. Would she even classify it in such a way? With no hopes towards a future?

And then she's telling me she's seen the photographs of the alley way where I almost touched her, almost pinned her beneath me and ravaged her.

She breathes heavily, and there's rain on her cheeks. She tells me about the blackmail. The classes for the inheritance. But all I can think about is the beginning of all this.

"What was on the list?"

She speaks the words from memory, and I feel a weight crushing me with every item.

"Graceful, with table manners, skilled in hosting," she says, and I think of Mother, "witty, charming, social leader," and I think of Pansy. The list goes on, and as she stutters over "level headed" and "obedient" I try to imagine her that way. I try to think of a boring life with a boring

I grab her arms and hiss, "Nothing is more important than you." I hear the skies crack apart, like bricks falling from the sky.

She breathes against my face, seeing me. Seeing all of me.

I've said too much.

I've done too much.

Father at least had the sense to keep his cards close to the vest with her. I've just laid all mine out, hoping she'll bet on me.

I kiss her, just so she'll stop looking at me that way, like I'm some kind of gentleman. Some kind of hero in a story.

And I press my body into hers, like no gentleman would do. Like no student of Madame Michele's Charms and Manners School would be allowed to do.

Her hands are on my waist and my tongue tangles in her mouth.

So much I need to know. So much we need to discuss. But this part is mine. She's let me have this already, so I know I can have it.

Echoes call back to me, something vile as I claim her. The ways I've won her from them all piece together in my head.

We could have split her down the middle. In more ways than one!

I think it's time you found a new bookshop. Malfoy.

Do you think she'll never moan for you after she's screamed for me?

I pull my lips off her, hands pawing at every part of her and mouth sucking at her jaw.

"Did he ever touch you?"

"N-no. Nothing like that," she gasps, and I pull her hair until I have her neck.

"Have you been to see him since you went in November?"

My hips press into hers, begging to let me back inside.

"No, we've written – He's written letters. Threats."

I suck at her skin, marking the spot that always screams that she belongs to someone. That someone has kissed her and fucked her and wants her.

"Tell me about the letters. Tell me what he said to you."

I sink into her neck, and then she's pulling my face back, holding my head softly, looking into me with anxious eyes.

"I know what you're doing, Draco, and stop." She rubs her thumb across my cheek, calming me. "This... what we have is very special to me and you're turning it into something ugly."

She's right. I close my eyes and breathe in her scent. I press a soft apology against her lips, and ask her the question that has been slowly killing me for months.

"What did my father say to you in Azkaban?"

Please. Please, Hermione. Just answer it.

There's a strange strain in the thread between us, but she powers through, like I knew she would.

"What was in New York?"

I grind my teeth together, preparing for a difficult topic.

"New York was a mistake." I let it hang there, in the silence, deciding what to tell her about Queenie Goldstein. What to tell her about me. "There's a woman there." I bite my cheek and after a breath, I say, "She's a Legilimens."

I stare at my lap, but I can feel her eyes, her interest. Before she can ask I continue.

"I needed... I thought I needed her assistance..."

I finger the crumbs in my lap, wondering if she could just... not ask her next question.

"Assistance with what?"

But of course.

And what was it I was running from? What was it Queenie said to me?

Voldemort is gone, sugar. So, who are you protecting her from?

"I'm a very skilled Occlumens," I rush out. "Between Aunt Bella and Severus... I had some remarkable teachers." My skin itches. The carpets are interesting. "I've been compartmentalizing for years. Separating memories, thoughts, emotions..."

People. Entire humans can live in other boxes, Granger. "Severus used to help me. Used to poke around until I'd regrouped. Until there were resilient walls again..."

Until you were elsewhere. Until you were safe.

"But without him..." I choke on something in my throat. "Before going to New York, I had been slipping. For months. I couldn't get the walls in place. Couldn't separate." I press my hands into my pants, thinking of how she had invaded my entire body for those weeks. "Blaise has tried to help, but he's shit at Legilimency."

I laugh and it's forced.

"I thought I needed someone to... test me. To poke around until it was all regrouped." I need to wash my hair. I feel greasy. "So, I got in touch with someone in New York who is one of the greatest Legilimens of our time. I offered to pay her handsomely to meet with me, and set up a Portkey that night."

She's silent. And I wonder what she thinks she knows about me. If things are falling to place for her.

"Is that something she does for a living?" she asks. "Is there a profession in that?"

"No, no. She refused my money. Refused to meet with me, really," I recall. "I had to beg her."

She's a normal witch. A widow.

"Did it help?" she asks quietly. "Did you get what you wanted?"

I finally turn back to her. "No." I smile lightly, remembering how it had burned inside of me to hear she would quit. To know it wasn't enough. "I kissed you again, didn't I?" Her brain was working, but she managed to smile and say, "Actually, I kissed you."

She had, hadn't she? She'd broken the spell.

"Yes, you went and ruined everything, didn't you." I bring my hands to her cheeks, running my thumbs over her skin. "Thank Merlin she didn't let me pay her. What a waste that would have been."

She smiles and lets me kiss her. Our lips barely tasting each other's. Like we're new at this now. Like different people after this moment, this confession.

What would it feel like to make love to her like this. Open. No bricks or walls.

I tilt my head to hers, ready to find out, and she softly pushes me back. Her eyes are wary, but deep, like velvet. Blue velvet.

"Did you go to New York to forget about me?" she asks, ready for any answer. I fall into her eyes, like swimming in a velvet-lined jewelry box, storing all my questions and all my heartbeats into her eyes.

She blinks at me, and I lean in to press my soul to hers again.

~*~

Friday, February 24, 1995

"The fuck is this Task about?" Theo says, pulling his mittens on. "Will we get to watch Potter drown today?"

I push through the fifth and sixth years, making space for us in the stands. Pansy is suddenly by my side, even though I didn't remember walking with her. She laces our fingers together as we sit.

"I think they have to dive for something," she says. She leans her head against my shoulder. I sigh.

"I overheard some of the Ravenclaws talking," Daphne says, sitting down with Blaise in front of us. "Cho Chang went to see McGonagall last night and never came back to her dormitory. I think Diggory has to save her from the bottom of the lake."

I smirk. "Let's hope they both drown. Two Seekers out of the way. Oo! And Potter makes three!"

Goyle chuckles heavily.

Pansy says, "So, what? All of their girlfriends are down there? That's so chauvinistic."

Pansy learned a new word this month. She has been saying it as often as possible. Valentine's Day, in particular, is very chauvinistic.

What else is she keeping from me?

"Draco—"

"How long have you been plotting with my father," I snap, trying to make sense of all this.

Trying to figure out how...

What part of this relationship is even real.

It's not a relationship, really. She's allowing me to fuck her.

We're stopped at a crosswalk, and I feel her next to me.

I win.

She's never told me that she wanted me. Never said she has ached for me for as long as I've wanted her. She said, *I win.*

"You say it like we're working together," she says, hissing at me.

"Aren't you?"

The signal changes and I plow through the street, a vague memory of where the Apparition point is.

"What did he tell you?" she demands. "If he defines it as anything other than *blackmail* then he lied to you—"

"You're not the only one who had a deal with him, Granger. You shouldn't have gotten involved in this."

She's jogging to keep up with me, and I just want to get her alone. Just get us to a private place where it's just the two of us and I can force her to start from the beginning. To tell me everything.

She asks me how I found her, and I tell her about going to the teashop.

The way Madame Michele had eyed me, knowing exactly what I was there for. Like she expected me weeks ago.

Because I should have known. I chuckle. Because it was so simple.

"You're done with those classes," I bite out.

"What about the money, Draco? The next three installments?"

We're a block away from Apparating. And I feel the clouds condensing above us.

"I told him to shove them up his ass." Essentially.

"We need that money, Draco," she pleads. "Malfoy Consulting is barely afloat as it is. I need to keep going to those classes—"

The idea is so abhorrent to me, that she would continue playing his game. I grab her and pull her into an alley, pointing a finger in her face. "You are not to step foot in that tearoom again, do you hear me, Granger?"

She looks at me with wide eyes, and says, "The business is more important than some insane classes, Draco!"

"Somewhere downstairs."

"And you?" He steps toward me. "You're alright?"

"I'm walking, aren't I?" I look him over. He doesn't have a spot of dirt or blood on him. And if I checked his wand, not a spell would have been cast. A survivor. "What are you still doing here?" I ask again.

"Pansy tried to come back for you. I told her I'd go instead if she promised to stay put."

I squint my eyes at him. "And to find me, you've been waiting for me to pass through this corridor?"

"No," he says, pocketing his wand. "I've been following Hermione Granger. Knew you'd come along."

Ice in my chest. I blink at him, wondering if it's worth the effort. We'll all be dead soon, won't we? So, I nod at him. "Where did you last see her?"

He frowns at me.

"Leave with me, Draco."

"You found her?"

Daphne and Pansy are at the Hogwarts Express platform. We're going to wait for the dust to settle and figure out what to do—

"Tell me—"

"You can't do this—"

"Watch me."

He steps into me and grabs my shoulders. "She's not yours to keep safe!" He shakes me.

"Look around you, Draco! There are bigger things happening. *She* is not looking for *you!*"

I feel a crack forming between my eyes. Like a sliver in a dam, holding too much pressure for too long.

"If you're not going to help me—"

"She must have a cunt of gold if you really can't see—"

My shoulders snap, jerking out of his hands. He stumbles back and my wand is in his face before he rights himself.

He stares down the end of my wand.

"You've made promises to each other then?" he confirms for himself, nodding. "I'm sorry.

I didn't know."

I blink at him, my fingers tightening on my wand. "We've made no promises. We... There is no 'we.'"

He stares at me. "This isn't a game for you though? Not a bit of fun before settling down with Pansy?"

Something wet rolls down my face. I pray that it's blood. "No," I say. "This... hasn't been fun for me." I lower my wand. "It's one-sided. She's not looking for me."

He just nods. And I don't have to ask again.

"I saw her and Weasley moving toward the second floor girls' bathroom," he says. "I jerk my head as a goodbye. I take off down the hall.

"Draco."

I spin back for him.

"I have 10,000. Probably more if we sell the vineyard." He shrugs. "It's yours."

I swallow and nod at him. "If I don't find you at the end, tell Pansy you never saw me."

I spin on my heel before I can thank him or say something meaningful about our friendship or beg him to come with me.

~*~

Saturday, February 26, 2000

I stay well after midnight the next day in Australia.

I head to Sweet Tooth in the morning to post a notice that the shop is closed for a week, and before I leave I place a few protective enchantments to keep any unsavory characters away.

Monica locks herself in the bathroom when the memory of an eight-year-old breaking her wrist pops through the haze and swarms her mind unbidden, with no other memories of her daughter to accompany it.

Wendell sits next to the bathroom door, whispering through the wood, and Dr. Flanders and I take a break to make lunch.

We haven't introduced magic yet. So, we can't open the door.

Dr. Flanders says we should save any magic for when they have grasped the first ten years. Only introduce them to Hogwarts and wizardry when they chronologically were introduced to it.

It's brilliant, really. But I just want to make a fucking pot of tea. And I don't know what these knobs and dials are for on this oven.

I couldn't tell the British Ministry exactly when I'd be coming back, so I have to go to the Australian Ministry for a Portkey. It's almost dawn when I finally find the statue outside of the Opera House, and follow the stairs down into the hidden Ministry.

I land on the moors outside the Manor in a bright sunset, and the time change hits me like a Bludger. I stumble for a moment, and once I can tell the difference between the ground and the sky, I start the trek up the stone path to the Manor.

To Hermione.

But first... Pepper-Up Potion. And a wash.

Once I'm fully awake again, I wander to the library, like a kite being reeled in.

She's deep in the stacks, nose stuck in an old volume that looks like it will fall apart in her fingers.

Her hair is down. And her dress is smooth and light against her waist and hips.

I can see them in her, more clearly now. Her mother's eyes. Her father's chin. Monica's graceful movements with Wendell's jerky thoughts pulling his body in all directions.

It seems unfair that she hasn't seen them in two and a half years, and I made dinner for them hours ago.

She turns her long neck and finds me watching her. I smirk.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you it isn't polite to stare?" She grins back at me.

"She tried," I say. "But she also told me to enjoy the beautiful things in life, so I find it a very difficult contradiction."

She blushes, and I take a moment to drink her in.

Hermione Granger in the Malfoy library, radiantly happy.

"Interesting finds?"

"Mm-hmm. In fact, I'm almost positive that if I'd had access to the Malfoy library over the past ten years, Voldemort wouldn't have had a chance."

She smiles down at the book in her hands, and I gravitate closer to her. "Well, the next time a dark wizard comes along, I'll make sure you have everything you need. What are you reading now?"

I stand just behind her, looking down over her shoulder. And I can see a hint of her breasts in the dress. She's answering me, but I'm focused on the scent of her after so many days without her. Feels like months.

I brush her hair off her shoulder, steadyng myself on her hip. My cheek rests against hers. And I think we could read like this. Maybe in the bath or in the window seat. She could huff when she was done reading a page and had to wait for me to finish.

She shivers. And my hand rubs against her hip, now thinking of other things we could do in the bath or the window seat.

She mumbles something about the book. Something about research and the best way to do things. And I watch her fingers tighten on the book.

I wonder how much time we have before dinner. And then I realize I don't care.

I press my lips along her neck, and she leans back into me, tilting her head for me. I trail my fingers down her arms, slipping over her elbow. My eyes slide over the Table of Contents, and I flip to the next page for her.

"Why don't you read me the Preface?"

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty Two

Saturday, May 2, 1998

It's hot in this part of the castle. Like the energy leaving the bodies burns through the air before dissipating.

Several Death Eaters pass, yelling at me to follow, saying they've seen Potter come this way. I tell them I'm on my own mission.

If it's true.

I saw her hair whipping through the corridors as the students gathered in the Great Hall. I was close enough to see Weasley's freckles for a moment.

It was foolish of me to think that she wouldn't be here for this. For the end of it.

If Potter fails... I'll try to get to her first. Presuming she's not dead already. The thought digs into my side. I'll try to end up with her, try to keep her from entering the pool of people to be sold. I need to find her, keep her in sight. And if the Dark Lord drops Potter, I'll take her then. Steal her like a diamond necklace in the night.

I turn a hallway, look both ways to make sure it's empty, and start north.

"Draco."

I spin and Blaise steps out from a hidden place behind a statue. He holds his wand at an angle, like he's not going to trust me.

"What are you still doing here?" I ask. He left with Pansy and Daphne.

"Where are you going?" he asks instead.

"I'm on my own mission."

"Under whose orders?"

I stare at him. Is it worth it to lie? What if this is our last conversation? He nods at my silence, and says, "Where's Vin and Greg?"

Maybe I'll quiz her on it later with my tongue inside of her. She'd fucking *love* that. I'll give her House points and only let her come when she reaches one hundred.

She takes a deep breath and reads, her voice washing over me. I hold her waist, rubbing against her hipbones. She pauses, and I tell her to continue.

I sprinkle light kisses on her neck, and slide my hand up her ribs until I'm almost at her breast. She stutters, and stops whatever she was reading about the portraits at Beauxbatons.

"What did the portraits have to say, Granger?"

I watch her nipples tighten through her thin dress. I wonder if my voice turns her on like hers does to me.

A small sound presses through her throat, and she continues, "Um... 'tales of young Nicolas and his adventures at school. But some of them had seen him since. Some of them'"—I cup her left breast ignoring her aching nipple, and gather the fabric of her dress up her thigh—"Some of them had seen Nicolas Flamel and his w-wife as recently as 1798, putting the El-flamels at around four-hundred-years-old."

I'm under her dress, inching towards her knickers and she can't focus on the Flamels any longer. My fingers dance across her and she moans when I nip at her neck. I run my other hand over her breast, rolling her nipple over her dress.

"Four-hundred-years-old is very old, isn't it, Granger?" I prompt her. And when she agrees and gasps, I dip into her knickers and slide my fingers through her. Already soaked. Her neck is tilted open to me, and I see that my love bites have faded since I last saw her. I pluck at her nipple and sigh, "What else does it say," setting to work on marking her again.

"I—I can't, Draco. Please."

Neither can I. I slip a finger inside of her, shaking at how tight she still is. My cock twitches against her backside, and I pull her close as she leans back against me, head on my shoulder. I fuck her with one finger until she moans. My other hand slips under her dress, reaching across her chest to get inside her bra. My wrist twists until I can thumb at her clit.

"Oh, god. Draco."

I love the way she says that.

I slip another finger inside of her and she trembles. Her hips jerk, and she rubs against my cock, so tight against me I think I can feel myself slipping in between her cheeks.

Would she let me fuck her like this? Just pull her dress up and shove aside her knickers and then I'd be inside of her. I'll tell her it's just like at Cornerstone, just lean forward on the stacks there, Granger.

She drops the book, and her hands try to grab for something. My wrists, my neck. She's groaning so beautifully every time I push my fingers inside.

“Put your hands on the shelves,” I whisper against her jaw. And when she obeys a fever runs through my chest, shivering down to my cock.

She likes the way my fingers shift inside of her with it, and I like the way her arse pushes against me.

My hips push back, rubbing my cock just right. Even with my trousers still on I’m sure I’ll come soon.

If I get her off first, maybe she’ll let me just slip inside like this.

I look up to see her hands squeezing the wooden shelves, and I close my eyes, grunting, “Fuck.” Her hips push back, slamming herself onto my fingers. “I’ve wanted this... Wanted this every time I saw you in the Hogwarts library.”

Wanted her to want me as much as she wanted those books.

Her cunt contracts on my fingers, and she moans, “Please, Draco.”

I hold onto her hip with one hand, the other still inside of her, twisting on her clit and pulling her against me. She’s moving too fast. Fucking herself on me, teasing my cock with her perfect arse, and her perfect moans.

I can’t wait to be inside of her, so I hold her still as I thrust against her backside, thumbing her clit and watching her hands on the shelves.

I hear a crack, and I wonder if she’s broken the shelves. The thought is just enough to make me come. I feel the tipping point—

“Mippy is telling you that dinner is ready.”

My brain needs a few seconds to catch up, but my cock immediately knows what’s happened, backs off.

She’s stiff as a board, and I slip my fingers out of her, and say, “Thank you, Mippy. We’ll be there shortly.”

A crack as she disappears.

She laughs and I drop my sweating forehead onto her neck.

“Fuck.”

She cackles.

There must be a spell to keep House Elves from doing that. Someone must have thought of it.

She slips out of my grasp, and I steady myself on the shelf to my left. She turns and kisses me.

“Give me a moment,” I say.

She blinks at me and slides her hand down my chest. “Do you want me to...”

I grab her wrist and say, “No, I’m... I really don’t want to come with Mippy’s voice in my head.”

“Blonde,” she whispers, gazing at my hair. I stare at her, waiting for her to continue. Waiting for her to finish whatever thought she started.

“Draco Malfoy,” she says, like a prayer she used to recite as a child.

My heart beat stalls in my chest. My face tingles.

I watch as her hand reaches out and turns a lock of hair behind my ear.

“She used to talk about you. And your hair.”

I swallow. Something crosses her face, and her head rears back, fingers at her temples like a sudden migraine. I help her back to her bedroom where Wendell is sleeping.

In the morning, she calls me Drake again. And asks again if I know her daughter.

"I do," I say. "And I trust him."

She nods, lifting her brows.

Dr. Flanders gestures to me. This is the part where I'm supposed to exploit a flaw in the memory charm. But I found so few.

"Wendell," I say. "Where did you go to university?"

"I didn't." He stares at me. His answer is quicker now.

"Where did you meet Monica?" I ask.

"At a university," he responds. He looks down at his hands, lips parting. He stares at Monica, and she stares back. "Did I meet you at university?"

"I think so." She's squeezing my arm.

"Monica where did you go to university?" Dr. Flanders asks.

And he begins a series of questions designed to falter their thoughts. It's repetitive. And then, after the sixth time Wendell is asked where he went to university, he tells us he went to dentistry school.

Wendell and Monica stare at each other, the Confundus Charm starting to fade.

Dr. Flanders casts a calming spell over them. And I watch as he asks them about what they remember from the year 1979.

~*~

After eight hours, they remember they had a daughter.

It breaks Monica in half when she remembers giving birth, but nothing after that.

Wendell can remember Hermione as a toddler. A two-year-old with curls running into desks and toppling chairs.

I keep making coffee. Dr. Flanders told me that the first session needs to be productive, or else nothing will stick. So, we're up all night.

Dr. Flanders will stay in Australia for the next two weeks, sleeping in their guest room. At 5AM, the Wilkins move to their bedroom, finally allowed to sleep. Dr. Flanders takes the guest room. And I sleep on the couch.

I wake up at 7:30 to Monica Wilkins sitting on the coffee table, looking down on me.

"Who are you?" she asks.

The charms have worn off. And any distrust they would naturally have of this situation has seeped back into her.

I sit up slowly. "I'm a friend of your daughter's."

"Hermione," she confirms.

"Yes, Hermione."

She stares at me, eyes bloodshot. "Drake. Drake Mallory."

"I gave you a fake name, actually," I say, running a hand through my hair.

She giggles, and kisses my lips again.
When I finally make it to the dinner table, Mother gives me a disapproving eyebrow. And I glare back at her.

Probably forced the poor elf to interrupt.

Mippy can't make eye contact with me for the rest of dinner.

I count down the minutes before we're standing from the table, saying our goodbyes. I lead her through the entrance hall, and up the stairs, taking her hand. She stops a few times, and I remember she's never been up this way. I let her look out over the pond and the peacocks.

When we reach my door, I'm struck with a sudden fear. Is my room clean enough? When did Mippy last change the sheets? Have I hidden away anything I don't want her to see?

I look down at her, bracing myself before opening the door for her.

She steps inside, looks around briefly, and laughs.

I frown. "What?"

She smiles at me and says, "It's just all very predictable. I love it."

I look around as she steps inside, and realize that yes, the green and silver were maybe a bit too childish.

She wanders, and I trail close behind her, watching her face, watching her fingers. They mark the things she's interested in. She looks carefully at my bookcase, and I knew there was something I wanted to clean up for her. I should have slipped in more nonfiction and biographies and theoretical magic.

She smiles at my books, and I wonder if she's teasing me.
When she peers into the bathroom suite, her eyes sparkle, and I wonder about that bath...
She finds my closet, and thumbs through my cloaks and trousers while I lean in the doorway.

"We need to get you into some oranges and pinks." She winks.

She teases me, but maybe it's a joke I'm in on.

She moves to the drawers, and it hits me that, yes, there was something I needed to hide. The knickers from our first time could be explained maybe. Even the *Prophet* pictures could be shrugged off. But the pictures of us in the alley that Father's spies took would be harder to justify.

She looks to me and I must be incredibly open for her to read in my face that she needs to step away from the drawers.
She presses herself against me, hands sliding up and into my hair. She kisses me and I pull her close. She slips into my mouth and I slip down to grab her backside.
"I like your bedroom, Draco." Reassuring me. And it's such a relief that she can read me. That I don't need these walls. That she and I could possibly understand each other with our eyes for the next forever.

I kiss her, smiling, but she pulls back and looks down at her shoes.

"I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, really," I say, thinking of all the surprises I have in store for her once we get on the mattress. How many hours I'll spend on her.

"Yes, I think... I think you'll like it."

I smile. You silly witch. Of course, I will.

"When do I get my surprise?" I say, squeezing at her.

"You'll need to, um... give me some space," she mumbles, and I smile and release her. I move to the bed, sitting on the edge.

She unzips her dress, and I already like my surprise.

I watch as the shoulders drop and reveal a green bra. Slytherin green.

I feel my throat dry as the dress drops to the floor. Green knickers too.

These are new. These are just for me. I know Hermione Granger would never in her life

purposefully buy green underthings for herself.

She looks nervous, like she's unsure I like her in this. So, I stand and take charge. "Get on the bed."

She smiles, proud of herself, biting her lip as she passes me, and my eyes drop to backside to find... very little.

These Muggles. They know what they're doing.

Her cheeks are perfectly framed with just a scrap of green fabric disappearing between them. The witch literally makes my knees weak as I grab for the bedpost.

She crawls across my bed, her arse in the air, long legs dragging along the comforter. I watch the muscles in her thighs, the dip of the knickers against her cunt, the cheeks that I want to bite into.

She stops in the center of the bed. "Like this?"

I look up and she's turned over her shoulder, and I know I have to have her on all fours in my bed one day, turning her head to watch me as I fuck her.

"Lay down," I tell her. And she obeys. And I wonder if one day she'll let me tell her exactly what to do. If she'd give me one night of pulling her wrists above her head and giving her instructions to obey.

She presses her knees together as I take my things off. I hesitate with my trousers, and decide to keep them on for now.

I crawl up to her, kissing her knees as she watches me. They fall open and I kiss up to her knickers. Fuck. I want to fuck her with these on.

I kiss her over them. And her head falls back. My lips press against her, promising things to her, and I drag my tongue over the green lace, pressing hard against her clit.

Sweet Tooth closes at 7PM. So, at 8AM in the U.K., Dr. Flanders and I spin away on a Portkey.

I meet Wendell and Monica at Sweet Tooth as they're closing. They drive me back to their little house just outside of Sydney, and I set a tracking spell on my wand so Dr. Flanders can follow my location.

We have dinner.

I ask them if they have any children, and Monica replies that they'd always wanted children, but it just never happened for them.

I ask where they went to university, and something flickers in Wendell's face, like he couldn't remember for a moment. And then abruptly responds that he hadn't.

I ask how long they've been baking, and together they respond, "Twenty-five years."

She was thorough. I get through every question Dr. Flanders gave me, and they never respond with, "Hm, I don't quite remember."

This would take a while. Dr. Flanders warned me. But this was deep.

After dinner, a knock on their front door. Wendell and Monica frown at each other, excusing themselves. They hadn't expected company. I slip my wand into my robe sleeve.

"Hello, how can we help you?" Wendell says. And I wonder if that's how he would have opened the door for Yaxley. Or if she'd taken away a certain amount of shrewd carefulness as well.

I stand from the table.

Dr. Flanders casts a *Confrundus Charm* on Wendell, and I hit Monica in the back with another. It feels dirty, like a *Crucio*.

Wendell stumbles a little, blinking. And Monica leans against a door frame.

"Hello, Wendell," Dr. Flanders says. "My name is Henry."

Wendell blinks slowly. "Hello."

"May I come in?" Henry smiles.

"Yes, please." Monica gestures and she falls a bit. I grab her arm, remembering her daughter slipping in an alleyway, drugged and dizzy. I swallow my bile and remind myself that this is a proven process.

Wendell and Monica sit together on the couch, blinking slowly at Dr. Flanders.

I sit next to Monica. She still holds my arm.

"Wendell, Monica," Dr. Flanders begins. "My name is Henry. I'm a doctor. You were in an accident two and a half years ago. And I'm here to help you remember things you've forgotten."

Wendell's head tilts slowly. "An accident?"

"Of sorts," Dr. Flanders smiles.

Monica's head turns to me. "Do you know him?" she asks me slowly.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Malfoy?" she hums.

She grins at me, like her mother. Only her smile is teasing me. Like I have nothing to worry about. Like it's commonplace for us to kiss others in the paper.

And it is.

I look down again instead of watching her self-satisfied smirk. I hear her move close to me. And then the paper disappears and her lips are on mine. Slow and sweet.

And I can't stop my arm from twining around her, like a vine, curling into place on the stones. She opens her mouth under my lips, pressing into me, her stomach against mine. I hold her face, tasting her slowly, beckoning her back to me.

She whispers into my mouth, "I like our flame better."

And that's all I need to hear really. She hasn't denied anything. But she's made it clear it doesn't matter.

I feel a smile tugging at my cheeks, and I look over her shoulder. "I have a meeting in five minutes, or else I'd offer to pound you into this desk."

"Hmm," she breathes. "That's a shame." And then she reaches behind me for her coffee cup, pressing her torso into line with mine. Her breasts firm on my chest.

I think of how long it's been since I've touched her skin, since we've come together, since her body has trembled in my arms.

I look down at her smirk. At her intelligent eyes.

Scheming really.

I remember my scan of the financials that morning.

"This week's installment of the inheritance transferred yesterday. It's usually on Tuesday evenings, but it was yesterday, at 8AM." I search her wary eyes. "You don't know anything about that, though, do you Granger?"

She sips her coffee slowly, smile tight. And I remember how exhausted she was yesterday. Like she'd had a full day before coming into the office. And I know it's a lie when she says, "Maybe your father wants to give it to you after all?"

And wonder if I'd rather have honesty or loyalty. Because she's a liar and a cheat when it comes to this inheritance. And I think I can only have one.

"Maybe." I brush her hair over her ear, like her mother does.

I kiss her cheek, then her other, imitating Viktor Krum's clumsy movements. And she's smiling at the joke when I press against her lips again.

I slip away from her, smiling at her smile, and go to greet Dr. Flanders at the elevator.

We sit and chat for a few hours about how tomorrow will go.

~*

"Fuck... Draco."

And maybe making her talk about the Giant Squid was the wrong thing. If she curses while I eat her out, that's worth everything.

"Say it again."

She says my name, and while I love it, I wait for her to say "fuck" again.

I smile and kiss her cunt. She moans and says, "Oh, fuck."

A chorus of fucks when I pull her knickers aside and lap at her. I twitch in my trousers. She grabs at my hair, and I twist my arm under her thigh, pressing her open. She tastes just as perfect as before.

She bucks against me and my tongue slides further inside of her.

"Oh, fuck, Draco."

I move to her clit, pressing quick firm strokes, and the noises she keens ring in my ears. She pulls my face into her, jerking her hips against me, and my own hips shift against the mattress, searching for something warm and wet.

She releases my head, and I suck in air, watching her fingers twist in the comforter.

I want to feel her come. I want to memorize the way her muscles grip me.

"Let me know when you're close."

I dip my head back to her, and she watches me for as long as she can before her head falls back. Her hips jump at me again, and I push her thighs down.

"I think... I think I'm... Draco."

I look up at her and she's got her hands on her breasts, rubbing herself. That fucking green bra.

I groan and it shakes her. "Fuck," she grunts.

Merlin, I love that.

Two of my fingers slide inside of her, opening her, and she sighs for more. I latch onto her clit and suck.

Her thighs try to close on my head. Her walls flutter around my fingers, and then clench as she cries out.

I work her down, slow pumping of my fingers, light lapping of my tongue.

When she opens her eyes again, she looks down and says, "Fuck."

Vixen.

I kiss up her stomach, kissing her breasts through the bra, but I stop when I reach for her lips.

Pansy hated this. She made me wipe my mouth or even brush my teeth before I could kiss her again.

"Can I kiss you like this?"

I watch her hesitate, and when she agrees, I know she's unsure so I smile and wipe my mouth before kissing her skin again. My body leans heavily on her, my hips pressing into her. She reaches for my buckle, and I just can't believe she's mine.

Then she rolls us over, and I laugh at our elbows and knees. She kisses my mouth and I press my tongue to hers, wondering if she tastes herself.

She kisses down my neck and chest, pausing over my nipples, testing to see if I like it. I grin at her and she frowns, like she's trying to find the right spell.

Her eyes flicker back to mine, wide and questioning as she kisses my stomach, and I'm trying to figure out what it is she's doing when her tongue slides against my abdomen.

She couldn't...

Air leaves me. I watch her as she continues lower.

She... She wouldn't want to.

She blinks up at me and her hands move to my buttons, lips inching below my bellybutton. I jump up, grabbing her wrists.

"You don't have to." My voice is hoarse from swallowing her down, and I wonder if she thinks we need to be even. That's not...

"You don't want me to?" She's confused, asking me to clarify why I wouldn't want her mouth on me.

And I have no fucking clue why I wouldn't. Or how I could explain to her how badly I want it. So badly that I can't guarantee I wouldn't hurt her. That I wouldn't thrust into her throat and pour into her, fistling her hair so she couldn't move.

The way I want it isn't the way she should do the first time.

I've said nothing, so she kisses my stomach again, and continues to unbutton me. I fall back and stare at my ceiling as she slides my trousers down, and I try not to think of how many times I've stared up at this ceiling thinking of her lips around my cock.

I feel my pulse between my legs, and I press my eyes together, prepared to hold back, prepared to keep my hands to myself.

When she hasn't touched me, I open my eyes to see her staring down at the bulge in my trunk, like waiting for it to reveal its true intentions.

I sit up again, hands on her shoulders. "We don't— There's so many things I want to do tonight. Every night. We can try that later."

She nods, visibly relieved, blushing at her failure. I kiss her deeply, convincing her that I want her. I think of something else, something she can accomplish.

Something we can utilize this bed for.

"Can we do something else instead?" I ask, and she nods.

Wendell bends and plucks a piece of dark chocolate from the glass. "For your heart. On the house." He smiles at me as he places the paper-wrapped piece on the counter. "They say chocolate keeps the darkness away."

I stare at him. Wondering if that's something she told them. If they knew anything about Dementors before.

"Thank you," I choke out. "I've... I've heard that too."

"How long are you in Sydney?" she asks, and she brushes her hair out of her eyes like her daughter does.

"Just until Saturday morning," I say. "I have a few tours scheduled today, and then tomorrow I'm going to just try to eat my way through Sydney." I laugh. "Do you have any recommendations for a party of one?"

I flash Monica a grin, and she blinks. And just as I planned, she says, "You can come to ours." She turns to Wendell. "For dinner."

My mouth opens, and I start to decline. Wendell says, "Absolutely. We'd love to have a fellow Brit over. We need an update on the weather. Like, has it ever not rained?"

He grins at me. And I spy two large front teeth.

I smile back at them. I buy a pound of chocolate. I ask for a good breakfast spot. I ask Monica about the book I see peeking out from under the register, and watch as she brightens and tells me the plot of the murder-mystery novel. I wave goodbye to them. And head back to the transportation point, pulling another Portkey.

~*

Thursday, February 24, 2000

OLD FLAMES BURN BRIGHTER

By Rita Skeeter

I look over the picture of Krum's lips on hers. It feels like it's been days since he came to the office, but it was yesterday. It's been days for me.

I watch as he leans in again, kissing each cheek and then once on her lips.

She puckers for him. I swear I can see it.

I hear the lift ding. I hear heels on the carpets. I hear the office door click closed.

"Old Flames Burn Brighter."

I fold the paper down and watch her jump to see me leaning on her desk. It was very difficult finding bricks this morning. They crumbled and cracked in my haste to bury her.

And now that she's here, I struggle between falling to my knees and begging her to stay with me, and burning the building to the ground.

Just the order to do it in, really.

Merlin, her mother is beautiful. Some kind of quiet grace that would never stand out against my mother or her friends, but a simple, domestic beauty. Her father looks a bit too much like Weasley for my taste. He's gangly and tall and his features have freckled in the Australia sun.

At least I had the decency to fall for someone the physical polar-opposite of my mother, unlike some Oedipal-scar-headed sods I know...

I turn through a few storefronts until five past the hour. I take deep breath and make a show of looking to see if they're open.

When I open the door, she's already smiling at me from behind the counter. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Miss," I say, looking around. "Are you open? I don't mean to intrude—"

"Yes, yes, we are!" She says, pulling candies and brownies from the drawers below. "Miss," she hums under her breath, chuckling at my compliment.

"And you're a sweets shop?" I ask.

Mr. Wilkins appears from the back room, an apron on his waist and flour on his hands already.

"Yes," he says with a grin. "Sweet Tooth. My, are you a Brit?"

"I am," I say with an open grin. "It sounds like you are, too."

"Where are you from?" he asks, picking up a towel to clean his hands, something methodical about it. Like he's used to cleaning his hands quickly and fully.

"Wiltshire," I say. "And you?"

"Hampstead," he says. "We moved down here about two years ago." And then he leans across the counter, holding his hand out. "Wendell Wilkins."

I stare at his hand, and spend half a second dizzy with the lie. With the disappointment that he finds me acceptable. That he would even like me. And it wasn't actually me.

"Drake Mallory," I say. Dr. Flanders said to keep everything close enough with the hope of a trigger.

"This is my wife, Monica."

I shake her hand. Skin soft.

"What brings you down here, Drake?" Monica asks me, opening the register and starting the daily count.

"It's my honeymoon," I say.

"Oh, how lovely!"

"But I'm alone, unfortunately." I grimace.

"Oh," Monica stops. "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

I shrug. "It's alright. I thought I would take the trip regardless. I've never been down under."

I take off my trousers and trunks fully, and watch as her eyes jump to my cock, as if imagining how blow jobs actually work.

I'll teach you one day, love.

We take her knickers and heels off, but once she reaches for her bra I stop her. "No, I never want you to take that off."

She smiles. And I lay on top of her, bringing her legs around me before spinning us until she's on top.

"Can we try like this?" I ask through her wild curls falling over us.

She sits up, looking confused. "I... don't know how to..."

"Let's figure it out."

I help her sit over me, and guide myself into her. She closes her eyes to concentrate on taking me, and I watch my cock slip inside of her.

Oh, Merlin.

Her in that green bra, sinking down me. Of all the fantasies I've had in this bed, I don't think that was imagined.

I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting to bottom out inside of her as her walls clench around me.

Of all the fantasies I've had in this bed, coming after two seconds was not imagined either.

She starts to move, and I have to watch. She lifts up, trying to find a good way to do this, and I almost help her but then she's flipping her hair over her shoulder and I definitely remember that part from my fantasies.

I grab her hips, and just lay back and watch her figure it out. Watch Hermione Granger solve a problem.

It's fascinating and exhilarating.

I reach up for her breast when she gets the hang of it, and she leans down on me, changing the angle. She bucks against me, and I take a moment to breathe.

She continues with that thought, jerking her hips into mine, and I'm groaning as I rub at her tits and let her fuck me.

She falls to her elbows, hips moving in a quick pace, her hair everywhere. And I find I don't have to help her at all.

I hold her hips as she searches for her own pleasure, using me. Her face is open and lips panting air.

She rutts against me, little moans pouring out of her, and I let her fuck me, just like I've always imagined. Taking control and knowing exactly what to do.

She goes faster, fucking herself on my cock. And my hips jump, meeting hers.

"Granger, yes," I whine. "Oh, fuck yes."

I hold her hip and bring my other hand to her clit. She gasps, and I continue to press up into her. Her thighs open wider, and she drops lower, moaning. I rub at her clit, feeling her flutter.

She grabs my face and kisses me, her curls in my mouth as we press our tongues together. Her hips keep snapping in small movements, searching for her climax.

She pulls up tall, and I get to watch her run her hand through her hair, panting hard in a green bra.

I get to pretend it's the Slytherin dormitories, and she's snuck in to fuck me.

She rolls her hips, bringing her hands to her breasts.

Goddess. She's so powerful like this. I'm just a side note in this story. She rides me, beginning to bounce on me, her tits jiggling, her thighs trembling. And I grab her hips and do my best to keep up. Try to touch her. Try to fuck her.

But she barely needs me as her hips slam down on me, using me to get off, trusting me to do the same.

Her cunt contracts, and her jaw drops open in a silent scream. She can't move as her body bends in bliss.

I roll us, feeling her walls holding me, and then I'm fucking her into the mattress, my face in her hair, her thighs around my hips.

"Fucking fuck," I groan into her neck, my hips pounding her, and it's so much better than my desk at work. Her cunt flutters, still going, and I don't want it to stop for her. I'll keep this pace forever if it means she's still coming.

Then her hands run into my hair, fingers gripping me as she yells out, honey dripping out of her between us, and I bite her neck to keep from screaming. *She* screams. And I'm grunting something into her, my hips fucking her, snapping deep. I feel her clamp down on me, and I come with a yell, her walls pulling at me in waves.

It feels like it lasts forever, pouring into her, breathing air from her. She moans into my ear and scratches at my back, and it feels like she comes again.

"I can't... oh, my god. I can't breathe."

I pull back and watch as she pants, staring into my eyes. Her walls pull at me and her eyelids flutter. She's beautiful and blissed and breathless.

She moans for me to come back to her when I slide out. I chuckle, and kiss at her chest, and whisper into her skin, "You're the most perfect thing in the world."

I turn us over, laying on my back with her in my arms. She rests for a moment, and then tugs her bra off, tossing it away. She presses her naked body along mine, throwing her leg over my thigh and dropping her head onto my chest.

"I'm coming back," she says. "For the bed."

"Just the bed?"

Krum appears and butchers her name like he always does, and then turns to me with a "Hello, Malfoy."

His face is tight. Which is wonderful. It means he knows I stand in the way.

"Krum," I say, shaking his hand. "We're so glad to have your support."

"Yes," Krum mumbles. "Anything for Harmony."

He takes her hand and kisses her knuckles.

Krum has gotten more skin contact from her in the past hour than I have in two days. And it boils me. He sends me a raised brow as his lips pull away.

Oh, wonderful. Another name to add to my kill list.

She walks him downstairs. I wait for her to return, fumbling through mail.

The lift opens and she tries to dodge me.

"I don't like your Bulgarian," I say.

I look to her, and she her jaw opens and her eyes narrow.

"I had to put up with yours. I lived," she says. And flounces off to her office.

I crack my neck, and drum my fingers on Melody's counter for a moment before taking a walk around the floor.

Touché, darling.

~*~

I have to admit. Denims are comfortable.

I walked into a Muggle shop in London, flashed a smile at the salesgirl, and had her dress me for a vacation.

Thankfully the store is on the higher end, so there are no palm trees on my buttoned shirt. I have her remove the tags, and walk back to the Apparition point in my new jeans. Once the Muggle-Repelling Charm washes over me, I reach into my bag for my "props" and grab the seashell Portkey at 8:29PM, and wait.

A minute later I'm tugged through space with salt on my tongue, arriving in an alley in bright sunlight with a view of some strange structure that is oddly beautiful. I look down at my tourist's map, and see "Sydney Opera House."

Lovely. I'll have to pick up a brochure.

I spend a few hours walking in the summer air (finding a place for espresso too) and bringing this Muggle camera to my face like I see other Muggles do. They are able to make it flash, but I haven't the foggiest how to do that. Must be professionals.

Just before nine, I wander over to a small storefront, just in time to see a woman with hair the color of brown sugar and a man with wavy curls approaching with the keys to unlock. They're chattering about something he read in the newspaper. She's rolling her eyes at him.

I smile.

I smile at her. "Rough night?"

"Yes."

She takes the coffee from me, and a low hum sings through me when my hand presses against her back as we walk to her office.

I tell her my plan for getting rid of Waterstone: a meeting on the Muggle-born Integration Program today, which does not need her expertise.

She hesitates. "I have the lunch meeting with Viktor today, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Viktor." Lovely.

"Maybe tomorrow?" she asks.

Dr. Flanders is coming in tomorrow...

"I have a meeting tomorrow at lunch. And then I'm out of town on Friday." I scowl at her door. "Are you free tomorrow night?"

And the surprised look she gives reminds me that we don't see each other outside the office or bookstores. This weekend is the first time.

Would she want to go to dinner with me? Is it too public for what we are? Maybe I could take her someplace no one will see us. Nepal. Or Antarctica.

"Er... I guess so," she says, and then changes her mind. "I mean, er, no. I'm not, actually. But I am free tonight."

Fuck.

"Tonight is no good for me." I twist my lips. "I'll figure something out."

I want to lean into her, just press my lips lightly to her skin. But I settle for tapping a finger on her hip, the place I like to press bruises into when she won't stop squirming under me. She licks her lips as I walk away.

Kelsey, Mockridge's associate, grins at me as I walk past.

"Mind your own business, Miss Perkins," I hum.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy," she chuckles.

After lunch, I hear a commotion on the floor, and I stick my head out to find Viktor Krum holding court with my staff. Wentworth and Walter have sucked him into a Quidditch discussion, and Granger stands to the side, looking at her mail. I slide up next to her.

"How was your date?" I whisper.

She grins, ignoring my jab. "Excellent. He'll be joining us next week for the media coverage. And he's very interested in the project, thank you very much. I didn't have to show him my tits or anything."

Oh, she hilarious. A fucking comedian.

"Great news, Granger," I hiss.

"And your mother, of course. The bed. And your mother."

"And the library."

"And the library. The bed, your mother, and the library."

I smile at the ceiling.

I never imagined this part. Never fantasized about her staying the night.

I trail my fingers up her arm, rounding her shoulder and back down, steering clear of the white scars on her forearm spelling a word I don't use any more. "My mother was very glad to have you over."

She hums, "I'm very glad to be friends with her again. I missed her."

I swallow, thinking of her without a mother for so long. And mine instructed to stay away. I confess, "That was my fault, I'm afraid. I told her to stay away from you. After your visit to Azkaban. After she miscalculated her control over my father." I feel her stiffen in my arms. "I'm sorry. I told her not to contact you again."

"Oh," she says. "I'm actually quite glad to hear that. She's the closest thing I feel I have to a mother. So, I'm glad to hear she hadn't given up on me."

Another stab to my chest. I hold her closer. "I'm sorry." She kisses my arm, accepting my apology. But I can't think of anything but Monica Wilkins sobbing in the bathroom, thinking there was a girl out there who needed her. "Have you ever gone down to Australia?"

"To... to see my parents?" I nod. "No. No, I don't... I don't really think I'd want to see them if they didn't remember me. If I had to pretend to be someone else."

I swallow, praying that Dr. Flanders has made progress. I slide my fingers across her arm, lulling her to sleep. "Have you looked into counter-curses?"

"A little bit," she says. "There's not been any success with reversing memory charms that deep. Removing an event is easy. You can recover it over time. But removing a person... It's too many events."

Exactly. Exactly as Dr. Flanders described. It seemed she had just never taken the next step to speak to a specialist. Probably too afraid of failure.

A calm happiness pours over me, suddenly very proud that I've done this for her. The beginning steps she couldn't take, I took for her.

"I'm sorry you had to do that." I don't elaborate.

"I know." She's drifting off to sleep, but I have to finish. I have to get it out. My hand strokes down her arm as I say, "And I'm sorry I was on that mission. The one at your house."

"It's fine," she mumbles.

Sweet relief burns over me. I shouldn't have apologized while she was asleep, but I had to. I part my lips, about to confess. To say: *I was there to save you. I was there to save them.*

"You wouldn't have hurt them," she hums. "I saw it on your face."

I guess that's enough. That she knows deep down that I wouldn't have hurt them.

She tumbles into sleep. And I stare at the ceiling, running my fingers over her arm.

I listen to her breathe.

I feel her air across my skin.

I frown at the ceiling.

You wouldn't have hurt them. I saw it on your face.

Was she there? My chest tightens. Was she that close to danger that day?

Under Potter's Invisibility Cloak maybe?

No. Greyback would have scented them.

I almost rustle her to ask. To clarify.

But she was confused. She had to ask me why my blood was on her walls. She saw something

on my face that day?

My eyes dance over my canopy curtains, wisping down from the tall bedposts. Wisping like memories.

My skin hardens. A chill running across the planes, tingling my face, tightening my toes. The muscles in my throat solidify, like choking on poured concrete.

It was impossible.

I saw it on your face.

I think back to the way I ran for her, desperate. The way I blasted open her bedroom door, searching every inch of the space for signs of her. The weight of the marble in my pocket, ready to take us away.

I saw it on your face.

I drag in a breath through a closed airway. The weight of her is too heavy on me. I peel myself from her, looking anywhere but the body in bed as I find my boxers.

It wouldn't be the first time she and Potter broke into the Ministry.

There's heat behind my eyes, sprouting forward into a pinch. A flush on my skin of embarrassment.

There was a time when she stopped asking me about that day. When it seemed like she dropped it. And there was a turning point where she wanted me again.

Where was it?

Something to do with werewolves.

Anything you need.

Something slaps the back of my head. I turn to glare and Marcus is grinning at me with his twisted teeth. I smirk back.

"Oi," he says, sitting down. "You all hear? The merpeople stole 'the thing they would miss the most.'"

I sneer and say, "You think Potter's parents are down there?"

My congregation snickers.

"No, no," Marcus says, "Ron Weasley is Potter's."

I smile at the lake. "Poor Granger. What a hard way to learn her boyfriend's queer."

Theo laughs loudly and awkwardly, slapping his knee.

"Well, they can all drown," Marcus says. "She's down there too. Viktor Krum's slag."

I blink at the water as Pansy gags and starts a diatribe about Krum and Granger. I look to the edge of the lake, and there's Krum in swimming shorts, stretching. I check the stands, and sure enough, she's not there.

Then Daphne's asking the question that I'm too afraid to ask.

"What happens at the end of the hour if they don't rescue them?"

"Well, people have died in the Tournament before, haven't they? Maybe it's not the

Champions that don't make it," Pansy says, laughing gleefully.

The whistle blows. And I watch Krum run into the water, splashing and desperate to get to her.

I watch Potter stumble into the lake, taking his sweet time before going underwater.

My hand is wet in Pansy's.

I tear my eyes off the lake and join the conversation again. There's nothing to do for an hour but wait. But at the end of the hour, no one has reappeared. And I wonder if Dumbledore would really let something happen to the Golden Trio.

It's ridiculous really that she be Krum's. They've been on one date. She wouldn't mean enough to him. Does the bastard really have no one else worth saving?

I twitch at every wave in the lake, and when Krum breaks the water with a soggy Gryffindor in his arms, Pansy slips her hand out of mine, shaking out her fingers.

~*~

Wednesday, February 23, 2000

Cornelia Waterstone must die.

I haven't touched Hermione since Monday afternoon. And my fingers are itching.

The bitch sat in on our lunch meeting again yesterday. And I will fire her.

Once I find reason, she's gone.

My lip is almost bleeding from biting the skin as I wait for Granger at the lifts with her coffee cup. The doors ding and she yawns in my face.

Hermione rubbed her forehead. This was... just not the right time. Draco had expressly asked her not to write to Noelle. She'd disregarded his wishes and had done so.

Because she wanted to know him better. Just like the memories.

It took Hermione all day to decide what she would do with the letter. To not open a letter sent to you might result in opportunities missed, friendships curdled like forgotten cream. But to open it may result in far worse discoveries.

With an hour left of the work day, Hermione trudged her way to the office in the back corner. His door was ajar, so she let herself in and closed it behind her.

He glanced up at her, frown on his face, and back down at his papers.

"If this isn't work related, I'm going to have to ask you to get out."

She pressed her lips together, trying to keep any untoward comments from bursting through. She tossed the unopened letter from California on his desk. He stared at it, trying to decipher its meaning.

"I wrote to Noelle after you asked me not to. She's just now gotten back to me." She watched as his eyes flipped up to her, cold and steely. "I wanted to come clean. And let you decide if I get to open it or not."

He glared at her, pulled his wand, and tapped the letter, setting fire to it.

She blinked as it crumpled and crisped.

Well, then.... That answered that.

He brought his attention back to his paperwork, and Hermione felt very dismissed. She took a deep breath, accepting her punishment, and started for the door.

"She misunderstood the situation. Nothing in that letter would have been factual anyway."

Hermione turned back. Draco was still focused on what he was reading. "What situation?"

He looked up at her. "That night. With Marcus Flint." His jaw tightened. She stood still near the door. "After you left with O'Connor, I didn't handle things very well inside."

Hermione tried to think of how Noelle would have seen it. Draco and Marcus getting in a fist fight in the middle of a pub. Hermione thought of how Aiden's friend had described it to Aiden.

/guess right after we left, Malfoy went back inside and started wailing on Flint! I guess he was flirting with Noelle or something...

She nodded at the floor. "And you didn't clear it up for her? Tell her what actually happened?"

"She was not my priority at the moment. Something I made abundantly clear to her afterwards." He grimaced. "And I didn't know how much of it you wanted to be public knowledge."

She bit her lip, thinking that she also hadn't wanted Draco dragged through the mud with her in the press should she have gone to the Auror's Office about Flint.

"She told her father that I was brash, and unstable. Not someone to invest in." Draco tapped his quill on the parchment in front of him.

"That could have been easily cleared up, Draco. I would have happily written to Noelle or her father." She wanted to step toward him, but refrained.

"The damage was done. I didn't want you involved any more than you already had been."

She tried to think of anything else she wanted to say on this matter. She nodded, and turned back toward the door.

"Any other backstabbing secrets you've been holding onto Granger?" She turned, and his eyes were cold again. "It's Tuesday. I'm starting to wonder if a tenth of my inheritance will transfer into my accounts tonight at 9PM."

She raised a brow at him and grabbed the door handle. "It probably will." She let herself out.

Thursday was publicity day for the ~~Golden Snidget~~ Golden Snidget campaign. She had the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler* coming to do a write up on the project, and Ginny, Harry, Rolf Scamander and Viktor Krum were coming to give interviews and have their photos taken as part of the "Save the Snidgets" campaign that would run in magazines and newspapers.

She felt like all her projects were actually moving forward, all within the same week. Today was publicity for the Golden Snidgets, which would print on Sunday, and the werewolf trial at the Wizengamot was scheduled to begin Monday. She had an incredibly busy week. Which was excellent, as it helped her not to concentrate on how awful she felt.

Yesterday had been just as strained as Monday and Tuesday. She had needed to prep the office on the Snidget campaign, so that if Rita went poking around in strange places, she would find a unified team. She and Walter addressed the whole floor on Wednesday afternoon, giving them basic information and talking points. Draco stood in his office doorway, arms crossed, shoulder leaning on the frame, and eyes off of her. Eventually he disappeared into his office, shutting the door behind him.

A *ding* of the lifts and a pair of heels marching their way to her office brought her back to the present.

"Darling!"

Hermione looked up, and Pansy Parkinson, tan and glorious, was pushing her way into the room carrying shopping bags and boxes.

"How I've missed you!"

Hermione blinked. "Me?"

"Yes, you! My model! My muse!" Pansy started dropping the bags in a chair and pushing the boxes onto Hermione's desk, almost tipping her inkpot. "I found so many goodies for you while I was in Italy."

As she scurried to save the paperwork on her desk that was slowly being plowed over, Hermione said, "Did you have a good time?"

"The best! I'll tell you all about it, but let's get set up for the publicity shoot today, hm?"

Pansy conjured a rack, and clothes started flying out of the bags and boxes, landing perfectly on the hangers.

As Pansy shoved her behind a changing curtain with an arm full of dresses to try, Hermione realized that she hadn't seen Pansy Parkinson since before the Valentine's Day Gala. Was it only three weeks ago?

She stared at the fabrics in her arms. Had she and Draco only lasted three weeks before they imploded?

Rita Skeeter arrived at 11AM, an hour before she was invited. While Daphne and Tracey started on her makeup, she heard Skeeter talking to Draco up front, asking questions about the werewolf trial next week, operations at the office, his thoughts on the Golden Snidget campaign. Rita's voice carried across the floor, and the scratching of her Quick Quotes Quill started grating on her ears, but Draco kept his tones deep and calm. She could only catch a word or two of his responses.

"And, Draco dear, how's your love life? Anyone special right now?" Rita's sing-song drifted through Hermione's office door. She swallowed, straining to hear Draco's response. She heard his rumble, a hiss of words, and a clattering of consonants, but couldn't piece together what he'd said.

Skeeter laughed. A high-pitched crystal sound that made Hermione's eye twitch.

"You ready?"

Hermione looked up and Daphne was hovering over her face with a lip pencil. Daphne raised a knowing brow at her. Hermione realized she'd been biting her lip. She released it and nodded. Daphne looked over Hermione's shoulder at Tracey, taming her curls, and smirked before descending on her with the lip pencil.

A moment later, Pansy was shoving her into a purple dress with buttons down the front, and she was greeting Skeeter at the front. Draco excused himself, and Skeeter started her onslaught of questions on Hermione. Bozo was in the conference room, setting up backdrops and clearing space for the pictures.

The elevator doors dinged behind her just as Skeeter began asking her about her personal life, and Hermione turned to see Luna Lovegood standing inside the lift, eyes dreamy and wide.

"Luna!" Hermione smiled. "Are you representing the *Quibbler*?"

She needed to speak to him in private, but she would need to spring it on him. She couldn't imagine him agreeing to a meeting with her today.

"Good morning, Granger." Blaise's voice sang to her across the table.

She looked up and he was grinning. "Good morning."

"How was your weekend?"

"Uh..." She looked down at her hands. "Not so great."

Blaise eyed her, and Draco kept his hands moving.

He began the meeting a few minutes later. His voice was the same. His mannerisms the same.

As if nothing was bothering him. And maybe nothing was. Maybe he had resigned himself to this.

When it was her time to give a status report on her team, she stood. She read from her notes.

She glanced about the room. She spoke eloquently. She sat.

Draco thanked her. Then they moved on to Wentworth. She listened.

Glancing up once, she found Blaise watching her, a curious expression.

When the meeting was done, she headed back to her office. She tried to organize her thoughts.

What an excellent reason for a Love Contract. Of course, for the sexual harassment problems, but more so, for the end of things.

A knock on her door frame, and Blaise was entering, shutting the door behind him. She stared at him as he stood at the door.

"So you guys broke up, huh?"

A hot spike of panic, followed by a chill of sadness.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice was even. She turned back to her desk.

"Yeah, whatever, Granger," Blaise said, rolling his eyes. She heard him leave. And finally relaxed.

She had a three-hour meeting later with Draco and Waterstone. A very painful three hours. Draco wouldn't look at her. He wasn't completely ignoring her, still directing questions to her or nodding when he agreed, but to her, it was painfully obvious that he wanted nothing to do with her. It seemed he had spent the remainder of the weekend getting his walls back into place. He was impenetrable.

She wished he would just leave her and Waterstone to work, but a bit of micro-managing was to be expected. The werewolf trial started on Monday, a week away. The first big project of her department. Draco wanted to make sure everything ran smoothly.

On Tuesday morning, When Walter brought her mail in, Hermione's hands stilled over a letter with a familiar return address. A university in California. Noelle Ogden's long awaited response.

"So, what did you end up saying?"

"Sorry?" Hermione chuckled darkly. She shrugged against her pillows, and turned back to the ceiling with a deprecating smile. "I told him I wanted to know him better."

"Does he know you love him?"

Hermione's cheeks flushed and she bit her lip. "No. Every time I have the opportunity, every time he asks me why I've done something for him... I tell him it was the right thing to do."

"Which is basically the same thing for you," Ginny said. Hermione looked at her again, and Ginny gave her a sad smile. "Does this mean you're broken up?"

"We... weren't really together, were we?" Hermione pressed her lips together. She sighed. "We weren't going on dates, or going public with our relationship."

"But that's what you want, yes?" Ginny's eyes were watching her. Hermione nodded. "Does he know that you want that?"

She felt her brows come together. "... I've been just taking what I can get, honestly." She shook her head.

"Maybe it's time for you to set the rules, then." Ginny was cocking a brow at her. She reminded her of Fred so much then.

"I don't think he wants anything to do with me anymore," she said. "Much less, going public to his staff, who all had to sign that Love Contract business."

She felt Ginny roll out of the bed. "You'll never know until you ask for it."

She drifted through her Sunday. She went to class with Madame Bernard. She went to Cornerstone. Not a Malfoy in sight.

She went home. Ginny had asked Harry to come over and cook for them, so Hermione tried to be social for a few hours before retiring to bed, finding it exhausting to pretend she was fine and to ignore the lovely way the two of them interacted. Unaframed of being together. In love.

She was drowsy on the way in to work on Monday. Draco did not meet her with her coffee. She didn't expect him to.

It was Walter's first day back from his week at the Somerset Snidget Sanctuary, and they met to go over his notes and numbers before she headed to the conference room for the 9AM senior staff meeting.

He was already in the conference room when she entered, standing at the head of the table, flipping through paperwork. Wentworth and Blaise were seated, chatting through something. Draco looked up as she moved through the doorway, and then looked away.

As if she was nothing to him.

She pulled her chair out and sat. She flipped through her notes, and ignored the hands that moved paperwork around just inches from her.

"Hello, Hermione." Luna danced out of the lift and let Hermione hug her tightly. "My father's come down with a terrible case of Norflax Flu, so I stepped in. I'm glad I get to spend time with you."

"Norflax Flu?" Rita Skeeter scoffed.

"Yes, it's a terrible cold caused by contact with a Norwegian Flaxson. They are native to Scandinavia." Luna brought a hand up to fiddle with her earrings.

"Oh. Has your father been to Scandinavia recently?" Hermione asked.

"No." Luna smiled, like she was ready to answer more questions.

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it and nodded, and brought Luna and Rita to the conference room.

Once Harry and Ginny arrived, she was much calmer, focused on the task at hand. Ginny went to change into her Holyhead Harpies uniform, and while Skeeter begged Harry to put on his old Gryffindor Quidditch uniform "for old times' sake" – with a bat of her eyes – Harry managed to decline.

Rolf Scamander arrived, looking very out of place, and Hermione gave him a hug.

"I'm not a Quidditch player, Hermione," he said, eyes flitting nervously around the room.

"I'm just somebodies' grandson."

"And that's all I'm asking you to be." Hermione smiled at him, and he disappeared into the conference room.

The lift doors opened and Viktor Krum appeared looking like he'd just come from a previous magazine shoot. Several of the workers who had met him last week waved and jumped up to greet him. He spotted Hermione and he headed straight for her, smiling and leaning in to kiss each cheek again.

And that was the perfect time for Draco to exit his office, reappearing for his interviews. Hermione looked at him and he looked away, heading for Krum to shake his hand.

"Thanks for being here, Krum." Draco's face was tight, and he disappeared into the conference room before Viktor could respond.

Viktor gestured for her to enter first, and she walked into the craze of the publicity day. Bozo had removed the table and had set up a few backdrops, one of a Quidditch pitch for the Quidditch players and one of a stone wall for Harry and Rolf. Rita was currently dripping off of Harry, living for every word he said about the wedding planning, and Rolf was talking to Luna, looking far more comfortable than she'd ever seen him. Hermione smiled as she watched the two of them.

"Excuse me, everyone," she bellowed, and the room quieted. "Thank you all so much for being here. Here's how today is going to work. The photographer will take a few shots of each person for their advertisement. These will go in magazines, newspapers, on flyers, with our

message 'Save the Snidgets.' Then Luna and Rita will take some time to ask a few questions for their periodicals. Harry only has a short time with us before he needs to get back to the Ministry, so we'll have Bozo start with him." She looked around. "And maybe we'll have Rolf start with Luna and Rita."

Rita looked nonplussed. Pansy, Daphne and Tracey were at the ready for those being photographed, and everyone else just milled about the conference room, waiting for their turn. She found Viktor at her elbow more often than not, and tried to engage in conversation with everyone.

Everyone except Draco, of course.

Rita was done with Rolf quite early, and was eagerly awaiting the deposit of Harry Potter into her interview chair, but Hermione watched as Luna continued to ask him questions about his current projects and his grandfather's relationship with the Golden Snidgets.

As they moved through the group and Harry left, Ginny stayed, hovering around watching.

"This is going well, Hermione."

"Thanks, Gin."

"But you haven't interacted with him at all," Ginny said.

"Yes," she sighed. "I know."

Draco and Pansy were chatting in the corner. She was smiling and whispering about Viktor Krum's photoshoot. He was frowning.

As Krum finished, Bozo was now done with their guests. It was time for Hermione and Draco to be photographed as Krum moved into the interview chair. Ginny bid her goodbyes, and Draco moved to the stone background. Pansy fluttered to Hermione and began fussing with the dress and her hair.

Hermione took her pictures as well, trying her best to come off as someone who wanted to save a species, whatever that looked like. When she was done, Krum was still being interviewed. She followed the lens to see he was pointing at her and Draco.

"Oo yes!" Pansy clapped her hands. "The pair that put this all together!"

"No, that's not necessary," Hermione started, but Pansy was already dragging Draco back to the stone backdrop.

They stood there, separately. Shoulder-to-shoulder. The bulb flashed. Pansy frowned.

"Afright," she laughed. "A little looser?"

Hermione tried bringing her hand up on her hip, tilting her head. She bumped Draco's side and they moved away from each other.

Hermione swallowed. "You know, at Hogwarts, whenever Harry, Ron and I would do something dangerous or against the rules, I would plan a story in case we were caught. I was always prepared to speak to McGonagall or Dumbledore. Ready to tell them an excuse." Hermione turned to look at Ginny, the blue eyes already on her. "I never thought he would find out. I never considered it. So, I had nothing."

Ginny nodded.



The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Five

Pansy looked horrified. She came in and had Draco stand behind her. She kept Hermione's hand on her hip, and had Draco bring his hand onto her other hip. Hermione could feel him warm behind her. Draco put his other hand in his pocket.

The bulb flashed a few times.

"Now this time, like you care?" Pansy tried.

Hermione set her face, ignoring the light hand on her hip, just where he loved to touch her.

They sprang apart from each other once Bozo allowed them to. Viktor was finished, so Hermione bid him goodbye as the room watched. She felt very stiff as he tried to kiss her cheeks goodbye again and asked if they could get together sometime soon.

She smiled and tried to act naturally as Rita Skeeter's eyes drilled into them.

After Hermione and Draco finished their interviews, Pansy and Hermione headed back to her office, passing Daphne and Blaise talking in the corner. They moved away from each other as Pansy and Hermione approached.

Hermione didn't have the brain capacity for this revelation. She was fired.

Once inside the office, Pansy helped her take off that dress, and suggested they try on her outfits for trial on Monday. She gave her a navy dress to try on behind the changing curtain. As Hermione slipped it over her head, she heard Pansy's voice call to her.

"So, what did I miss while I was in Italy?"

Hermione's hands stilled. Well, quite a bit.

"Um, nothing really." Hermione stayed behind the curtain longer than necessary.

"Mmhmm," Pansy hummed. "How long were the two of you together before he fucked it up?"

Hermione closed her eyes. She should have known better than to try to pull a fast one on Pansy Parkinson. She emerged from behind the curtain, and Pansy was folding clothing, looking at her with a smirk.

"Er... barely three weeks. And he didn't fuck up. I did." She slipped into the shoes Pansy had laid out for her.

Pansy laughed. "Not likely." Pansy came to her, and started tugging at the sleeves and pulling the fabric around her ribs. "I highly doubt that anything you could do would cause any kind of damage, Granger."

Hermione let her eyes glaze on the wall. "I broke into the Ministry and viewed the memories he provided to the Wizengamot."

She felt Pansy pause. "Wow, Granger. Wow."

Hermione looked at her and found Pansy grinning. She swallowed.

Pansy knelt at her side and started pinning the hem. "You'll be fine. Just give him a bit of space."

Hermione wanted to believe her, Draco's ex, but she couldn't. "I don't know. You didn't see his face. How betrayed he was. I think... I think I really botched it."

Pansy was silent as her fingers worked. Hermione glanced down at her and Pansy was grinning.

"What?" Hermione asked.

Pansy took a breath, and bit her lip. Hermione waited four more breaths before she finally spoke.

"Do you remember how you used to catch the two of us snogging in the hallways, Granger?"

Hermione suddenly felt very awkward. "Er... yes."

Pansy pulled a pin from her teeth. "It took me a long time – longer than I'd like to admit – to figure out that he only met with me on Thursday and Saturday nights. And an even longer time to realize that he would choose spots along your Prefect patrol route."

Pansy smiled up at her. And flipped the hem over to hand stitch it.

Hermione was frozen. Her heart beating hard and fast as she looked down on this girl in panic.

Pansy turned her attention back to the dress. "It wasn't until sixth year when he whispered your name to me," she said, pursing her lips sadly. "And even then I tried to ignore it for a few months."

Hermione swallowed. Her eyes watering.

"He's been waiting for you for a long time, Granger," Pansy said. "Just give him a bit more time." She shrugged and stood. "Let him have his tantrum. And when he's done crying he'll remember why he fought so hard for you."

Hermione stared at her, and all she managed to say was "I'm sorry, Pansy."

"It's not your fault," Pansy flipped her hair. "I have terrible taste in men." Her eyes widened gleefully. "Did you know Theo Nott is gay???"

"What?"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"He's so handsome."

"I know. I tried. I turned him gay."

Hermione laughed, and Pansy fixed one of her stray curls, twisting it back for her.

Pansy and Hermione spent another hour and a half laughing and talking boys, and Hermione felt any residual guilt melt off of her.

Pansy left, and Hermione tried to wait. Tried to give him time. She really did. But she had to see him.

I turn to find Rowle on his back, blood coming up from his lungs, reaching out with wide fingers for his wand inches away.

"Malfoy. Help."

He's got a gash in his side, probably from the explosion. It's an easy fix. A basic skin-knitting charm to get him on his feet again.

"My wand..."

I watch as he stretches, tearing the delicate flesh above his hip.

He coughs, and I see blood bubble out of him.

"Just need my wand."

Cold sweat across my arms. I step towards him, and pull my wand up to aim at his wound.

It's a simple twist and twirl motion.

"Thank you," he gasps, and waits for me to cast.

We could have split her down the middle. In more ways than one!

I smile as my wand presses into him, and he howls. I kneel on his chest, digging the wood into his wound, and whisper a slicing charm, watching his eyes bulge as I split him down the middle.

I stand tall, step over him, kick his wand down the stones, and watch him as he gasps and gurgles, making sure I'm the last thing he sees.

I wipe my wand on his robes, and continue following the bounce of curls through the castle.

It explodes in a shower of mirrors and brass and blue velvet. Something slices my cheek, blood mixing with the slide of tears down my face. It smokes. And quiets.

I stare at the hole in the ground, waiting. Waiting for something to feel different. Better.

A scrap of blue velvet flutters from the ceiling, sliding down to fall over my shoulder. I pluck it off my skin and run my fingers over it as I walk a wide circle around the blasted carpet, stepping on glass and brass in my bare feet, my blood mixing into the book pages and blue velvet.

I gather the remains, pulling the glass out of my feet, piling the brass and hinges, holding the fabric in trembling fingers.

And I piece it back together.

~*~

Saturday, May 2, 1998 - later

Second floor girls' bathroom. Second floor girls' bathroom.

I skid around corners. There are spiders as large as four-posters crawling down corridors. Ghosts glistening through walls on horseback.

I take the stairs down two at a time. I can hear voices, hers interspersed like a drum beat.

"But how did you get in there? You need to speak Parseltongue!"

Potter.

"He did! Show him, Ron!"

I peek around the corner and she's standing there, staring at Weasley like he cured Dragon Pox. They're holding bones in their arms.

"I had to have a few goests to get it right," Weasley crows, "but, we got there in the end."

"He was amazing!" She smiles brightly at him. "Amazing!"

I watch as they regroup. I watch her eyes rove over Weasley, drinking him in like she's just realized how thirsty she is.

I remember her on my drawing room floor. She's much recovered. No lasting damage. I wonder if the scar is still there. If she was able to heal the skin in time.

They run off. All three of them, like they're not about to die. And maybe they won't. I check both directions, and follow.

An explosion to my left blows me off my feet. I land on my side, trying to remember how to breathe and I can hear several new battles beginning around me. I lie there, mentally examining my ribs.

I pull myself up to my feet and watch as the fighters move away.

I'm alone again.

A gurgling to my right.

"Malfoy."

She'd been holed up in her office with Pansy for almost two hours, and she hadn't seen any of her staff since the morning, before the publicity shoot. She headed towards his office, but as she approached she saw his light was off. She checked her timepiece. It was 4PM.

"He's gone."

Hermione turned, and Blaise was flipping through some papers behind her.

"He left as soon as he heard."

Hermione frowned at him. "Heard what?"

Blaise looked up at her, brow furrowed. "You don't know yet?"

She felt her ribs pull, and she shook her head at him.

"Lucius Malfoy was stabbed this morning. He's at St. Mungo's in critical condition."

There were reporters and cameras outside of St. Mungo's and at the Apparition point. She heard Skeeter calling her name, saying things like "Hermione, dear! You'll tell them to let me in, yes?"

Hermione headed straight for the reception desk where the Welcome Witch directed her up to the third floor – "Wounds – Magical & Natural." She stood in the lifts, listening to the Healers talk their office gossip in hushed voices.

On the third floor, she followed signs to the private suites, and once she saw a rather conspicuous D.M.L.E. officer, "disguised" as a waiting room visitor, she knew she was headed in the right direction.

She turned a corner, and at the end of the hall were two blond heads. Narcissa stood next to a door, on the other side of a stationed guard, and Draco leaned against the wall a bit further away. He lifted himself off the wall and moved slowly across the tiles to the other wall.

Narcissa, Draco and the guard made a beautiful picture, this far away. Still. Silent. There were two chairs next to Draco, but neither he nor his mother looked inclined to sit.

Narcissa saw her first. She smiled tightly. "Hermione, dear."

She saw Draco tense and then turn his gaze on her, still down the hallway. His eyes cut her open, but he quickly looked away, muttering something.

Narcissa walked to meet her. They hugged in the middle of the hallway, a few paces from Draco and the chairs he wouldn't sit in. Narcissa gathered her close, and if she knew any of the situation between Hermione and her son, she didn't show it.

"It's so kind of you to come, Hermione." Narcissa pulled back and held her face between her delicate fingers. She brushed a strand a hair back into place for her, and Hermione felt so warm inside her chest.

"Do you know anything yet?" Hermione glanced over Narcissa's shoulder and saw Draco frowning at the ground. "Is there anyone in custody?"

"No, nothing like that yet." Narcissa ran her hands down Hermione's arms. "But it seems a guard was placed under the Imperius curse this morning, and was ordered to attack him. They're still trying to figure out if the knife had any magical properties."

"An Azkaban guard did this?" Hermione looked at the door shielding Lucius Malfoy from the rest of the world. "That's preposterous."

Draco snorted. Both women turned to look at him, and he ignored them, moving down the hall, further from them.

Narcissa turned back to her. "Sit with me?"

"Of course."

Narcissa led her to the two chairs, holding her hand in hers. They sat silently for a moment until a Healer-in-Training appeared down the hall. She walked briskly towards them, and Hermione felt Narcissa hold her breath. The girl smiled shyly and then entered a door across from them – a supply room. The girl grabbed what she needed, then shut the door behind her, nodding politely before darting away. Narcissa relaxed again, and stared down at her knees.

"Draco tells me that the first Wizengamot date is set for next week."

Hermione looked back to Narcissa, ignoring the movement from the figure down the hall.

"Yes, Monday. We're just about ready."

"That's wonderful!" Narcissa smiled at her, then turned to look at Draco. Hermione saw the woman's eyebrow lift in a lovely judgmental way. Narcissa looked back at Hermione, innocently.

"Dear, would you like anything at the café upstairs?"

"Oh, no, thank you." She saw Draco roll his eyes in the distance and caught on a second too late. "But, I can run and grab you something—"

"No, I think I'm just going to use the restroom." Narcissa stood, and Hermione was just about to say she needed to use the restroom as well, when Narcissa did what Narcissa did best: She meddled. "Will you wait for me here?"

Hermione took a breath and nodded. Narcissa patted her shoulder and left Hermione sitting alone in a hallway with Draco Malfoy and a silent guard.

She tried to think of something to say that wasn't as moronic as "how are you?" and failed. She was just opening her mouth to say exactly that when he spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

She glanced up at him, his eyes still on the tiles beneath his feet. His lips were tight.

"I wanted to be here for you and your mother." She watched as he rolled his shoulders back.

"You should be preparing for the trial next week."

"I'm prepared."

He lifted his head, staring at the wall across from him. "Someone needs to be in charge of the office—"

The wingback chairs explode open. Why would I provide two? What company did I expect her to entertain? What a mockery.

The armoire catches fire, burning the clothes I prepared for her arrival. The curtain's around her bed sizzle with blue electricity before catching periwinkle flames and turning her bed into a pyre.

I stand, burning in the destruction.

Like anything would have been enough.

I should have run to Dumbledore. Just before sixth year, when I'd been given the task. I should have committed myself to the Order.

It still wouldn't have been enough.

The flames glint off a reflective surface deep within the room, shining mirrors and brass back at me.

And I hate Severus Snape for doing this to me. For giving me the option to keep her hidden, to keep her safe—

You would have saved me.

I shake my head, glaring at the jewelry box on her bedside table. I had thought it was a fitting home for it.

I stretch my hand for my wand, and it clatters through my bedroom, into the hallway, and slides into my outstretched fingers.

I wave my hand and quiet the room. Smoke and fluttering pages remain.

I point my wand at the jewelry box, summoning it forward to the ground in front of me. It's the only thing in this room that deserves to go.

"*Diffindo!*"

It bounces once.

I snarl, "*Bombarda!*"

It spins on itself, mocking me, top still closed.

"*Incendio! Deletrius!*"

What did Severus do. Almost like it wasn't the first time someone had tried to destroy it.

I send it against the wall. Not a dent in its side.

I freeze it, heat it.

My blood is thundering. This fucking box ruining my life for five years, mocking me. Keeping her locked away like a pretty cream room in a manor. Can't touch her in her box. Won't be able to hurt her in her box.

Keep her in her box and she won't hurt you.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

"I'd like for you to leave." She doesn't move, so I clarify, "Get out."

I head to my bathroom suite. I can't watch her get dressed.

I lean my forehead on the door. I can hear her slipping out of the sheets and for a moment I wonder if she's coming for me. If she'll wait me out.

My bedroom door closes.

My chest contracts.

Finished, I guess.

But she probably doesn't know her way out. I should probably—only gentlemanly to walk her out. And kiss her goodbye with a promise for tomorrow—

I'm out the bathroom suite and racing to the hallway, throwing my bedroom door open as a crack! bounces through the corridor, shattering the silence and rumpling the portraits.

I stumble to the place she just stood with Mippy, before the little elf vanished her. I stand in my trunks, sucking in air, figuring out what it is I am chasing. What I'm apologizing for. What I'm running through hallways for.

Is it worth it? If she doesn't trust me. If I never allow her to trust me.

It's not enough. Nothing I've done has been. Always just short of the mark.

I turn back to my room, and my eyes land on a door. Unmarked. Innocuous. The faintest hint of a Notice-Me-Not Charm that only I know to look for.

And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me.

Save her. Like an angel. Like Potter.

What was a mattress and a bookshelf compared to freedom. Compared to fighting, instead of running through a castle, hoping to catch a glimpse of brown curls.

My fingers twitch and the door opens, swinging wide.

What were two wingback chairs in front of a fireplace compared to pulling my wand on Bellatrix, cursing her in the back while the blade pulled across her unmarked skin?

What was a renovation, paid in favors and gold, knocking down the wall between suites and opening the first bedroom into a living area with bookshelves upon bookshelves, compared to *That's not Harry Potter. His eyes are too close together.*

What were cream bed curtains, falling down over a canopy bed as large as my own, feather pillows, heavy satin sheets, compared to cursing Greypack, Yaxley, and Dolohov in the back as they crawled into her home.

A laugh bubbles out of me as I look around the suite. What the fuck was all of this? How would this have made her forget she was a captive, made her forget her friends were likely dead.

Like she hadn't already read every book on these fucking shelves—

Like a sword cutting through their spines, each book is bisected, tops falling off and pages fluttering to the ground.

"Blaise has it handled."

Draco pursed his lips.

"Understand if you don't want me here," she said. "And I'll go if it will make things easier."

But I wanted to make sure Narcissa was alright."

Draco clenched his jaw. He shifted on his feet and looked down the hallway in the opposite direction.

They were silent for what felt like a million heartbeats.

"It was a knife?" she asked.

He nodded.

"And an Azkaban guard was under the Imperius curse?"

"That's what they say."

She studied him. His hands were in his pockets and his hair fell around his eyes. He looked very tired.

"Have you seen him yet?"

He shook his head. "Not until he's stable."

She heard the click of Narcissa's shoes down the hall. She returned with a cup of tea and a few treats. She handed Draco a pumpkin pasty, encouraging him to eat it. Draco rolled his eyes and Hermione smiled. Narcissa offered her a few treats and she politely declined.

Narcissa and she sat for the next thirty minutes, chatting intermittently about nothing at all, staying away from the topic of the man lying in a hospital bed behind the door.

Whenever Draco crossed the hallway, pacing, she'd watch him. One might mistake him for bored, if they didn't know to look for the tightness in his jaw, the clenching and unclenching of his fists, the movement in a rather still person.

The door to Lucius's room opened, and rather suddenly everything was in motion again. A Healer exited, older and clearly in charge. Narcissa jumped up. Draco pulled himself off the wall. The Healer stepped forward to speak with them and Hermione stood, trying to move behind Narcissa so she wouldn't intrude.

"We've repaired the damage to his internal organs," he said, directly to Narcissa. "It is still possible that the knife was magical or had been dipped in poison. We have a curse-breaker looking at it now, but based on preliminary sweeps of the wound, there is no magic or poison."

Narcissa nodded, eyes wide.

"What does that mean?" Draco huffed.

The Healer turned to him. "We expect him to make a full recovery."

Hermione watched as Narcissa nodded, hands twisting around themselves. Draco was still.

"I do need to go over some paperwork with you, Mrs. Malfoy—"

"Black," Draco said. He was frozen in place watching the Healer speak.

"Yes, of course, Ms. Black," the Healer corrected himself. "He's resting right now, but will be ready for visitors soon."

"Yes..." Narcissa looked around the hallway. "Well, I'll come with you now for the paperwork."

She turned without another glance at Draco or Hermione, and followed the Healer down the hallway.

Hermione faced Draco, his eyes still focused on the spot the Healer had been. His jaw clenched and released. His left eye twitched. She watched him swallow and take a breath in, listening to the air rattle like a Dementor.

She recognized this. She'd seen it on him in his memories, right before he broke.

He pushed the air out of his chest, and looked down at the tiles. She approached him slowly.

"Draco..."

He spun away from her, squeezing his eyes shut, and pressing his palms against his face. She looked up, and the guard was averting his gaze, shuffling his feet. No one else was in the hallway, but it was a very public place.

Draco's head rose quickly, and the hand that had been reaching for him returned to her side.

He looked around the hallway with hot eyes, like he wanted to destroy something. She came to his side, and grabbed his hand as it fisted.

His chest was heaving, and his eyes were wet.

"Draco."

And he grabbed her hand, and held it close to him as he doubled over. A sound tore from his throat, a sob. He leaned on her and she brought her free hand to run her fingers through his hair.

"Why won't he just die."

Hermione's fingers froze. She didn't know how to help this. She didn't know how it felt to wish someone was dead. Someone who was her own flesh and blood.

She moved through his hair again, and he leaned into her more. She looked up and the guard was letting his eyes wander to them. A Mediwitch rounded the hall, looking at a chart.

"Shh," she cooed. "Come with me."

Hermione opened the door to the supply closet and pulled him inside. Once the door was shut behind them his voice broke on another sob.

It was dark in the closet, and she thought about casting a silencing charm and finding the light, but then he fell forward, onto his knees and wrapped his arms around her hips, pressing his wet face against her chest.

She stopped breathing.

"I wanted him to die," he choked.

I spin to her. "There's that word again." Saved. "You think I would have *saved* you at that Auction, Granger? You think I gathered all available funds, reached out to all relatives and contacts, so that I could set you free? Sent you running with a stolen wand? The room we passed on the way to mine? The first door? That was your room." I feel like dragging her in there. Just grabbing a chunk of her hair and shoving her inside so she can feel what it would have been like. "You were never getting out of here." I smirk at her, laughing at her. "I don't know why I bothered lying about recognizing you that night. You were always going to end up a prisoner in Malfoy Manor."

"So, you're telling me that belonging to you would have been the same as any other Death Eater?" she reasons, and I think of Rowle and Dolohov. "I would have served your dinner and been your entertainment at parties. *Crucio* 'd when I disobeyed – at best. Passed around like a whore?"

We could have split her down the middle. In more ways than one!
I look away from her.
"I've had plenty of time to think on this, Draco, so let me know when to stop—"

"Stop."
She presses on. "You would have saved me. It wouldn't have been freedom, but it would have been the best you could have done—"
The best I could have done. Far, far from it.

"Do you think I would have been able to keep away from you?" I sneer at her. "That you would have lived out your days here and remained untouched."

"Yes." So quick and honest. "Don't try to scare me, Draco. I know what kind of person you truly are."

"Ah, yes. You've seen the worst of me, haven't you, Granger." I walk away from the bed. She has no fucking clue what the past five years have been like inside my head. "Just needed to tip a memory into a basin and it's like we've known each other forever."

"I'm sorry, Draco. I'm sorry. I didn't think I had another choice. I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you—"

Hypocritical bitch. "Then ASK, Hermione. Don't take!" I'm screaming.

Her name is foreign on my tongue. And I feel a sense of brutal satisfaction that we both hear it aloud for the first time as a bastardized endearment.

A tear falls down her left cheek, and I look down to the carpets to keep from reaching for her.

What happens now.

She apologized. I don't accept.
We're... finished, I guess.

I stand. A fire twisting through me. "Who says you're entitled to the whole truth?" I spit at her. She's sitting up in my bed, holding a sheet to her.

"I don't know how to apologize for this," she whispers.

I ignore her attempt at apology. "Which ones."

"What?"

"Which ones did you watch? Or did you grab some popcorn and play them all?"

"No. Just two. The one at my house. And the night the Snatchers brought us to Malfoy Manor."

I can hear her screaming. It echoes up through our chimneys, crawling like smoke from the drawing room below.

"Why?" I hiss at her, and her eyes are wet.

Good.

"I needed to know why you saved us. I needed to understand—"

"Why do you keep using that word?" My feet carry me to her, like I'll find answers if I can just breathe the same air as her. "I didn't save you, Granger. I did *nothing*. You were screaming on my drawing room floor and I stood there."

"That's not how I saw it."

She saw. She saw me weak for her. Saw me turn to the fireplace and crumble into a pile of bricks as she screamed.

"Oh, I'm so glad we both have seen these memories so now we can debate them."

"You did your best, Draco. You tried to help us then, and you would have helped me if there was an Auction. That's all I wanted to know about."

Did my best. Running around Hogwarts looking for her. Building castles in my mind to hide her in.

I remember this feeling. It hasn't zizzled me in such a long time, too wrapped up in her scent and her body, too grateful to be in her presence.

Like the wind could blow in either direction and I could fuck her or kill her.

"When you told me about the Auction for the first time," she says, "you told me you'd sell me for a profit. But your father told me something completely different."

Of course, he did. If Lucius hadn't gotten involved we could have continued to orbit each other. Bookstores and bar stools. Just shallow enough to keep me sated.

Maybe Father saw this coming. Maybe he knew we'd end here, with her naked in my bed, explaining why she didn't trust me enough.

I turn to the balcony windows.

"So, I had to know! And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me."

She brushed her hands through his hair, and felt him breathe again.

"I know." She felt the tears prick at her own eyes.

His arms tightened around her hips, pressing himself closer to her, and a broken sob pushed out of him, into her chest. He buried his face against her, and she held him, letting her fingers move through his hair, across his neck, down his shoulders and up again. She repeated this several times as his breath slowed. She felt his hot exhalations against her stomach.

She heard him sniff as he moved his head, and she wondered if her dress was wet from his tears. The arms that looped around her hips loosened before his hands slid up her ribs, resting on her back. His face pressed against her stomach, then her sternum, and as he rose from his knees, she realized he was pressing his lips against her as his mouth touched down between her breasts.

She gasped, and his arms held her tight as his lips pressed against her chest, her collarbone, and then her neck. He whispered, hot against her ear. "I miss you."

She felt her breath coming quickly as he kissed her just below her ear, pressing her into the door.

"Draco."

He ran his hands across her back, slipping forward to run against her stomach.

This probably wasn't the most opportune time to... whatever this was.

His hands cupped her cheeks, kissing her mouth and letting his tongue push against hers. She sighed into him, and let him kiss her.

She pushed lightly at his shoulders.

"Draco. Not now." His eyes refocused on her, his face still pink and wet. He started to close off from her, like rejection, and she pulled his face to hers again for a soft kiss. His lips tried to move against hers and she pulled away. "You have to go back out there."

He sighed, pressing his forehead against hers. She moved her thumbs across his cheeks, brushing away the remaining tears, and trailing her fingers into the hair at his temples.

He let her pull him out of the supply closet, back into the too bright hallway. The guard was resolutely looking elsewhere.

"I need to..." Draco started. "I can't see him yet." He wiped his eyes, and Hermione took in his face, pink and splotchy, and the skin below his eyes puffy. He had undoubtedly been crying. It was so easy to tell. She hadn't seen true tears on him since he was a child. "I'll check on mother with the paperwork, find a washroom."

Hermione nodded. "I'll be here."

He looked at her, as if it surprised him. She gave him a small smile.

He nodded and turned to head down the hallway, her hand pulling from his as he moved away. She hadn't realized he was holding it. She watched him go, and turned to look at the guard, staring down at the tiles. She wandered toward the chairs again, but didn't want to sit.

"He's awake."

Hermione looked up and the guard was watching her.

"Oh," she said. "Wonderful."

He shrugged. "You're on the list, if you'd like to see him."

She blinked at him. "The what?"

"The list of approved visitors. Hermione Granger is on Lucius Malfoy's list."

She felt her heart in her throat. "And when did he make this list if he's been unconscious?"

"It's in the Azkaban paperwork, so I'm not sure when your name was added. But before today."

She looked beyond him to the door. She held her breath knowing she was an idiot.

"Okay."

He nodded at her and gestured for her to enter.

She pushed open the door, feeling the weight of the moment. The moment that was supposed to be reserved for blood relatives only.

Sparse room. Light blue curtains on the window and long privacy drapes around the bed in the center of the room. There were flowers on the windowsill and she was curious to know if they were for show or if someone had actually cared for Lucius Malfoy enough to send them. She heard her own footsteps against the linoleum, clapping in the silent room as she rounded the privacy curtain to find Lucius Malfoy, propped up in bed, like he'd just finished a stay at a spa.

"Miss Granger." His lips turned up in the corners. "I was hoping you would be here."

Besides the hospital gown, the hospital bed, and the pale shade to his skin, there was no difference between the sight of him now, and her visit to him in Azkaban. He wore the same curious gaze, his hair pulled into the same style, and his superior attitude had not wifled one bit. "Mr. Malfoy." She stood one step from the foot of his bed. "I'm surprised to find that I was included on your visitor list." She heard her voice, measured and controlled. She hoped her face gave the same facade.

"Of course, Miss Granger." His eyes sparkled at her. "You're practically family, after all." Hermione felt a shiver, starting at the top of her spine and shooting through her like the Cruciatus curse.

She looked closer, and found the thin skin around the eyes, the delicate way he was propped against the pillows, the drowsy tilt of his head. She had nothing to be afraid of. This man had

I need a map. Or a chart of this betrayal. Some kind of graph of her decisions over the past six months to spot the moment she decided to infiltrate my mind and steal things that don't belong to her.

It would spike in certain places, wouldn't it?

Meeting with Lucius behind my back.

Etiquette lessons.

She's still taking those lessons, I know. Still lying to me.

Another spike.

And suddenly I think of everything else locked away in the Ministry cabinets. And my mind floods with everything I wished I could lose when they pulled the wisps from my head.

What had she seen?

I sit at the foot of the bed, my trunks back on. I feel the weight of another person on the bed behind me. Haven't shared a bed with someone like this. Haven't trusted myself to sleep next to someone for years in fear that secrets would pour out of me in my dreams.

And she worked her way inside, slithering through the cracks.

The bed moves. The sheets slide.

"What are you doing?"

I breathe deep into this acid.

"Did Potter help you?"

But, of course he did. I just need to hear her say it.

"What?"

"Potter helped you get to the memories?"

She pauses too long. She tries confusion.

"It's just like Hogwarts, isn't it? You and Potter running around under an Invisibility Cloak, doing whatever the fuck you want, while the rest of us have to play by the rules."

"Draco. I'm... I'm sorry—"

"Do you know how difficult it was for me to release those memories to the Wizengamot, Granger?" I hiss. "You know how hard I work to keep people out of my mind."

I think of Severus, standing over me as I try to keep my mind from flying into fragments after the Headmaster died.

Did she see that too?

Who I am kidding. She saw everything.

"I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you." Her voice trembles. "I needed to know why your blood was on my living room walls."

"I told you why. You asked and I told you."

"Never the whole truth. You always leave something out."

Today is the publicity campaign for the Snidgets. Rita holds me hostage at the front desk until I answer questions about my love life. I smile at her like Draco Malfoy smiles at Rita Skeeter. My voice croons to her like Draco Malfoy's voice croons.

"Always on the market, Rita," I say. "I can't imagine settling down."

I see curls behind my eyes when I blink.

She leaves her office in purple, shaking hands with Rita and jumping right to work. I leave her to it, trailing back to my office.

I sit behind my desk. And wait.

I turn back to the financials. We're solvent. And I ignore the explanation why.

I stare at the obsidian reflection from my desk.

Brick of obsidian. I hadn't thought of that.

Volcanic.

Acidic.

Cooled and strong.

"Oh, dear." A voice from my doorway. Luna Lovegood is standing there, twisting her hair around her fingers. I blink to make sure I'm seeing her right. "Hm." She tilts her head. "You're orange again."

Orange. That sounds about right.

"Like rust. It's not pretty." She plops on the arm of my guest chair.

"Lovegood." I send her a tight grin. "Are you here for the *Quibbler*?"

She nods absently, looking around my office. She stands, fingers running along my walls, eyes drinking in my shelving and my furniture. She stops in the middle of the room, staring at my ceiling.

"It's like the inside of you." She tilts her head down to look at me. "Sterile. Cold."

My eyes flit across my office, seeing it for the first time.

"Hermione's wearing purple today," she hums. "But she's more of a grey. Slate." She turns her open gaze on me again. "She matches your eyes."

"Yes," I say. "None of us are really our best selves today, Lovegood."

"Can you see them yet? The colors?" She smiles at me.

Her fingers tug at a loose thread on her jumper. She sways, like she can hear a dance in her head.

"No." I look down at my desk. "I don't think they like me very much."

She hums. "I tried to write to you. You never responded."

I swallow. "I didn't respond to anyone. I'm sorry."

"Hm. That's alright." She stares at me, and tilts her head. "I don't like his color on you."

I give her a small grin. "I'll change into something else."

Carrie interrupts us. They're ready. When I leave my office, Viktor Krum is here, pressing his lips to her skin. And Rolf Scamander is here, smiling at her.

Where's the Weasel. Such a pretty picture they all would make.

I shake Krum's hand. And the grin he gives me is challenging.

You are welcome to her, Vik.

We move into the conference room, and I wait for further instruction. Pansy hovers at my elbow, talking my ear off about Italy. I welcome the white noise.

Potter eyes me from across the room and I purposefully remain invested in other conversations.

I pose for pictures. Pansy tries to make Granger and me pose together, and I have to touch her, place my hand on her side.

I'm doing something wrong because no one is happy.

Lovegood shakes her head at us, like the combination of our hues is hurting her eyes.

I return to my office. As long as I keep my hands busy, I can't feel the heat from my fingertips.

After a few minutes my door opens without a knock. I'm expecting Pansy or Blaise. Ginny Weasley strides in, pushing the door closed.

She marches to my desk, plants her hands on her hips and says, "It was my idea."

I stare up at her. And she charges on.

"I was the one who pushed her to do it. Blame me. Hermione thought it was a bad idea - she didn't want to snoop like that - but I practically forced her into it." She takes a breath. "Alright?"

"Alright."

"Brilliant. So, you forgive her?"

"Not likely."

She frowns at me. And then tosses herself into a chair. "Merlin, you're a pest," she mutters.

"It's the past Malfoy. You two have a future to look forward to. Why dwell on those memories?"

"Because they still affect my present," I reply. "I want you to think of the most unpleasant memories you have, Weasley. The things you keep locked away. And now imagine Potter prying into them without your permission."

She frowns at me. "Harry was there. For every one of them."

I scowl at her, and shuffle papers around. "How nice."

"He was there because he cared for me. He was there *for* me, mostly." She sits forward. "He came for me. He protected me. He braved a Basilisk for me." She tilts her head. "And you've done the same for her," she says, standing and crossing to the door. "You just need a new point of view, Draco Malfoy."

She gives me a small grin, and disappears.

A new point of view.
I get three minutes of quiet before Blaise marches in, closing the door behind him.

"I think Daphne and I might be back together."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Blaise."

"Well, I don't know. We're going to dinner tomorrow night."

I lift my brow at him.

"What?" He pouts. "We can talk for *hours* about *your* drama but the second I have news,

suddenly you don't want to hear about it?"

I frown. "Fine. Yes. Go ahead." I gesture for him to continue.

"We're going to dinner tomorrow night."

"Brilliant."

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"Think so."

"Great."

We sit. He sighs. "Alright. Fine. What's your drama?"

"And how is that?"

I shake my head at my desk. "Miserable, really."

"Well," Blaise begins, crossing his leg, "all I can say, is that it's for the best. This will fade, and you'll grow apart from each other—"

"What the fuck are you going on about?" I snap. "You're getting back together with yours."

"Right," he says. "Do as I say, not as I do." I roll my eyes and he scratches his jaw. "Draco, you need an opportunity to evolve and grow without Granger. You've been so caught up in her your entire life. It's time to be your own person, without her."

An airy New York accent floats to me.

You're so wrapped up in her. You won't have much left...

I swallow, and look to my nails. "What if the person I am, is someone who belongs to her?"

He's silent for a moment, and I can't meet his eyes. And then—

"Go jump off a bridge, I guess."

I drop my head onto my desk. "Blaise—"

"Or, I probably could compile a list of people who would *pay* to Avada you."

"Blaise—"

"Make some Galleons off it."

"Merlin—"

"Someone's gotta keep the business afloat after you're in the ground."

She's a cheat. Just like her mother. There's a procedure for things. If a doctor tells you not to skip ahead in your recovery, you don't go behind his back. Like disobeying a direct request. Like writing to a half-wit in California.

I burn the letter, and watch the fire dance across her surprised eyes.

Back to my paperwork, and I feel her step back.

"She misunderstood the situation," I explain. Nothing in that letter would have been factual anyway."

"What situation?"

"That night. With Marcus Flint," I hiss. "After you left with O'Connor, I didn't handle things very well inside."

She nods, like she understands. "And you didn't clear it up for her? Tell her what actually happened?"

"She was not my priority at the moment. Something I made abundantly clear to her afterwards." The way she screamed in the snow... "And I didn't know how much of it you wanted to be public knowledge. She told her father that I was brash, and unstable. Not someone to invest in."

Funny to have his name on the list in front of me, scratched out as she asks this. Funny to have the feeling of Marcus's hands on my collar still burning my skin.

"That could have been easily cleared up, Draco. I would have happily written to Noelle or her father."

"The damage was done. I didn't want you involved any more than you already had been."

I feel her ready to leave. I want to keep her, even if it burns.

"Any other backstabbing secrets you've been holding onto, Granger?" She turns back to me. "It's Tuesday. I'm starting to wonder if a tenth of my inheritance will transfer into my accounts tonight at 9PM."

She lifts a brow. "It probably will."

She flounces out.

A cheat, and a liar. I should know by now not to trust anyone with eyes like that. I reexamine the finances with the idea of an installment in the bank this evening.

A cheat, and a liar. Keeping us afloat.

Perhaps my Slytherin is rubbing off on her.

~*~

Thursday, March 2, 2000

The inheritance did transfer. Mockridge is befuddled, but I tell him I cannot explain it.

know"—she swallows—"I remember sending my eleven-year-old off to a magic school. I remember reading the books she left behind and finding dark magic and wars. And I just..." She kisses my hand again. "Thank you."

Thank you.

Like *I'm* the one responsible for her. Like *I saved her*.

I pull my hand from her, nodding, and move to the kitchen to say hello to Wendell.

After breakfast, Dr. Flanders shows me his journal. They've kept their memories for two days, waking up every morning just as they were the previous evening.

"They're anxious to learn more. To see her as a teenager," he explains. "They are likely to regress at some point, but their current progress is wonderful. To be expected really; if their daughter is the brightest witch of our age, then they must be exceptionally adept as well."

I flip through his notes, waiting for him to tell me why I'm here.

"So, the next phase would require a Pensieve. And a slow process of letting them absorb someone's memories of Miss Granger while she was away at school!"

I nod, running my fingers over a passage about Monica remembering her own real name. Jean.

And then like a snap, I realize that he wants *my* memories.

I look at him, eyes bright and twinkling behind his spectacles. I laugh. A bark right into his face.

Tossing his notes onto the table, my fingers come up to my eyes, rubbing at thin skin. "You've got to be fucking joking."

I'm still laughing when I grab my coat and slam the door behind me.

~*~

Tuesday, February 29, 2000 - again

My door office opens, and closes.

I look up, and she's standing there, shifting from one foot to the other.

She wears pink.

"If this isn't work related, I'm going to have to ask you to get out."

My eyes return to the list of investors I compiled months ago, before I thought I could finance this business on my own.

She throws a sealed letter to me, and for a moment I think it's her resignation again. I can't tell which relief is more acute: thinking it's her resignation, or realizing it's not.

A letter addressed to Hermione Granger, from California.

"I wrote to Noelle after you asked me not to," she says. I scowl at her, finding her mother's eyes. "She's just now gotten back to me. I wanted to come clean. And let you decide if I get to open it or not."

My fireplace hums. The flames crackle to life. And the fire morphs into a face I do not recognize.

"*Draco Lucius Malfoy. An urgent message from Azkaban prison.*"

I stare at the mouth, flames flickering green.

"Proceed." My voice is gone.

"*After an earlier incident, prisoner number LM537 – Lucius Abraxas Malfoy – has been taken to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries for treatment of a stab wound to his left side. Any further questions should be directed a medical professional or an officer on-site. Thank you. Have a pleasant day.*"

The fire dies.

Someone is talking to me.

A chair squeaks.

And then I'm standing, taking Floo powder from Blaise, and tossing it into the flames. I watch them turn green again.

Green like death.

And then Blaise says, "St. Mungo's." And I'm shoved through.

~*~

Sunday, June 5, 1994

The scotch burns.

I hate it.

But apparently, it's extremely expensive. So, it's delicious.

"Delightful," I cough.

Father grins at me. "Leave the bottle," he tells the server in Italian. The short man's eyes widen, and he quickly bows and leaves us. "Are you ready for your exams?" He eyes me over the top of his glass.

"Yes. Despite Remus Lupin's lack of instruction. He's barely there."

I take another sip, forgetting my lesson the first time, and cough again.

"Do you like Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"I suppose." I pat my lips with my napkin. "I like learning the spells and counter-curses. But I haven't had a suitable instructor yet."

Father hums, tapping his thumb on the table. "I'll speak to the governors about that," he says to himself. "And Potions? Severus is very pleased with you."

"I like Potions. I like the way things come together."

"If you had to take your O.W.L.s tomorrow, which subjects do you think you would score highest in?" He sips from his tumbler again.

This is a test. An O.W.L. in its own right.

I lick my lips and say, "Potions. Charms. Transfiguration. History of Magic. Ancient Runes. Arithmancy. Possibly Herbology—"

"And what would you like to do with all of that?"

I stare at him. "Do?"

He sips, his eyes on me.

"Where do you want to go? What's your plan, Draco?"

I blink at him, and recover. "I might want to become a potioneer. With Severus's help, I could probably get into the Brazilian program. Or perhaps I could work my way up through the Wizengamot. Chief Warlock in no time."

I send him his own cocky grin.

He nods, watching me. "But what is it *you* want to do?"

I swallow.

He sips.

"Sir?"

He sighs with satisfaction at the taste of his scotch.

"Don't worry about what I want to hear. What do *you* want to do?" He lifts a brow at me.

"What makes you happy, Draco?"

The only thing that comes to mind is Quidditch. And Potter falling off a cliff.

He continues, "You're exceptionally talented. With your name and your mind, you could easily become Minister of Magic."

His eyes drift to the doorway as a couple enters. My skin tingles.

"But," he says, "if you would like to play Quidditch, or teach"—his eyes find me again, and I wait for the hammer to fall—"that is perfectly acceptable as well."

I watch as he thanks the waiter for checking on us. As he swirls his glass, speaking in Italian. As he points at me, saying something that brings the waiter's attention to me with an "Ah!"

When the waiter leaves, I stare into my full scotch glass, and say, "You mean it? You wouldn't be terribly disappointed if I played Quidditch?" My lips twitch and I say, "Or if I take over for Rubeus Hagrid as Magical Creatures professor?"

He lifts a brow at me with a dry expression. "While I would hope that you would teach something that actually requires intellect... no. You could never disappoint me, Draco."

The scotch burns my chest, warming my bones, spreading heat across my skin.

"I want you to be happy, Draco." He's looking at me, examining me. I see my eyes staring back at me. "Find what makes you happy. And I'll get it for you."

Several waiters bring over a slice of tiramisu with a candle, singing Happy Birthday.

My father grins.

And I wish for us to stay like this forever.

"It's in the past now."

"No," Blaise says. "What's happened to you?" I look at him, and he's eyeing me carefully, like I'm some kind of rare creature he's only read about. "What's she done to you now?"

I blink at him, slowly, vision clearing as my lids lift. "She's proved you right. Such a stupid thing to fall for a Mudblood." Blaise frowns at me. "Especially her." I echo back to him.

When I turn back to the window, I hear him moving around. I hear him trying to speak to me. I hear him at my side. And eventually he's gone.

The word tastes like a medicine I used to take as a child. Never sweet to go down, but a cure for all internal injuries.

The owl from Dr. Flanders. I stare at it for five minutes before finally tearing the seal.

Incredible progress. Need you for phase two.

I stare out my window. The window I had her pressed against two weeks ago, just before I pressed my tongue to—

I blink.

There is a Muggle man with an umbrella.

An auto broken down.

Someone has lost a hat.

There is a letter in my hand, requesting my presence for a problem I intend to solve. I head to the Ministry for a portkey.

~*~

Tuesday, February 29, 2000

Monica opens the door. I blink at her, struck by her eyes.

"Hello, Drake. Come in." She smiles warmly at me, and steps to the side. "Tea? Scones? Wendell's making sausages."

The change in her halts my feet before I say, "Er, yes. Thank you."

It's dinner time in the U.K. But I'm not sure I had breakfast today. Yesterday.

Monica takes my coat, babbling about the weather, and stops me before we proceed into the living room.

She looks up at me with Granger's eyes and whispers, "Please, tell me. She's alive, isn't she? Hermione?"

Her hand squeezes my arm, and she has no idea that the skin underneath her tight fingers is tender with a faded tattoo.

I frown at her. "Yes, she's alive. Why?"

The lines around her eyes disappear, like a good night's sleep has just set in. She breathes deeply. "Thank you. Thank you." She brings my knuckles to her lips. "Dr. Flanders won't let us skip ahead. Won't let us ask questions past our current memories. And I didn't

~*~

Marcus stands, buttons his robes, and walks around my desk. He picks up a piece of parchment and extends it to me. "Take a look at my proposal before your new Gryffindor morals blind you too far."

I summon the parchment to me instead of walking closer to him. For his safety, really. The offer is worth this week's inheritance installment that I won't be getting. We would be able to hire back the staff whose hours were cut, and continue with normal business operations.

"Thank you for coming in, Flint," I say, disappearing the parchment. He's still leaning on my desk.

"Come on, Draco!" He laughs. "Let's put the past behind us. Let's get a drink." He nods at Blaise. "The three of us." He smirks at me and steps close, straightening my robes like he used to with my Hogwarts tie. "You've gotta unwind." His tongue peeks out from between his beloved teeth. "Invite Granger. From what the papers say, you two are much closer now than you were before."

There should be a fire. Something mirroring the last time he smiled at me while talking about her. Something like speaking to the hag in the bookstore, or even screaming at a naked girl in my bed.

You can let it out, sugar. Not everything belongs in boxes.

Marcus brushes my shoulders. "You got to have your way in the end, Draco. That's all that matters, right?"

Focus, Mr. Malfoy. You are too vulnerable like this. Too easy to manipulate.

Despite Severus's best efforts, Queenie Kowalski wins for a brief moment.

"I must not have been clear that last time we spoke, Marcus." My voice is steady, and I don't blink. "You are not to set foot on Malfoy property. You are not to contact myself or Miss Granger in any way. And if I never see those ridiculous teeth again, it will be too soon."

His eye twitches as I remove his hands from my person.

"Blaise, please escort Marcus out through the Floo." I say, keeping my eyes on Marcus's sour expression.

I hear Blaise standing, coming to my side. "Draco," he whispers, "I don't know what I'm missing but this is a little dramatic—"

"Marcus's 'manufacturing business' revolves around a potion used to drug women in bars. I don't think we want any of his Black Market money. As for the 'dramatics,' I would like to spare Miss Granger any discomfort in seeing the man that drugged her leaving my office." I look at Blaise. "So, if you please. Take Marcus away before he goes in pieces."

I move to the window, turning my back on the room and listening to the Floo *whoosh* as Marcus leaves.

"What happened?" Blaise stands next to the fireplace.

Thursday, March 2, 2000 – later

The mediwitch recognizes me. I don't need to explain why I'm here. She escorts me down several corridors until I find my mother at the end of one. She paces the width of the hall with slow footfalls, her robes long and black. Already in widow's wear.

She sees me as I approach and pulls me close to her, whispering sweet things and stroking my hair.

I stare over her shoulder to where a D.M.L.E. guard is standing next to a door. He looks at me, and looks away.

"What's happening?" I ask.

Mother pulls back to look at me. And probably repeats what she's just said to me.

Imperius'd.

Knife to the lower left side.

Tissue damage.

Poison.

Something clicks in my mind and I turn my eyes on her. "Imperius curse?"

She lifts a brow at me. "Yes. That's the official report."

I sneer at the door behind her. I roll my eyes and begin to pace with her.

The tiles beneath my shoes blur together in my path.

There are vaults. Deeds. Properties.

Unless he's already taken care of that. Unless he's so unhinged at this point that he would stage his own murder after ensuring that nothing would be passed to me.

I never secured the Manor. Or the estate in France. Just the inheritance. Just the cash. It's possible he's tied those up with his great uncle's family in Normandy.

I look at Mother, standing still while I swim. Is this to hurt her? To evict her from the Manor if she continues with this divorce?

If he's altered his will, or worked with his solicitors to bargain the inheritance in place of the deeds, then we'll be out.

I try to think. Try to figure out how this works in his favor. His own death, worth all this.

Or is it a warning? He'll survive this and then show us the paperwork.

Draco asked for his galleons before his wedding, so I took it upon myself to alter the inheritance paperwork.

I hope you understand, darling.

A door opens, and my eyes snap up.

Not his door.

Three doors away.

There's a window at the end of the other corridor, and for a moment I see my father, standing next to my mother, pacing.

I blink to clear my eyes, recognizing myself in the reflection next to my mother.

I focus down on the tiles. They would make a clean wall. Sterile. Built up from the ground like a sloping mountain.

Heels clicking on my tiles. Climbing up alongside the slope, scaling my mountain.

She's at the other end of the corridor, walking towards us, eyes on me.

Fucking hell.

No peace.

Mother hugs her, answers her questions.

"An Azkaban guard did this? That's preposterous."

I laugh, shaking my head at her naïveté.

Mother sits with her. Talks to her. Dotes on her.

And then Mother glares at me. Finally figuring out why I haven't been eating, haven't been sleeping. Haven't been living.

But not our breakup nor her husband's precarious health can deter her from meddling.

She leaves us alone. And the silence is dark, twisting inside of me at something that reaches for the light.

"What are you doing here?"

There. It's broken.

"I wanted to be here for you and your mother."

"You should be preparing for the trial next week," I hiss.

"I'm prepared."

Of course, she is. "Someone needs to be in charge of the office—"

"Blaise has it handled."

Always an answer for everything.

"I understand if you don't want me here. And I'll go if it will make things easier." She's looking at me. I can feel it. "But I wanted to make sure Narcissa was alright."

I want to snap at her. Tell her it's family only.

I hold my tongue, waiting for Mother to come back and mind her.

"It was a knife?" she asks.

I nod, looking at my tiles again.

"And an Azkaban guard was under the Imperius curse?"

"That's what they say."

"Have you seen him yet?"

"Not until he's stable," I say, kicking at the floor.

"Bloody hell, Draco. I thought you'd be more excited!" He grins and grabs my shoulders "I've found our savior! We'll be back in the green in no time!"

I roll my eyes at him and say, "It's called 'the black,' Blaise," and push forward into my office.

Marcus Flint grins at me from my chair, his feet up on my three thousand gallon desk.

My skin vibrates.

"Draco," he coos. "I hear you're in a bit of a tight spot."

Blaise slides past me, begins a sales pitch of sorts, outlines how he reached out to Marcus last week, chuckles at a snide comment Marcus makes.

And all the while I stand in my doorway, staring at him with his feet on my desk. Where I used to fuck her.

A voice from the office floor behind me, speaking to Waterstone about some redhead hag in the Wizengamot. I look over my shoulder to see her exiting the conference room, heading to her office.

If she sees him...

If he even looks at her—

There's a pebble stuck in the grooves of Marcus's shoe. He is in green. It's raining.

I'm cold.

"So," Blaise wraps up, "I'll let you two iron out any details, talk... investor things." Blaise

rubbs his palms together, probably planning how he'll be able to hire back the female intern he had his eye on. He sits on the couch, quite pleased with himself.

Marcus smirks at me.

And I wish I'd broken his teeth when I hit him.

"I have quite a nest egg from my new potions career. I've been manufacturing as of late. Maybe you've heard." His eyes sparkle, like we're making fun of someone to their face like we used to. Like the events of that night are a private joke. "I'm looking for a place to invest my new money. And I heard you're in the red." He chuckles his tongue.

I haven't moved yet. "Well," I begin, "that was so nice of Blaise to discuss private business financials with you, but we're doing just fine here at Malfoy Consulting." I slide my hands into my pocket to keep my fingers from twitching. "We won't be needing your assistance."

Marcus smiles at me. I hear Blaise sit up on the couch.

"Draco, what are you—"

"It's alright, Blaise," Marcus hums. "Draco's just a little sore at me. I tried to give him a hand a few months back with an affliction he's had. Brewed him up a little cure." He chuckles. "But I guess he didn't like the side effects."

Carrie brings in my calendar. I cancel the lunch appointments. "Just for this week?" she asks, scratching through with a quill.

"Forever."

Then I request that she fill my week to the brim. Any busy-work and small meetings I've been putting off, I tell her to schedule it and contact the clients.

Mockridge brings me the financial report at 8:30AM before the Senior Staff Meeting.

"We're in the red."

I nod at the graphs.

"I want to be transparent and let you know that I'll be on the job hunt until we have our feet again. If we have our feet again. I believe Wentworth will do the same after this is announced."

I look up at him. "I understand. Please keep me as informed as you can."

He nods and leaves.

I look down at the expenditures, and the empty space where investments used to be written.

If Mockridge goes, I'll have his salary to add the pile. That's a bright side.

Senior Staff Meeting at 9AM. I arrive early and shuffle papers in a rhythm I create.

Blaise complains to me about the lack of female staff members under him, begs me to let

him have a new intern. Female, preferably.

I look up when she enters. I look back down. She sits next to me, in the spot I gave her when she was my Empress.

I wonder if I can move her.

I begin, and invite her to speak on her progress. Her hands tremble and her lips are dry. She brings her hair back over her shoulder, and I can't see where I sucked at her skin—

The person next to me sighs. Their hands fold.

Blaise tries to visit my office after the meeting, and I lock him out.

I have a meeting with my Wizengamot Relations Consultant and my Non-Wizard Relations Consultant after lunch to work through the Werewolf Policy. We propose a week from today.

The only thing I learn is that Cornelia Waterstone has a chin hair on the left side of her jaw.

When I step out of the conference room, Blaise accosts me.

"I have the answer to all of our problems!"

"Wonderful." I lift a brow and step around him.

"I have an investor." He walks backwards, leading me to my office. "Someone we trust. Someone who's looking for a new startup." He shrugs. "I'm actually surprised you didn't reach out sooner."

"Alright," I say, waiting for him to elaborate. I shuffle my notes from the meeting and try to open my door. Blaise stops me.

Mother returns, forcing a pumpkin pasty into my hand. I push it into my pocket until I can dispose of it.

It feels like hours pass as I listen to the two of them chat.

She's the closest thing I feel I have to a mother.

Jean Granger swims in front of my eyes, waiting for me. Waiting for my mind to open to her so she can find her way back—

There is a door in front of me.

A man stands next to it.

Two women chatter to my right.

I smell cleaning potions.

My neck aches.

I am hungry.

The door in front of me opens. The Healer steps out.

I move closer to him. My mother stands.

He's repaired my father's organs. He's worried about a knife. He's working with curse-breakers.

"What does that mean?" my throat asks.

He looks at me. He has grey hair and brown eyes and thin old skin.

"We expect him to make a full recovery."

He speaks to my mother again about paperwork and all I hear is "Mrs. Malfoy."

"Black." I correct him. He should know in advance. The paperwork will say Black. It's only appropriate to let them know. Legal documents need legal signatures.

He takes my mother away to sign paperwork. And there's a door at the end of the corridor.

Closed.

A guard stands next to it. Keeping me out. Keeping him in.

My chest is cold. Breath is icy.

A full recovery.

Fully recovered. No need for deeds and wills. A perfect little plan to get us all here. I think of a 500-year-old bottle of scotch and Italian voices singing to me. We always said we go back. *Maybe for Christmas next year,* he'd said.

But he wasn't there.

Maybe for Christmas next year.

But he was gone again.

I hated that scotch.

But the promised we would.

Maybe when he's out. Maybe the day they release him I'll Apparate us both to—

My breath stabs my throat.
The guard blurs, like water on a glass. And the tiles are wet and I can't breathe. There's a voice calling me back—

My robes are tight.
My shoes are black.

I have ten fingers.

My fingers over my eyes, pushing the water back inside.

Would he be happy I cried over him? Or just disappointed in my weakness.

You could never disappoint me, Draco.

No.

I look up.

It's a game. This whole thing. Italy and Azkaban and Mungo's.

Just chest pieces moving, clattering about a board and falling over.

A hand wraps around mine. And I don't know whose queen she is. Which side of the board she belongs to, his or mine.

She'll topple us all if we're not careful.

I grab for her, bringing her skin to mine and it hurts to touch her again. It slices into my stomach, and I pull her into me, clutching at her.

A gasping wet sound from my ribs, like there's something pouring out of me, my insides on the tiles.

Clattering and falling out of my throat, bricks tumbling down my tongue and to the floor. Her fingers in my hair. Her chest against my side. Her voice in my ears and her scent against

me.

And it could have been this simple. For years, it could have been only us. But the man behind the door kept me from her, kept me from what I wanted, kept me from being happy.

Lying, like he always does. Never about what I want. Never for my happiness.

I could have been free of him. A knife could have sliced him into ribbons until he was just a memory of scotch and newspapers and his eyes staring back at me in the mirror.

Why won't he just die.

It would be so much simpler.

She's dragging me somewhere. Sweeping me away into a corner for just the two of us. Dark and private and it feel like home with her here.

My knees give out, but I know she's got me.

My arms around her body, the hips that belong to me, my face pressed into the stomach that

I've kissed.

"I wanted him to die," I confess into the darkness. Into her.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty Three



Monday, March 30, 1998

A girl is screaming. She writhes on the floor just ten paces in front of me.

The fire is warm against my legs.

My mother's hand on my wrist is cold.

My aunt pulls a blade and drops to the person with cinnamon curls and eyes—

The person begs. My aunt laughs.

There is a body on our drawing room floor. It looks at me. And screams.

Someone's hand is on my arm. An echo of a whisper in my ear. *What would Severus say?*

Something cries on a floor of blue velvet, bleeding into the carpets at the bottom of a well.

~*~

Sunday, February 27, 2000

"You can invite her to breakfast, dear."

I stop in the doorway. Mother sips tea.

"She isn't here."

Mother looks up and smiles. "Snuck her out already?"

I turn to the fireplaces, and follow the green flames to the Leaky. Tom waves at me. I walk into Muggle London.

It rains.

~*~

Monday, February 28, 2000

Mother asks me if I've eaten and I lie.

I Flo directly into my office. A note from Dr. Flanders on my desk. I stare at it, waiting for something to happen. I put it to the side.

"I know."

Her hands in my hair and on my neck, absolving me. Forgiving my thoughts.

I cry into her stomach, breathing her into me. I'll hold her until she pries me away.

Her fingers drift through my hair, dancing over my neck and shoulders calming my thoughts and my breath. She holds me, keeps me close and secure.

And I feel like I've fallen down a pit, but she's at the top, waiting for me.

GINNY WEASLEY'S self-righteous tones sing to me: *He was there because he cared for me.*

She came for me. Protecting me.

Save me, please, Granger.

The curve of her hips to her small waist, so familiar under my palms. The rhythm of her breathing against my forehead. My lips press into her stomach, my hands sliding along her back.

She's here for me.

I come to my feet, pressing kisses along the center of her chest, inclining toward her skin. She gasps, and I wrap my arms tighter around her, keeping her. My mouth finds the familiar path to her neck, her ear.

Everything falls away.

Nothing has felt like this, like having her close and having her want me.

"I miss you," I whisper into her, pushing against her, pinning her to the door and pressing myself to her.

She says my name in that breathy tone I've come to recognize from my dreams, and my hands slide to cover every inch of her.

Her stomach, her ribs, running up her neck to hold her face. I push into her mouth and she accepts me, taking me in and kissing me in the darkness.

Have to be inside of her again.

It's so simple when it's just the two of us and I'm inside of her.

Her hands move to my shoulders and I'm about to slide my knee between her thighs. She pushes me back.

"Draco. Not now."

I connect to her eyes. She doesn't want me. She doesn't want this—

She brings my face down to her, pressing her lips against mine sweetly. I kiss her back and she pulls away.

"You have to go back out there," she says.

And it all comes back down on me.

Father.

She drags her fingers over my cheeks, into my temples, pulling away all my dark thoughts. She brings me out of the dark room and into the light.

The guard's eyes flicker away from us.
My skin feels tight and swollen.

"I need to... I can't see him yet." I press my hand to my eyes, scraping away the emotion.
"I'll check on mother with the paperwork, find a washroom."

So much to do. I'll need to see him. I'll need to speak with him about what it is he wants in return for the Manor. I should probably comfort Mother. I haven't done that yet.

"I'll be here."

I look to her.

Here for me.

Her hand is in mine, comforting me. Saving me.

She smiles at me. And I can't wait to return to her.

I leave, her fingers fluttering through mine, and I find a mirror and then my mother. She is speaking lowly with Skeeter when I find her.

"Draco!" Skeeter jumps. "You poor thing! How did you feel when you found out?"

"No questions to him, Rita." Mother's voice is low and dangerous, bringing Rita Skeeter to heel. "You have a piece on the Golden Snidgets to run on Sunday, so I suggest you quickly write up something about Lucius Malfoy's stabbing so you can concentrate on that feature."

Rita presses her lips together with difficulty, and marches away.

"Do you need me for any of the paperwork?" I ask.

"No," she says, taking my elbow. "I'm finished." She leads us back to the corridor. "When he's awake, I think you should see him. I know you don't want to, but you need to."

I grit my teeth and I feel her hand press on me.

"I know. I have to figure out what he wants. Why he's done this." I feel her eyes on me. "It must be a warning. A chance to show us what we'd have without him. I think he's found a way to keep the Manor from me."

I keep my gaze on the floor as we walk. She's quiet. Until she's not.

"What happened between you and Hermione?" she whispers to me.

"We... we broke up. It's a long, complicated story."

She squeezes me to her. "It doesn't have to be. She's here, isn't she?"

I nod. Feeling lighter. Feeling freer.

We turn the corner, and I take a breath, ready to see her sitting in those chairs, waiting for me. I'll sit with her and hold her hand. And I'll ask her to dinner. And later – much later – we'll talk through trust and secrets.

She's gone.

My feet stop.

She's left. Though she was here for me. She came for me, and now she's—

The anger rippled through Draco's shoulders as he stepped in front of her, shielding her from his father's view.

"Stay away from her. Don't talk to her."

"Draco, she came to find *me*."

"Don't." It burst from her. She looked Lucius Malfoy in the eye until she saw it land on him.

"Stop using me against him. The game is done." She held his pale eyes until he looked away, almost pouting, resigned.

"Hermione, please leave us alone," Draco said.

Her name on his lips paused her. She took one last look at Lucius Malfoy, hoping she'd never see or hear from him again in her lifetime, and knowing it was a foolish wish.

Draco touched her arm, pulling her gaze back to him. "Please go." His eyes were soft. "I'll see you in the morning."

She turned to find Narcissa standing quietly in the doorway, just out of her husband's sight.

She gave Hermione a tired smile.

Hermione brushed her fingers across Draco's hand on her arm, and looked up at him and nodded. His eyes flew to her lips, and she wished he would kiss her goodbye.

She turned, pulling from Draco's grasp, and approached Narcissa in the doorway. Narcissa touched her shoulder as she passed, a gentle comfort, and Hermione exited.

Narcissa stepped fully into the room, and Hermione wondered at this family reunion. The first time Hermione had seen the three of them in the same space since the Great Hall at Hogwarts, all pale and shaken, Lucius trying to hold onto his pride, Narcissa trying to hold onto her son, and Draco trying to hold onto his control. And Hermione, looking in on them.

Narcissa closed the door behind herself.

She nodded at the guard and walked down the long hallway to the exits.

at her. "You would have taken those classes sooner or later. Draco wanted the inheritance sooner. So, I upped the timeline."

Hermione felt her hands shaking. She shouldn't have come in here. The confidence he had. The feeling of inevitability. Pansy's sad smile as she flipped her hem this morning. Blaise's gentle probing this week. Narcissa and her hugs and grins and gentle touches and mothering eyes and family diamonds.

"Once you released the inheritance, you wouldn't have had any control over his bride," she whispered. "So, you manipulated me into taking the classes."

"Come now, Miss Granger. You manipulated yourself. I hardly had to do a thing."

He grinned without malice. Without a conniving plan. It was like he'd played his final card, and the deck had been swept away already.

She felt angry tears in her eyes. "Why did you do all this? Why did you interfere?" She closed her eyes, thinking of Blaise, Pansy, Narcissa, Ginny and Harry, Marcus Flint even... "All of you."

"I've already told you, Miss Granger," he chuckled. She opened her eyes to see him looking at her softly. "Everything I do, I do for my son."

She thought of his "proposal" last November. Take the classes, wedding in the gazebo, shadow Narcissa at society balls, and she could have had him.

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. "Well, Mr. Malfoy. Was it worth it? This game you've set up, with pawns and queens. Was it worth your pending divorce and your destroyed relationship with your son? They'll never want to see you again."

She tried to hiss at him, but she could only look on sadly.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Miss Granger." He lifted an arrogant brow. "I believe they're just on the other side of this door."

She blinked at him. And a chill swept through her as a piece clicked into place. She stepped back. "Was the guard even Imperius'd?"

Lucius grinned at her. Proudly. Fatherly.

"He's been well compensated, Miss Granger. I assure you," Lucius said. "It was about time to... what did you call it?" He smirked at her. "Oh, yes. Spice things up."

The door burst open and she turned to find Draco's hot eyes on her.

"Get away from him."

She felt her breath coming in short spontaneous movements. She stepped back from the bed, seeing the betrayed expression on his face as he rounded the privacy curtain, and turned to his father. She watched as Lucius smiled.

"Draco. So good of you to come."

There's only a guard standing next to a door. And my father behind it. I'm running, my mother calling after me. The guard draws his wand, eyes wide as I approach, but he's caught in indecision as I throw myself against the door, feeling the wood give under my weight.

She's standing at the end of a bedframe. Mint green curtains. Here for me. Unless...

Here for him.

No, that's not—

—moan for you after she's screamed for me—

She's not—

There's tears in her eyes. He's hurt her.

"Get away from him."

She springs back, pressing herself against the wall as I step into the room and face my father, propped up in bed.

Pale. Impotent.

"Draco. So good of you to come," he sings to me, smiling.

But still dangerous.

"Stay away from her," I hiss. "Don't talk to her."

He tilts his head. "Draco, she came to find *me*."

I feel something burning up from my gut, and before it reaches my heart, she stops it.

"Don't," she yells out. "Stop using me against him. The game is done."

And I watch my father frown, and looks away. Like a child that has been sent to his room.

I turn to her, and she's glaring at him. Having none of it.

Hermione Granger just turned her best Prefect scowl on Lucius Malfoy and he withered like a first year.

I couldn't love her more.

"Hermione, please leave us alone," I ask.

She glances between us, like she needs to stay. For me.

To save me.

My fingers on her arm. "Please, go. I'll see you in the morning."

She looks at me softly. And I wish I could kiss her goodbye.

Maybe one day.

I turn my eyes on my father, waiting to hear the door click closed.

He stares back at me.

"She's remarkable," he says, a small grin. "But you've known that from the beginning."

"Yes," I reply.

Mother joins us, stepping around the curtain.

"Ah," Father says. "My ex-wife."

"I prefer former-lover," she quips. "It has a better ring to it."

I roll my eyes and go stand in the corner until they're done.

"Speaking of *rings*," he hums, looking down at her bare fingers. "I know the Malfoy engagement diamond has been sent to curse-breakers, but I've asked all the usual jewelers to let me know when your wedding band shows up for pricing."

"Oh, don't bother, dear. I was going to sell it to the Muggles."

I rub my eyes.

"How magnanimous of you, darling. Always thinking of those less fortunate."

"Yes, my thoughts have resided with *you* quite often—"

"Glad to hear it."

"So, Father," I cut in. "You're well? Not poisoned after all?"

He turns his scowling eyes to me, and takes a deep breath. "Yes. Thank you for your concern, Draco. I'm sure they'll catch the person who cursed poor Thompson."

"I'm not sure 'poor' is the word to describe Thompson any longer," I say, and his lips turn up at my cleverness. "So, while you've been granted momentary freedom, what is it you'd like to discuss?"

"Discuss?" he asks innocently. "Why, I just enjoy seeing you both."

"I'm sure." I step closer to his side. "What a blessing then, that you've been mortally injured."

"Your son thinks you intend to keep the Manor from him," Mother cuts to the chase. "That you have some kind of plan for your death that would prevent us from living happily without you."

Father's eyes drift to me. He tilts his head, turning over the idea. "No, no." He shakes his head, squinting, trying to decipher me. "Of course not, Draco. The Manor will be yours once you are married to Miss Granger."

Like punching me in my stomach. I take an even breath. "And when will that be, Father?"

He frowns at me. There's something in his eyes I can't understand. Something I remember from when I was young.

"I presume after you make her an offer of marriage. If you haven't already."

He chuckles. I stare into his grey eyes, remembering her running from the library, tears in her eyes, racing away from me. I whisper, "And if she won't have me?"

He sighs, lifting a brow. "Of course, she will. I've ensured it."

"Ensured it?" My throat is tight.

played all his cards when he told Draco about the classes. And he clearly posed no physical threat to her. It was a mental match she had to prepare for.

She took a deep breath and looked him directly in the eyes. "Why did you tell Draco about the classes? What *possible* motivation could you have had for that?"

He smirked at her, so different and so similar to Draco. "I assumed he already knew. I had no idea the two of you would keep *secrets* from each other."

He was toying with her, like a mouse. She summoned something deep inside of herself and felt her brow curve upwards.

"How boring it must be. To be in Azkaban with no one to play with." She stepped forward, and brought her hands down to lean on the rail at the foot of his bed. "Were things getting a bit too comfortable for you?" She quirked her head to the side and saw his eyes follow her.

"Narcissa wasn't speaking to you. Your son's inheritance – the only thing that still tied him to you – was leaking away. And I was playing by your rules." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Was it time to spice things up?"

His lips twitched. She watched as his eyes ran over her face, a smile spreading on his cheeks.

"How different you are, Miss Granger," he sang. She squeezed the bedrail and kept her eyes as clear as she could. "I could credit Madame Michele for refining your approach. Miss Parkinson for styling you just so, or Miss Truesdale for teaching you how to move..." He let his eyes wander across her form, and she held her ground. "But it's something else as well," he said, eyes meeting hers again.

She sent him an icy stare, and let the sarcasm drip into her voice. "Now, now. Don't say it was 'in me all along.' Not when I've gone through all this trouble."

He smiled. Almost a true smile. He looked directly into her eyes and said, "You'll make a fine Lady Malfoy for him, Miss Granger."

Any confidence she had left her in a puff of air. She felt her eye twitch, and her lungs seize. She pulled up from her arrogant lean forward on the bedrail, and lost all idea of what to do with her hands.

She searched his face for his game. And found almost a fondness there. There was acceptance. There was pride. And if she reached deep into his eyes, she could almost see an expression lost in her memory, one that belonged to her own father.

What was he doing? What game was this?

"I don't understand," she breathed.

"You know, Miss Granger," he said, looking to the window on his left. "The Malfoy inheritance is only to be released on the heir's wedding day. It's been that way for centuries. And it would only be released should the bride be approved of." He turned back and grinned.

The oak doors opened, and the small, toady man appeared. The same one from all those months ago. She gave him her wand and looked back at Draco. He smiled softly at her.

She knew her face was mess, her eyes were still leaking, and her hands were shaking from the emotional whiplash, but Draco smiled at her.

And it was time to save the fucking werewolves.

The Wizengamot was even less excited to see her than normal. The redhead woman that she loathed took lead on the examination of their case, and seemed to be purposefully prodding at Hermione throughout. The blonde woman who reminded her of Molly Weasley tried to smile encouragingly, but it was clear from the faces in the courtroom that they steered themselves in preparation for this day.

The day Hermione Granger took on the Wizengamot.

After her opening statements were delivered and the Wizengamot had the opportunity to ask questions, court was dismissed after only two hours to allow the members the rest of the afternoon to review the paperwork and statistics Hermione provided.

Which was wonderful, because that meant Draco could take her out to lunch.

They ended up in a Muggle restaurant, and after forty-five minutes of Hermione yammering about how amazing she did in the courtroom, and forty-five minutes of Draco watching her with a small grin, she finally stopped and said, "And how's your sandwich?"

Draco smiled. "You know Granger, I'm not sure I like this concept of dating. Why take you out and pay for your meal here when I can listen to you ramble about yourself for hours at the office."

"You narrowed her eyes at him. "Maybe I'm paying."



"You can try," he warned.

The trial continued for the rest of the week. Harry came in on Tuesday to testify on behalf of Remus Lupin and his legacy. Every evening Draco took Hermione to dinner. They had yet to figure out what to do about the Love Contract and office dynamic, so they stuck with Muggle restaurants where they would be less likely to be recognized.

He walked her to the nearest Apparition point at the end of the every night, and he held her hand and kissed her goodbye. They didn't pick up the lunch time trysts, and Hermione didn't know if that was due to her being in trial for the Wizengamot, or if he was actually taking it slow.

On Tuesday evening, he came with her to Madame Michele's lesson and sat through tea with them. On Wednesday night, she asked him if he wanted to come home with her.

His eyes flashed, and he bit his lip. "As much as I want to," he said, "I can't. There's something I need to get back to at the office tonight." He looked quite put out.

"Is it anything you need help with?" she asked.

He blinked at her, and paused before saying, "Not yet. But possibly soon."

On Friday, the Wizengamot voted. Forty-seven out of fifty members voted to implement the new werewolf laws, allowing equal rights for werewolves and adjusting the existing legislation.

She was positive the redhead was one of the three votes against, and she made sure to get her name and title so she could send her a rotten fruit basket next week.

She and Draco returned to the office, and he held her hand as they stepped into the lifts to take them back up to Malfoy Consulting.

"I have a surprise for you."

She looked up at him, and he was staring at his feet.

"A good surprise?" she laughed.

"Mmhmm." He nodded. The lift doors closed. "I was shocked to hear it was ready today." He looked at her. "So, I wanted you to have it now, in honor of your triumph in the Wizengamot today." He grinned at her. Nervously.

She blinked at him. A gift? Not a book or a sweater or parchment and quills. Something that needed to be made? Or worked on? She couldn't think of anything she wanted that needed to be made. Perhaps he'd gotten her parchment and quills with her initials engraved.

"I – thank you. I'm... quite speechless really." Her curiosity began working immediately. "It's something you had made?"

"No," he said, looking at the lift doors. "Fixed, really."

She frowned. "Fixed? Have I broken something?" She laughed, and he grinned.

"You'll know what it is in just thirty seconds, woman. Can't you wait?"

She stared at the lift doors. A surprise for her. From him.

The lift slowed, and he squeezed her hand before releasing it, his fingers drifting away from her.

"I have senior staff and associates in the conference room this afternoon for the March staff meeting. I'll let them know of your success today." The doors opened. "You're excused for the rest of the afternoon, Granger."

He started to exit. She jumped.

"What? Why? What?" She stepped out of the lifts. "Is *that* my surprise? You must not know me at all, Malfoy, if you think I enjoy days off—"

"Go!" He whipped around, exasperated. "Go to your office, enjoy your surprise, and I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

He stalked away from her. Tense. He was nervous. She looked around the floor, finding several people heading into the conference room. She wasn't invited to the meeting?

Hermione shook her head and walked to her office. She opened the door slowly, expecting balloons to drop or fireworks or something dangerous.

A man sat behind her desk, and a woman in her guest chair. The man stood.

"Miss Granger." He smiled. He was the man she'd seen Draco with at the Valentine's Day gala. The one he'd met with at the office a few weeks ago.

Hermione blinked, about to ask who they were when the woman turned toward her, and Hermione was staring at the face of her mother.

She felt her lungs tighten, pulling in on themselves. She felt her skin buzz. She stared at her mother's face –

No. Monica Wilkins. This woman didn't know her. Hermione could see it on her face as she frowned at her.

Hermione's mouth was open, so she closed it. "Hello, how can I help you?" she croaked.

"Hermione?" A voice from her bookshelves. Her father was standing there. She hadn't noticed him. And he'd called her Hermione...

"Yes, that's me." She could feel her heart drumming. She couldn't be sure. She couldn't hope

–

Her mother stood, and her eyes were drawn back to her. She missed the way she moved.

"Your hair is different."

Hermione reached up and touched her hair, sleeked into large curls for court today. She remembered.

Monica Wilkins remembered a before.

"Mum?" Hermione's vision blurred. She felt her lips tremble and she pressed them together. Her father moved toward her as her mother nodded. She crossed her arms, holding herself

together. A tear tumbled down her face as her father touched her shoulder.

There was still a strange look on her mother's face, but her father hugged her, and she felt her chest break into fragments. When he released her, she turned to the man behind her desk.

"Who are you? What's happened? Are they cured?"

He smiled gently at her. "My name is Dr. Flanders. I'm a memory charm expert. Also, in the Muggle world I'm a psychologist. Your parents are on the *road* to recovery. The next step in the process involves you. Meeting you. Spending time with you."

"Step in the process?" She frowned at him. "How long have you been working with them?" She couldn't ignore her mother's eyes on her.

"About two weeks now," he said. "You three should talk. Ask each other questions. I'll remain a quiet observer in case things become too mentally taxing for them."

about the 'right thing to do.'" She laughed, a manic sound that couldn't be pulled back in. "It's because I love you.

"And I want to know you. I want to know everything about you. And I understand that I have to ask, but I want to be able to ask. I want you to tell me things when I ask," she said, stomping her foot. She felt like she'd continue this nonsense until he stopped her. "But if there's something you can't tell me, not right now, then maybe there's a – a hand signal or something.

Like you pull your ear—"

Finally, Draco stepped off the wall. She sucked in air, waiting for him. He turned to face her, and his cheeks were pink, his eyes were gliding over her face. He stepped toward her, crossing the invisible line between them.

"Ask," he whispered. "Ask me now."

She watched him get closer as she pulled air into her lungs. A million questions flying through her mind, but there was still the first question. The one she still hadn't heard him answer.

"Why didn't you identify me that night. At Malfoy Manor."

He took the final step into her, and she tilted her head back to see his face. He looked into her eyes, and small smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

"It was the right thing to do."

She blinked, drinking in his smirk, the heat in his eyes, and felt another tear fall. A small laugh bubbled up from her chest, breaking her into a thousand pieces. She gasped in air, and she felt her face crumble. She couldn't decide if she was laughing or crying, but with this man, it was safe to assume both.

She closed her eyes, pressure pinching behind her lids, and her lips pressing together, and leaned her head back against the wall.

"God, I hate you." She laughed again, feeling the hot air hit his face.

"I love you, too, Granger."

And he pressed his lips on hers. She squeezed her eyes tight and felt the tears running away.

She threw her arms around his shoulders and he slipped his hands to the curve of her spine.

She pulled back, the past five minutes hitting her in the face. "I'm sorry. That was probably a lot." She opened her eyes and he was still there in front of her. "The... marriage thing and staying every night—"

"Oh, I don't know." He shrugged, and she felt it in his arms. "I think the gazebo is available this weekend." He raised a brow at her and she laughed, slapping at his chest.

The sound of the lifts arriving. Waterstone was back. Draco pressed his lips against her one last time, and slipped out of her arms as the gates opened.

She smiled at him as Waterstone announced that it was time.

Waterstone nodded and walked down the hall back to the lift. Once she'd disappeared, Hermione tried to focus her mind.

"Anxious?" Draco said.

She chuckled. Of all the things in her life, the Wizengamot was giving her the least anxiety. She looked up at him. He leaned against the wall across from her, just as he had all those months ago, at Dolohov's trial. The day this mess began. Before Love Contracts and lists and walls.

She stared down at the stones between them, like a battle line not to cross.

Draco thought she didn't want to marry him.

He's been taking what he can get.

Wasn't that precisely what she had told Ginny last week?

And what had Ginny said.

You'll never know until you ask for it.

She looked up at him. He stared at the wall next to her feet. Waiting for something.

Waiting.

"I want to be with you." The words tumbled past her lips and landed on the stones between them. She watched him blink at the wall. She swallowed, pushing her heart back down from where it had caught in her throat. "I want to date you. In public. Not just lunch in your office." She checked in with him and he was still fixed on the point where the ground met the wall, eyes glazing. "I want to come out as a couple to M.C.G., and figure out what to do about the Love Contract and dating policies..."

She shook her head, trying to clear her rambling thoughts.

"I want to go to dinner with you, and be photographed in the *Prophet*. And hold hands on the way to the Apparition point." Her heart was pounding and she could feel the rhythm in her fingertips. "I want to spend the night again – every night. I want to have weekly meals with your mother, and let Mippy make me pumpkin soup, and spend *hours* in that library..."

Her voice cracked, and the corner of his shoulder that she'd locked her eyes on started to blur. She thought of how badly she wanted that library and him in it. And how easy it could be to have it...

"I want to be your wife." She heaved a breath, words spinning off her tongue. "And see you in the mornings, and marry you in the gazebo and – and rule the fucking *world* with you."

She couldn't look at him. He hadn't moved a muscle.

"And I don't know where the wires got crossed along the way, I don't know how things got so twisted. But that's all I've ever wanted." She slapped a tear away from her cheek and sniffed.

"When you ask me why I've done the things I have, I want to be able to say it's because I love you." She gasped as it came out of her. "That everything has been for you. It's never been

Hermione stared at him. Then her mother moved toward her. "I'm... slower to the process, unfortunately," her mother said, and Hermione felt another tear fall. "But I do recognize you. Hermione." She touched her face. "And I know you are mine."

Hermione nodded, an empty feeling tearing through her at the idea that her mother needed convincing. She would need to move slowly.

"Tell me how this is working. What do you know already?" she asked.

"Well," her father started. "Dr. Flanders started with our earliest memories. I mean to say, that I remember you quite vividly as a child."

Her mother nodded.

"And then having that boy tell us about you as teenager," her father said. "That was helpful."

"Yes, there were gaps, but Dr. Flanders explained that you were at a boarding school."

"Magic school. Remember, dear? We heard about the magic?"

"Yes, that's right. The magic is newer to me," her mother said, closing her eyes. "But then just two days ago, the boy let us... what is it? Watch a memory?"

"Yes," her father said. "That's it. We swam into a... thing and watched a few of his memories of you from school. Harold didn't like that boy much, did he?"

"Harry, dear. His friend's name is Harry."

Hermione blinked, feeling her heart crying out. "What boy?"

The floor was dead as she excused herself from her office for a moment. Just a few of the interns and secretaries gossiping in a corner, jumping apart in surprise when they saw her.

Her heels clicked on the way to the conference room. The door swung open for her, and all eyes turned to her as she marched in. Cuthbert Mockridge was standing, giving his report on his department. The senior staff sat in their places around the table and the associates lining the walls, except for Walter who sat in her place at the table.

"Miss Granger," Mockridge said in greeting. "As I was saying..."

Hermione locked eyes on the man at the end of the table. "The boy" as her parents called him. His eyes wary and tense as he watched her walk around the table, heading straight for him.

Mockridge continued his speech. Blaise moved out of her way. And Draco looked like he was prepared to be hit. Her hand shot out and grabbed his collar, bringing her lips onto his. She heard whistling, sputtering, gasping, but she kissed him. His fingers wound up into her hair, and she smiled against his lips.

She pulled back and looked up. Mockridge was squinting at them, and a few of the male associates looked taken aback. But the women were giggling, including Mockridge's associate

who knew Draco's coffee routine. Blaise was grinning like a loon, and even Dorothea had a small smirk on her face.

"Hello, yes. Hi." She sputtered. She gestured between herself and Draco. "Draco Malfoy and I are dating. We, uh... Yes. We're dating. Boyfriend and girlfriend." She nodded at the table. "So we'll need to take a look at that... er, Love Contract business. And just... abolish that, I say."

She shrugged. Blaise gave a "Here! Here!"

"Because... because I love him." She looked at Draco. He was blushing, and trying to fight the smile creeping onto his face. "And he loves me – I think –"

"I do, yes." He grimed at the conference table.

"So. That's that! I'll, uh, let you all get back to it." She waved her hand at Mockridge. "Continue on. I'll be heading to dinner with my parents now."

She nodded at them all, ignoring Blaise's giggling, and left the room.

She heard applause following her. And smiled.

At dinner with her parents, they kept with very easy questions and stories. She asked them about Australia and their life there. They asked her about her current life, instead of the past they couldn't remember. Her mother didn't take her eyes off of her the entire evening.

They were set up at a hotel nearby, so Hermione walked them back and hugged them goodbye in the lobby. They would have lunch tomorrow on her break from Cornerstone.

She Apparated home, climbed the stairs to her and Ginny's apartment, and opened the door to find Draco, Harry, and Ginny visiting around the small dining room table. Before she could process Draco in her living space, Ginny had launched herself at her.

"You won! You WON!" She tightened her arms around Hermione's ribs. She pulled back. "And your parents! Your PARENTS!"

"Er, yes. Both." She looked past the ginger curls to Draco. "Draco told you?"

"Yes, Harry and I will have a session with them tomorrow."

"A session?"

Draco stepped forward. "Dr. Flanders thinks it may help if your parents saw memories of them interacting with you. From an outside observer."

"Like in Diagon Alley, buying books with Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

Hermione nodded, still quite overwhelmed by it all. She was desperate to pick Dr. Flanders' brain about how this all worked.

Ginny looked back and forth between Hermione and Draco in the silence.

"Er, Harry and I are just going to... go somewhere... for a while. Days maybe."

"Thank you. What a splendid idea."

"Oh, come off it Granger." He rolled his eyes and she widened hers. "Like you haven't been setting the rules for this since the beginning."

"What?!" If that wasn't the exact opposite from how she felt about this whole thing...

"If you've changed your mind, you need to tell him," he said. "He's been taking what he can get."

"Changed my mind about what?!" Hermione's voice was rising, but Blaise stayed very neutral as he spoke next.

"You said you wouldn't marry him."

She felt her skin prickle, and her blood chill, and her eyes drilled into him.

She had. She'd said it to Narcissa when she'd left Azkaban. She had needed her to stop pushing. She'd needed to end Narcissa's delusions at the time.

And Narcissa had told Draco?

And he still believed it?

She stared at Blaise Zabini, the only person close to Draco who'd been allowed inside his mind.

A knock at her door.

"Granger?" Draco's voice "Ready?"

She jumped. "Yes, yes. Come in."

Draco opened the door, eyeing Blaise, and Hermione quickly grabbed her paperwork, sliding past both Slytherins as she headed for the lifts, her head a mess.

Draco, Cornelius Waterstone, and Hermione stood in the lifts in the Ministry, taking them down, down, to the Wizengamot.

Waterstone was chattering the entire time. She had done her research on each member of the Wizengamot, noting where they stood on issues in the past. She was very confident going into this trial.

They stood in the long stone hallways for twenty minutes or so, Waterstone mentioning Wizengamot members who might appreciate more eye-contact than others, and Hermione stood still, taking it all in.

"Cornelia," Draco said. "You know what would be most helpful right now?" She heard his voice take on that soothing coo that he used when he was about to manipulate someone into thinking they had a bright idea. "I think it would put everyone at ease to know when they'll begin."

"Oh, absolutely," Waterstone said. "I'll head up, and see if I can't watch the Wizengamot as they arrive, shall I?"

She looked up to see Blaise in her doorway, holding a teacup.

"Hello, Blaise. I'm just on my way out."

He watched her quietly as she fumbled around with paperwork. When he didn't leave, she flipped her eyes to him.

"The two of you made up?" he asked, brow lifting. He took a sip of his tea.

She looked over his shoulder for eavesdroppers. "Er, yes, in a way."

"Nothing a little life-or-death, can't cure, eh?"

She looked at him again. There was an edge to his voice and a tightness in his lips.

"Is there something you need, Blaise?"

He sipped from his cup again, emptying it. Then vanished it with a wave and shut the door behind him. She watched as he placed his hands in his pockets and leaned back.

"I need to ask you a question, Granger. One that I posed to him a long time ago." Blaise watched her carefully, and Hermione felt her brows pulling together. "Is this a game?"

She blinked at him. "A game?"

"A bit of cat-and-mouse? Something to break the rules a bit?" He shrugged at her, and she felt very cold. "Or...are you in it for the long haul?"

She opened her mouth to reply and it was like she'd been Confunded. "Because if you're not going to see this all the way through," he said, leveling his eyes on her, "then I beg you.... Back the fuck off."

She felt like she'd been slapped. She hadn't seen Blaise's eyes like this since Hogwarts. Since bullying in the corridors. Even then, there was teasing joy. But now, she was being chastised. And it was completely unnecessary.

She felt the anger rise in her, about to tell him to mind his business and get the hell out of her office when he spoke again, quieter.

"Please," he said. His eyes softened. "He won't survive this."

Hermione felt her anger slip away. She locked eyes with Blaise, and nodded.

"I appreciate your concern for him," she said. She cleared her throat and looked at her carpets. "But I do love him." She felt her heart thundering. "I have for a long time."

She waited. Waited for Blaise to laugh at her, or cheer in his victory at getting her to open up to him.

"But have you changed your mind about a future with him?"

She looked up at him. "Changed my mind?" There was no smugness on his face. Just curiosity.

"Still no dinner dates," Blaise said. "No going public with him."

Hermione started to sputter. "I... That's been his decision as much as mine—"

She grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him past Hermione. She grinned at Ginny, and just before the door closed on them, she heard Harry say, "But I made dinner."

She looked at Draco, standing with his hands in his pockets in the middle of her living room.

"Don't I pay you, Granger?" He looked around the small flat. "Surely with Weasley's Quidditch salary and your measly income, you can afford an upgrade."

She glared at him. "I like this apartment. Besides, I'm barely in it."

He smirked at her and stepped closer. "You outed us to the entire office today."

She winced. "I did. I really did, didn't I?" She pressed her lips together as he stepped closer again, sliding his arms around her waist. "Was there a discussion of what to do with the Love Contract, or will you need to resign?"

He smiled as he kissed her. She brought her hands up to his arms, holding him to her. She pulled back.

"Did you really show my parents your memories?"

He looked away. "A few. Just about everyone has seen into my mind now, so I thought, what's the difference?"
She smiled as he lowered his lips to her neck, sucking on his favorite spot. Her pulse sped, and her body began to sing.

"Which memories?" she breathed.

"Wouldn't you like to know." His breath ghosted across her neck.

"Thank you, Draco." She ran her hands up his shoulders and into his hair. "Thank you for bringing them back to me."

"Of course." He pulled her closer to him and whispered, "It was the right thing to do."

She slapped his shoulder, and he laughed. A sound that made itself quite at home.

"HERMIONE GRANGER AND DRACO MALFOY IN LOVE!!!"

by Rita Skeeter

A love story for the ages. A romance against all odds.

Yes, that's right, fair readers. Hermione Granger has hooked herself a Malfoy. And Draco Malfoy must be doing something right, himself.

The couple was seen just last week at dinner with a couple that could only be Miss Granger's parents. After saying goodnight, Granger and Malfoy were seen holding hands and canoodling on the way home. They have been spotted several other times throughout the week, even on a double-date with Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Will there be a race to the altar?

When asked for comment on their new relationship, Draco Malfoy responded, "She's a very important person to me. We're very serious about each other."

Hermione Granger declined to comment. Quite nudey.

Of course, you know me, readers. I have such a voracity for knowledge! I reached out to Narcissa Malfoy for comment.

"Hermione has long felt like a daughter to me. I couldn't be more supportive."

"Well, from one friend to another, I must tell you. I think it is safe to say that Draco Malfoy is finally off the market.

We at the Daily Prophet wish him the best of luck with his Golden Girl.



Two Years Later

She stepped through the fireplace right on schedule. The guard took her wand, read her the rules, and searched for weapons on her.

She followed a younger guard through the maze until she was brought before a familiar stone door. The guard stood to the side, and Hermione pushed open the door.

He sat at the metal table. Hair pulled back, hands folded. He looked the exact same as he had in the hospital, only two years older.

"Miss Granger." He grinned. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Lucius." She nodded. "It's Mrs. Malfoy, now."

She walked to the metal chair in front of him and sat. She crossed her legs and leaned back. "Yes," he grinned. "I was quite taken with the photographs from the *Prophet*. Miss Parkinson's first wedding gown design, was it not?"

"It was. She has several more offers now." Hermione lifted a brow. "It was a beautiful day. Perfect. And you were right about the gardens. The gazebo was the perfect location for the ceremony. Reception in the ballroom."

She clasped her hands together on the table, matching his pose, and managed to flash the Malfoy family diamond at him.

His eyes flickered down to it. He smirked and looked back up at her.

"What is it you are really here for, Mrs. Malfoy?"

She grimmed tightly. "I hear that you are headed to trial next year to negotiate your sentence down. What with your good behavior and the unfortunate incident of your stabbing two years ago, I have it on good authority that you might stand a chance of getting out of here in five years."

He watched her carefully. "Well, that's good to hear."

She sat very still, just like Draco taught her. "I may be enticed to testify on your behalf. Perhaps even get your ex-wife and son to do the same."

His eyes glittered at her before returning to dead grey orbs. "What is it you want in return?"

The next day at the office, Hermione was swamped preparing for the first day of the werewolf trial on Monday. She barely saw Draco once, but there was a cup of coffee waiting for her on her desk when she got in.

On Saturday, she arrived at the café to find Draco already sitting and chatting with Monsieur DuBois, laughing at something the instructor said. She pulled a chair and Monsieur DuBois promptly ignored her for the first ten minutes, then finally began quizzing her on modern architecture.

Sunday morning Draco was there with Madame Bernard, and the older woman thought it was the perfect opportunity for Hermione to test her skills and try to plan an imaginary party at the Manor with Draco. Draco insisted on everything being green and silver, just to piss her off. On both occasions, he said goodbye immediately after the lesson. He didn't offer to walk her back to Cornerstone, and he didn't show any affection towards her. Not that he could. They were never alone. By Monday morning, she was seriously confused on their relationship status.

He greeted her with coffee at the reception desk that morning. She thanked him, and he walked her the twenty feet to her door, discussing the day ahead. Draco would head to the Ministry early to handle Skeeter so that Hermione and Waterstone could focus on the case. She took twenty minutes to gather her notes and practice her opening arguments before she started packing up. She should have known to close her door.

"So, your coffee delivery is back on schedule, I see."

Hermione thanked her. She stood stoically while Miss Truesdale suggested a few beginner classes that she taught over the summer to the students while they were out of school. She offered for Hermione to join the twelve-year-old pure-bloods, as that was the level she was currently at. Hermione raised a brow and responded, "I'll consider it."

Hermione waved goodbye to the crocodile-woman. Draco held the door open for her to the lobby, biting back a smile.

As the door swung closed, he said, "For what it's worth, I think you're on level with fourteen-year-olds. At least."

She sent him a withering glare as she changed her shoes and bundled up again.

"Do you and Monsieur DuBois always meet at that caff?"

She looked up at him. "Er... yes, mainly. Why?"

"And you and Madame Bernard have tea at that French restaurant?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Like I said." He reached up and tucked her scarf in. "You've been working too long without a partner."

He lifted a brow and exited into the brisk evening air.

She separated from him, moving to dance with the imaginary man two couples away. The place Draco had always been.

She faced the mirror on the side wall of the dance studio, and saw her hair was falling out of its ponytail, her face was flushed, and she had a silly grin on her face. Over her reflection's shoulder, she watched as Draco bowed. He rose, spine straight like always, and the mirror in front of him showed her his face as he caught her eyes. She felt the silly grin spreading as she dipped into a curtsey.

He brought his right hand up, palm facing his reflection and his imaginary partner. She brought hers up, like she had twice before when it was him in front of her. His eyes sparkled at her reflection in the mirror, and as he stepped forward to spin around, she watched a thousand different Dracos and Hermiones dance around each other in the bouncing reflections.

She thought of how terrified she felt when she had spun to him at the Yule Ball. How she waited for him to spit venom at her, and he had only bowed, watching her closely. She had felt out of breath as she brought her hand to his, keeping their skin from connecting, afraid he would snap at her, reel back and wipe his hand on his pant leg.

She turned around herself and caught his eyes across the room, and laughed.

"Miss Granger. Keep focused on your new partner."

This made her laugh harder. Draco smiled at her, biting his cheek.

"You must give your full attention to the new partner you meet," Miss Truesdale called. Hermione finished the circle and faced the mirror again, watching Draco's reflection. "The new partner in the French Waltz signifies the end of our youthful escapades." Hermione bit her tongue to keep from commenting on the *significance* of ballroom dancing. She turned and moved back to Draco, meeting again in the center of the room. Miss Truesdale continued, narrating their movements.

"And in returning to your original partner" – she faced Draco again – "it signifies that you have forsaken all others," – Hermione watched as Draco lifted his hand chest-level again, waiting – "and you have chosen your partner for life."

She blinked up at him. He swallowed. She lifted her hand, bringing it palm-to-palm with him, and just before they started the final spin around each other, she pressed her skin to his.

They stepped around each other. His hand was warm, and pressed against hers. She bit her lip, watching his face as they finished.

He bowed. She curtseyed. His eyes were deep and almost blue.

"Adequate, Miss Granger."

Miss Truesdale's voice broke her out of her trance. She shook her head, taking a deep breath, and listened while the woman gave her notes.

Hermione pulled a slip of paper from her pocket, and slid it across the table to him. She watched him frown at it.

"And what's this?"

"A list," she said. His eyes flipped up to her. "Of qualities in my child's grandfather." She rested her hand on her belly, and sent him the Malfoy smirk.

When Hermione stepped up to try it, she avoided Draco's stare. It felt like flying class at Hogwarts all over again, everyone watching as the know-it-all found something she didn't know.

She stumbled over the footprints several times, and heard a "tsk tsk" from the general direction of the gramophone.

"You see, Mr. Malfoy? She is unfocused and uncoordinated."

"Hm," Draco chuckled, and she ignored his eyes on her. "Perhaps she's been working too long without a partner."

She looked at him, feet fumbling as he approached her. She stared at him in horror as he reached for her hand and her waist.

"Er, I don't quite know the steps yet—"

"Come on, Granger. Let me take you for a spin."

She watched as he slipped one hand across her ribs as the other grasped her hand. She heard the music start up, and looked down at her feet as Miss Truesdale counted them in.

"Look at me," he whispered, and she looked into his eyes just as he stepped forward. She countered back. She held his stare as he turned them to face the corner of the room, and as his palm on her ribs guided her to step a certain way. She didn't blink away from him when Miss Truesdale called out, something about staying on her toes.

They returned to center, and his eyes were smirking at her. Miss Truesdale was giving notes, leathery fingers tilting her head, and prodding at her spine. She tried to concentrate on the feeling of being in his arms.

Working too long without a partner.

When they tried again, adding a bit more complexity, she focused on the feeling of Draco's thighs brushing hers as he led them around the room. She felt very light and free, and when he lifted their hands, and pushed her ribs to spin her underneath, her feet obeyed and she floated back into his arms. Her jaw opened and she burst out a laugh when he lifted a brow at her.

Miss Truesdale was quite pleased with her performance, but reminded her that ballroom dancing was no laughing matter. The ex-ballerina had Draco lead her through several other dance forms Hermione had been working on over the weeks. And Draco was right. It was infinitely easier with a partner.

The music played for the French Waltz. Her eyes snapped to him, and the corner of his mouth tilted upward. He bowed to her, and she responded with a curtsey. He reached for her, and she moved into his arms, beginning the dance she knew so well. For the first time, as his partner.

After twisting about the room with Draco, she couldn't help but think of how light his hand was on her ribs compared to Viktor's firm grip. How Viktor would need to stare at his feet for the third formation, but Draco kept his eyes on her.

"Then why are you..." She caught her breath. Was he here to shame her about the classes? To forbid her to help him anymore? "I'm taking these classes, Draco," she tried, firmly. "I only have one more week left, and I intend to finish. The inheritance will transfer and that's that. I made a deal."

He nodded at the floor. She watched him, waiting. He gave her a small smirk and pulled the door open, holding it for her. "After you."

She stared at him, not comprehending. She felt her feet move, and entered the bright studio, feeling him follow her.

"Miss Granger, you are two minutes late." Her stern voice carried to them across the hardwood floors.

Hermione opened her mouth to apologize, but Draco cut her off.

"I'm afraid that was my fault, Miss Truesdale."

The ex-ballerina spun around in a delicate twirl, and when her eyes landed on Draco, they shone.

"Young Mr. Malfoy! What a lovely surprise." The seventy-year-old woman – who still insisted on being called "miss" – let her eyes wander down Draco's form as he crossed the floor, smiling at her and taking her hand to kiss her knuckles. "You have been so missed."

Draco grinned, and Hermione tried not to roll her eyes, wondering if these teachers who sang his praises actually remembered his talents, or if they were just enamored by him and his mother. Was he really this excellent at *everything*?

Miss Truesdale asked Draco about Narcissa, gave her condolences on his father's health, and flicked her wand at the gramophone, shooing Hermione like a fly towards the ballet bar. Hermione frowned at the old bat, and began her warm-up. She tried to ignore the chatter from them, focusing on why Draco was here, sitting in a chair at the front of the room.

Miss Truesdale's voice floated to her. "If you are here to check on her progress, Mr. Malfoy, I am sorry to report that she needs *much* more time and focus to truly compare to girls her age."

Hermione pressed her lips together to keep from barking back as she came down from her final position at the bar. She heard Draco chuckle. Miss Truesdale waved her wand and footprints appeared on the studio floor, laying out the routine she would be learning.

"Miss Granger," she said. "We will learn Viennese Waltz formations today. Change your shoes."

Hermione quickly swapped her ballet flats for the practice heels and joined Miss Truesdale at the center of the room. The older woman one-two-three'd her way across the floor. Hermione watched the woman's feet match perfectly on each footprint, spinning in circles, and confusing Hermione's eyes.

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

Chapter Twenty Four



Thursday, March 2, 2000 - later

She runs in from the rain, kicking off her shoes, shucking her scarf, and I'm smiling at her.

Late for dance class. Like an eighty-year-old who desperately didn't want to go.

When she sees me sitting, she gasps, clutching her pearls, like I'm the killer in a horror story. "What are you doing here?" she wheezes. "Is everything – Is your father doing alright?"

Thinking of me. Going from zero to ax-murder to genuine concern in .07 seconds.

I stand, and before I can answer, she's onto another emotion.

"I'm taking these classes, Draco." She glares at me. "I only have one more week left, and I intend to finish. The inheritance will transfer and that's that. I made a deal."

Stubborn little wench.

I open the door for her, and sweep my hand to guide her entrance. "After you."

She stares at me for a few moments, and then enters.

A sharp admonishment comes from the direction of the gramophone. "Miss Granger, you are two minutes late."

Merlin, fuck that fucking voice.

"I'm afraid that was my fault, Miss Truesdale," I say, and the withered old bat spins around, face cracking into a delighted smile.

"Young Mr. Malfoy! What a lovely surprise." She pats at her grey hair, and slips her hand into mine as I kiss her knuckles. "You have been so missed."

"I'm glad to hear it," I flirt back.

"How is your mother? I was so sorry to hear about your father's incident," she pouts, and then with a wave of her hand the gramophone tunes up and Granger is sent to the ballet bar.

I answer in the respectful way, eyes catching on the evening *Prophet* laying on her end table. A picture of my family stares up at me.

She must know who's paying her, right? She must know why she's been required to stay past her usual classes for private lessons with a Muggle-born girl.

Truesdale floats over a chair for me to sit in at the front of the room, and slides over her own stool.

"If you are here to check on her progress, Mr. Malfoy, I am sorry to report that she needs much more time and focus to truly compare to girls her age."

And there it is.

I smile at the dig. And I wonder if some of my quips and insults as a child were absorbed through watching Truesdale "teach."

I turn my eyes to see Granger in her final demi plié and grand plié, ankles rolling outward, backside slipping out of alignment.

And maybe there's some truth in the insult.

I bite back my grin.

Truesdale sets up the Viennese Waltz on the floor, guiding Granger through the formations and turns. Her cheeks burn bright as she stumbles. Her eyes pretend I don't exist.

"You see, Mr. Malfoy? She is unfocused and uncoordinated."

You cow. Get stuffed.

"Hm. Perhaps she's been working too long without a partner," I say.

Granger's eyes finally meet mine as I move toward her. There's that ax-murder fear again...

"Er, I don't quite know the steps yet—"

"Come on, Granger," I whisper. "Let me take you for a spin."

I take her in my arms, one hand along her back, one sliding against her palm. She's tense, already in fight or flight mode. She looks down at our feet, eyes flitting around at the footsteps she has to follow.

"Look at me," I say. Trust me.

Her eyes land on mine, and we glide.

My feet guide us, my hand pushes and tugs at her ribs, and her eyes stay on me. Her breath catches as I turn us, and her eyes deepen, like tunnels I can dance through.

It feels nothing like Legilimency. And yet it's everything like it. Connecting to her in this way. This trust she gives me. And the feeling of nothing between us. No space, or bricks, or monsters. No misunderstandings or assumptions. No blood or war.

And when the music stops and Truesdale adjusts her spine and her elbows, she stays in my arms, in my eyes, letting me into her very soul, and searching for mine underneath all the cobwebs and shadows.

The Right Thing To Do

Chapter Thirty Six



After leaving St. Mungo's, Hermione headed back to the office to close up and grab the belongings she'd left behind, including her dance bag.

She had her very last lesson with Miss Truesdale tonight. Then on Saturday, her last lesson with Monsieur DuBois, and on Sunday morning her last lesson with Madame Bernard. Tuesday would be her last lesson with Madame Michele, and the last tenth of the inheritance would transfer at 9PM.

She spent some time answering letters and catching up on her desk, reading the evening *Prophet* detailing as much of Lucius Malfoy's condition as Skeeter knew. She left the office with five minutes to spare before her lesson, Apparating to a point several blocks away from the small dance studio. Hermione was glad to be done with these classes, but even more so after her conversation with Lucius Malfoy that day.

You would have taken those classes sooner or later.

She shook her head to clear it as she sprinted inside, quickly shucking her scarf, coat, and mittens, and hanging them on the coat rack in the tiny lobby area just outside the studio door.

She kicked off her rain boots, strapped on the little ballet slippers, and grabbed the two-inch heels that Miss Truesdale had her practice in. She was so glad Pansy had her in a dress today, or else she would have to change into one of the studio's rehearsal skirts.

She turned to rush into the studio, with seconds to spare, and found Draco. Sitting in the tiny lobby waiting area, watching her.

She gasped in shock, then flushed in embarrassment at her own melodrama.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, hand over her heart. "Is everything – Is your father doing alright?"

He nodded and stood, placing his hands in his pockets. Still watching her.

"But most importantly," Father begins, voice calm and even, "I knew if that girl gave you even a scrap of affection, you would follow her like a dog for the rest of your life. You'd be lost forever." He presses his lips together, and I feel my heart in my neck. "So, yes, I meddled." He scratches his jaw and grins. "I told you. I'll get you whatever makes you happy."

I close my eyes, an impending headache creeping through my brain. "In the future, I'd like to do the 'getting,' Father."

"Then what are you still doing here?"

I open my eyes. He's shaking his head at me. A small grin. Mother is looking at me over her shoulder, wearing a similar expression.

"If I'm not mistaken, she'll be at a dance studio in an hour." He lifts a brow at me. "She could use a partner."

I think of her arms around me, holding me. The way she shut down my father with one glance.

How she showed up for me. How she always shows up for me.

I nod at my Father, our best impression of a goodbye, and stumble to the door on my way to find her.

I pass through the door, face-to-face with the guard, before I turn back to wait for Mother. When she doesn't follow, I look around the curtain, watching her float to sit on the bed at his side, her back to me.

Father's eyes dance across her face, and his hand reaches for hers. She pulls her arm back. "Don't do this again," she whispers to him, barely loud enough for me to hear. She leans forward, and pushes his hair behind his ear. "Or I'll stab you myself."

He smiles up at her, turning his cheek into her palm.

"I know you will," he says.

I watch for a few moments as they stare into each other. She pulls her hand back, and hovers near him. She tells him about a book she's read, and he watches her face, listening and nodding. He tries to reach for her hand again and she shifts away into the chair at his side, but continues telling him about the book.

He smiles at the right moments, and frowns at the bad.

Like a dog. Looking for scraps.

I let the door close behind me, and disappear down the corridor, heading to a dance studio.

The music plays again. And when she's doing better than before, I turn her under my arm. Her feet stumble, but she comes back to me with ease, eyes wide and surprised, and she *laughs*. And I see a blue dress spinning. And a girl laughing as she stumbles into her partner. Laughing and happy.

Truesdale, of course, has to be a cunt about it.

"The dance floor is no place for laughter, Miss Granger." And then she added under her breath, "Excellent work."

We go through several other dances and styles, testing my memory as much as hers. She trusts me. She watches me. Her eyes stay on mine, not drifting to our feet or to Truesdale.

And then the gramophone plays the French Waltz. She looks at me with wide eyes like we have a joke. Like we've known each other for years and someone has just brought up a simple thing of no consequence to them, and we just smile in our tea at each other.

I bow to her. And she smiles. And when she curtseys, a beautiful dip, steady and low, she keeps her eyes on me, and it's like we were always meant to meet each other this way, in this dance.

She floats into my arms, and it's clear this dance is much more practiced for her. She anticipates my steps instead of letting me push her where she needs to be. She lifts her own arm to spin under. She doesn't squeeze my hand, pressing when she forgets the steps. Instead it just rests against my skin.

We part from each other, and she smiles at me in the reflection of the dance studio mirrors when we greet our new partner. I bring my palm up, watching her, thinking of how she wouldn't touch me. Even after I found a way to orbit her, found a pathway to appear in front of her, closer than I'd had any right to be. I stole her breath, and hoped I could take more from her, and all she had the courage to do was bring her palm within an inch of mine.

Even though she wanted to.

Brave little lion, still waiting for the snake to strike.

She laughs, bringing me out of my thoughts, and as we spin around imaginary partners, we have a moment of facing each other across the room. And she giggles.

It's contagious as Dragon Pox. I smile back at her, loving the sound of it.

"Miss Granger. Keep focused on your new partner."

She laughs outright, and I grin at her.

Truesdale starts in on the metaphoric symbolism of the dance, and I see Granger's eyes dull, in the same way they used to in Trelawney's classroom when she had to hold her tongue.

"The new partner in the French Waltz signifies the end of our youthful escapades," Truesdale sings from across the room, voice carrying over the gramophone. Granger one-two-threes her

way back to me, and I lift my hand, palm facing her. "And in returning to your original partner, it signifies that you have forsaken all others, and you have chosen your partner for life."

Something shifts in her eyes. She blinks at me, hearing Truesdale's symbolism.

My hand is lifted, facing her, offering myself to her. Choosing her.

And I wait lifetimes for her.

She lifts her hand, and looks into my eyes as she presses her skin to mine.

We spin, moving around each other, connected. Finally.

We're back at the beginning. Our hands drop. I bow. She curtseys. And I could drop to one knee right now, based solely on the look in her eyes.

"Adequate, Miss Granger?"

She blinks, breaking away from me. And the moment is gone.

Truesdale offers her a few classes with twelve-year-olds over the summer, to complement the level she is currently at. I smile at the black floors while Granger turns orange with rage.

We exit to the lobby, and I say, "For what it's worth, I think you're on level with *fourteen-year-olds. At least.*"

She glares at me, and it's just as exhilarating as her smile.

I watch her change out of her shoes and toss her scarf around her neck. I want to take her home. I want to dance with her in a more familiar way, where she's *vastly* more practiced. But I have things to do.

"Do you and Monsieur DuBois always meet at that café?"

She looks up at me, surprised. "Er... yes, mainly. Why?"

I ignore the question. "And you and Madame Bernard have tea at that French restaurant?"

She's suspicious now. "Why?"

I grin at her. Her scarf flutters around her shoulders, and I need to touch her again. "Like I said." My fingers twist her scarf into her coat, knuckles brushing her neck. "You've been working too long without a partner."

She stares at me, and I smirk, leaving and heading to the Ministry.

~*~

Friday, March 3, 2000

When the door opens, Monica Wilkins/Jean Granger stands there, smiling softly. Her eyes drift over my face.

"Can I help you?" she says, with an amiable smile.

And my gut slices open.

She doesn't even recognize me anymore.

There's sand in my throat and I can't even begin to explain who I am to her.

"I wasn't so sure myself. I thought she might have fancied you, yes." His eyes gleam at me. "But it wasn't until I received confirmation from Madame Michele that she attended her first lesson that I knew she truly cared for you."

My jaw clicks. I feel mother shift next to me. She moves to the window, examining the flowers on the ledge.

I try to follow his logic. Try to figure out what he wants next.

"You've misevaluated her. She's driven by what's right. She attended those classes because you morally obligated her to me—"

"Don't be an idiot, Draco. It doesn't suit you," he says. I snap my jaw closed. "She knew exactly what that little list was when I gave it to her."

"You're both right," Mother says. She stares out the window, hand on her clavicle. "She's not like us. She doesn't know how to play these games. But she's desperately in love with you, and has no idea what to do about it."

Desperately.

I blink at the back of her head. I turn my eyes back to Father and he's smiling at me. I look down.

"What do you want from us, Father. What do I have to do to get you to leave her alone?"

"I just want you to be happy, Draco—"

"*Nothing* has been further from the truth."

He frowns. "I've... taken steps, yes. Steps to make sure she was suitable for you. To make sure she was the right choice. I wanted to be sure she felt the same for you."

I snarl, "That isn't your responsibility—"

"It is my responsibility!" His voice booms throughout the room. I feel it clap in my chest.

"As Lord of Malfoy Manor, it is my responsibility," he hisses. He sits in a hospital gurney, but it feels like he's in his armchair in the drawing room, holding court with me. "You think I don't know you? Haven't watched you over the years?" he growls at me. "I knew you'd disappear with her the moment you could. Knew you'd give everything to that girl without a moment's thought about your duty to this family!"

"My duty to marry a pure-blood, you mean?" I lean forward, grabbing the rails at the end of his bed. "My duty to marry a girl who knows how to host parties and curtsey and recognize the Rembrandt we have in our ballroom."

"Yes." His eyes harden into mine. "All of those things are important. Your mother can testify to that."

I see her shift in the corner of my eye, but she doesn't speak to deny it. I think of Pansy. I'm too late.

If you want her in your world, Draco, there are things she needs to learn.

He goes to sit in my office chair, spinning it in circles until I've collected myself enough to join him at my desk.

~*~

I call a meeting with Potter and Ginny Weasley. Dr. Flanders thinks more memories will help, especially ones that show Hermione with her parents.

Potter is finishing dinner on the stove as we chat. He's quite interested in Dr. Flanders and his techniques, but Ginny Weasley can't stop beaming at me. It's unnerving.

We sit around the small dining table, and I try not to notice all the little touches that scream Hermione here. The books, the pictures, the Muggle things that Ginny Weasley would have no use for.

"So, tomorrow, if your schedules allow?" I ask.

"Absolutely," Potter grins. "This is... It's quite extraordinary, Malfoy. What you've done."

I stand. "I've done nothing. Just... paid someone, really." I take one last look around the flat, and start to take my leave.

"You won't stay for dinner?" Potter asks.

"Hermione should be home soon, don't you think?" Ginny grins at me with manic eyes.

I scowl at her.

"I don't want to intrude—"

"Oh, Draco, dear, we're practically *family* now," Weasley says in a gross imitation of my mother's friends. Her eyes sparkle. "Besides, I need to grill you about your intentions."

I swallow. I've never wanted siblings for this exact reason. Too familiar.

"Granger and I have talked," I say, still standing, trying to extricate myself. "And we're... on the same page now. We want the same things."

Potter nods at me, trying to catch up, but Ginny Weasley stands quickly.

"When are you proposing?"

I blink at her. "That's... I think we're a bit early for that—"

"You have it on you don't you," she whispers.

"I have no idea what you're—"

And she's on me. Shoving me into the wall, hands fumbling through my pockets.

"OW! Weasley! What the fuck are you doing?"

Potter is protesting, but this witch grew up with six brothers. I grab for her hands and she slaps me away, digging into a different place in my robes.

"POTTER!" I look to him and he's shrugging at me, helpless. I'm a second away from shoving Ginny Weasley off of my person when she sings.

"Aha!"

And she's holding a golden box, flipping open the lid, and gasping. She stumbles away from me, staring down at the ring. Potter appears over her shoulder and his eyebrows jump.

"Blimey, Malfoy," Weasley says.

"It's... I'm not doing it tonight. I was just—"

"Oh, yes, you *must* do it tonight." Weasley looks up at me, eyes bright and mischievous.

I shake my head. "No, I... I want to speak with Henry. When he owns his mind again." I look down. "I've spent a lot of time with them, and it's only right that I..."

I trail off, and when I look up, Potter is regarding me with something... something disgusting really. Something like pride or acceptance or friendship and it's awful. I sneer at him like I used to and he smiles at me.

Weasley pushes the ring box into Potter's hands. "Harry, quick. Bake a pot pie. We'll bury the ring in it and all have supper together and—"

"Excuse me?" I gasp. "You'll do no such thing."

The locks in the door start to turn, and we toss the ring box between us, running like mice into a casual position at the table. Granger pushes open the door and Weasley is jumping into her arms, congratulating her, while I tuck the ring box back into a pocket, recasting the Notice-Mc-Not Charm.

We explain to her that they'll have a session with her parents and Dr. Flanders tomorrow, and her eyes don't leave mine.

Weasley catches on. She makes some excuse for leaving, dragging Potter behind her even as he protests over the dinner still uneaten on the stove.

And now we're alone in her flat. Her... tiny little flat.

"Don't pay you, Granger? Surely with Weasley's Quidditch salary and your measly income, you can afford an upgrade."

"I like this place," she huffs. "Besides, I'm barely in it."

And I plan to keep it that way. I grin at her and say, "You outed us to the entire office today."

"I did. I really did, didn't I?" She's a bit nervous about it still, so I step in to her, touching her, holding her. "Was there a discussion of what to do with the Love Contract, or will you need to resign?"

Oh, she's hilarious. I smile against her lips. She pulls me close.

I try to kiss her. To really kiss her, like I've wanted to, but she pulls away and looks up at me.

"Did you really show my parents your memories?"

I stare at a point over her shoulder, still trying to fight the bricks that snap into place. "A few," I say. "Just about everyone has seen into my mind now, so I thought, what's the difference?"

She smiles, and I kiss her neck, finding her skin just as sweet as I remembered.

"Which memories?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

I can tell she aches to ask me more. But she just drags her fingers through my hair, and whispers into my ear, "Thank you, Draco. Thank you for bringing them back to me."

I press our hips together, and smile against her skin when I say, "Of course. It was the right thing to do."

She slaps my shoulder, blushing and trying to pull away from me. I'm laughing when I tug her back, pressing her into the hallway wall. She fights me, cursing my name until I press my tongue to hers, and I feel her melt back into me.

My hands slide around her waist, dropping down to hold her backsides close to me. She sighs a small moan into my mouth, and I pepper kisses across her jaw until I whisper into her ear, "Show me your bedroom, Granger."

She kisses me quickly, and tugs us down the hall to the door on the left. I drink in as much of her bedroom as I can before I'm shoved to sit on her mattress, her legs climbing over mine and her lips on me again.

I laugh into her, thinking how easily she could have talked me into something slow and sweet today, but this witch is randy.

My hands slide up her sides and back down, rounding over her backside. It sounds like she growls against my lips. I squeeze her, filling my palms with her cheeks and rubbing circles against her dress.

She sighs against my lips, shifting on her knees to press closer to me. Her breasts push into my chest, and her hips open wide to press against mine. Her hands hold my head close to her as she devours me, and my palms slide across her dress, down to her thighs, rounding her knees and back, taking her dress with them.

My cock presses against her, and she rolls forward against it.

How many times have I wanted to this thought. This barest of ideas. Hermione Granger's thighs on either side of mine, her hands threading through my hair.

My hands slide over her thighs, and she mumbles against my lips, "Touch me."

She's wet, dripping through her knickers. I rub her through the fabric and she moans, kissing down my neck, hands sliding to unbutton my robes. My thumb drags against her, slow slides from her entrance to her clit that make her hips vibrate. Once I'm down to my shirt, she starts on her own dress. Buttons down the front pop open, and I watch her greedy fingers as she breathes against my neck.

She shrugs the dress off, sliding it down her shoulders and to the floor behind her. I press a circle on her clit, and she shivers, hands pausing before sliding into my hair again. She attacks

She marches to me, ignoring every other person in the room. Something's gone wrong. Where is Dr. Flanders? She reaches for me – to throttle me – and then her lips are on mine, leaning into me, hovering over my body. My hands steady her, holding her head and twirling her hair as she smiles into me.

She pulls away with a smirk, and tries to address the room with as much dignity as she can muster.

"Draco Malfoy and I are dating. We, uh... Yes. We're dating. Boyfriend and girlfriend," she stumbles. My face heats. "So, we'll need to take a look at that... er, Love Contract business. And just... abolish that, I say."

Blaise cheers. A few of the ladies giggle.

"Because... because I love him," she says, and I feel her eyes on me, inviting me. "And he loves me – I think—"

"I do, yes." There's some odd sensation of joy trying to overcome my face. "So. That's that! I'll, uh, let you all get back to it."

She bids us goodbye, and they applaud her exit. All but Mockridge, who really for the life of him can't figure out what just happened.

At the end of the meeting, I run to my office, still blushing and smiling. Blaise follows me in and jumps on my back, hollering.

"Merlin, Blaise!"

"You did it! You hooked yourself a Golden Girl, mate!"

"Get off!"

"Oh, she's fiery! You'll have your hands full for sure—"

I knock him off of me and he shoves me onto the couch, one knee pressing into my chest. I'm about to twist his nipple to get him off when I see him snarling down at me. My eyes go wide.

"If you fucking dare," he hisses, "choose Harry Potter as your best man over me..." He growls and I look up at him, quite terrified. "I will kill you the Zabini way. And then I'll marry your sexy little widow, and fuck her everywhere in Malfoy Manor—"

"What the fuck, Blaise!"

"I just want to be clear—"

"Yes, yes! You're the best man!"

"I'm the fucking best man."

"YES. You're the best man!"

He lifts off me, and smiles broadly. "Excellent. Now that that's straightened out, I have a new client to discuss with you."

She nods, and I lean into her, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. Her fingers trace my jaw, and I pull away before I stay with her all night.

Once she's disappeared, I Apparate to Heathrow.

~*~

Friday, March 10, 2000

Dr. Flanders and the Grangers stay in a hotel suite near the office. When I'm not walking Granger to her office or escorting her down the lifts to the Wizengamot, I'm with the Grangers. They've maintained their memories for four days. They survived the stresses of Muggle travel (which Dr. Flanders assures me is not all that stressful, but I'm still unconvinced). They decided to close Sweet Tooth and put it on the market, officially moving back to the U.K. I'll let the Granger family decide if they want their old house, but in the meantime, I send a crew to the Muggle neighborhood to clean my blood off the walls and erase any magical signatures haunting the house.

The Wizengamot votes for the Werewolf Policy. Of course, they do.

Father writes to me the night before to let me know that he has it on good authority that the majority of the council is voting in her favor. And the minority are weak-minded fools who only need a letter from the right person—

I roll my eyes and toss the letter into the fire.

When Granger and I head back to the office on Friday afternoon, I take her hand when we step into the lifts.

"I have a surprise for you." Merlin I hope this works.

"A good surprise?"

I nod. "I was shocked to hear it was ready today." Dr. Flanders and I were supposed to do this on Sunday, but he said it was time. "So, I wanted you to have it now, in honor of your triumph in the Wizengamot today."

"I—thank you," she stutters. "I'm... quite speechless really. It's something you had made?"

"No." Just wait, you silly witch. "Fixed, really."

She won't give it up though. So I tell her to just take the afternoon off, which she also doesn't like.

I march away from her, demanding that she go to her office and not come back.

I take a deep breath once I'm in the staff meeting. We begin as soon as I settle in. Mockridge starts in on our second quarter projections, quite pleased with himself that we have all ten installments of the inheritance to work with.

I'm just thinking of the Muggle-born Integration Program and how to throw money at it when the door to the conference room slams open.

Oh, fucking hell.

my mouth with teeth and tongue, gripping my head to hers, and her hips start rolling back against my hand.

I bring my free hand to her hips, squeezing her as she moans into my mouth.

"Draco, please."

My hand twists until I've pushed aside her knickers, and I slide one finger inside of her. Like coming home after a long day. I release a shaky sigh against her lips, and brush my thumb over her clit in strong, quick movements that have her starting to gasp. Her cunt flutters around my finger, and she groans when I add a second.

"Oh, god..."

Her lips parted, eyes squeezed shut, and when I rub my fingers inside of her, and circle my thumb on her clit, I watch as she comes with a shout, holding me inside of her, her face scrunched up.

Her face starts to relax, her eyes drift open to mine, and I say, "You're so beautiful."

I watch her eyes darken, and her teeth bite down on her lip, as she flutters around me again.

Not quite an orgasm, but still something pleasurable to her. Something I gave her.

She's catching her breath still when her hands move from gripping my shoulders to the buttons on my shirt. I remove my fingers from her, holding her hips close to me as she kisses my neck. She opens my shirt, pushing it down my shoulders, leaving it on my elbows for me to finish, and then her hands drop to my buckle.

I smile into her hair.

She shifts on the mattress, giving herself more space to unbutton me, and I close my eyes when she sucks on my neck like I do to her. My cock twitches.

I feel her lifting off me to stand, pulling my trousers down my hips, and I laugh at her eagerness.

The sound is stuck in my throat when I open my eyes. She's sliding down to her knees.

Between my legs.

Her hands pull me out of my trunks, and her eyes meet mine before I can even ask, "What are you doing?"

She swallows her nerves and says, "I think I know how I've read... a few things."

I shake my head, trying to tell her, trying to find the words to make her understand that this will ruin me.

"You don't..."

"—have to," she finishes for me. "I know. I—I want to."

A fever inches up my chest, burning me as I look down at Hermione Granger, on her knees in front of me, about to suck me off.

And my lips tremble.

She reads me like one of her books, brows furrowing, and says, "Why are you afraid?"

My mouth opens, useless. I can't... explain it. How my mind works. How things had to stay in boxes and how this... *this*... had to be locked away even deeper. I remember the hours Severus spent, extricating *this* from my mind, leaving behind one or two of the more aggressive and purely sexual fantasies.

It would be odd to find no desire for her whatsoever; he'd told me.

"It's a lot," I say, feeling my stomach shaking.

She smiles up at me, and strokes me slowly, softly, and says, "Do you want me to go slow?"

A wink. Teasing me a bit, but truly asking.

So, I reach for her face, pressing my fingers into her hair, and say, "I want this. Very much."

She grins. And I watch as she brings her lips to the tip.

I can't breathe. She looks up at me. And her tongue peeks out to lick just the head.

Warm. Wet.

She blinks at me with her wide eyes and asks, "Tell me what you like?"

What do I even like?

"You," my voice tremors, before I can even process a response.

And the slow grin spreading a beautiful blush over her cheeks and down her neck is all I can see behind my closed eyes when she opens her lips and takes me into her mouth.

I gasp, and my fist closes on her hair. I think of sugar quills and soup spoons and swotty voices answering questions before my hand can even shoot into the air.

I grow harder, thicker, twitching inside her mouth. My eyes are screwed up and my fist releases her hair so I don't hurt her, clenching the comforter under me instead.

She slides her mouth on me. Pressure too light, like her hand earlier. Teasing almost. I feel her tongue twitching nervously, trying to figure out its purpose.

"Suck," a dark voice from my throat demands. And when she does, I groan out, my hands covering my face, helpless as she pulls at me.

I'm breathing quickly, feeling my stomach panting, just knowing that she's on her knees, with my cock in her mouth.

And it's like Hermione Granger solved a riddle she's been trying to crack. She takes more of me into her mouth, and sucks, pulling me into her, placing a hand on my thigh and squeezing the base of me with the other. It feels like the pressure will never end, and I moan into my pains, fighting the urge to just thrust into her.

She finally takes a breath, gasping, and before I can tell her she's done well and she can stop now, she descends on me again, sucking and dragging me into her mouth.

"Fuck."

She pulls off me. "Draco."

My body flows into hers, my hands braced softly on the wall on either side of her. She tilts her head back, ready to drink me in.

I smirk at her. "It was the right thing to do."

She blinks at me. A slow smile pulling at her face. Her tears tumble down and she laughs, crying. She tilts her face toward the ceiling and whispers, "God, I hate you."

I smile. "I love you, too, Granger."

It was supposed to feel difficult, wasn't it? Not as simple as breathing.

I kiss her, and she holds me close. I slide against her spine, pulling her in. Her lips press wet kisses against mine, and she pulls back.

"I'm sorry. That was probably a lot. The... marriage thing and staying every night—"

Oh no you don't, Granger.

"Oh, I don't know. I think the gazebo is available this weekend."

She laughs. Like I'm kidding. And I grin at her.

The chime of the lifts arriving. I kiss her before pulling my arms away.

Waterstone marches down the corridor, announcing that they are ready for us.

Granger shoves the tears off her cheeks, wipes at her mascara, and strides to the oak doors.

She looks back at me before disappearing, smiling and flushed.

Radiant.

The door closes, and I wait.

Wait for her.

What's another few hours after all this time?

~*~

We go to lunch and she talks my ear off. She tries to pay. The minx.

On Tuesday I follow her to tea with Madame Michele. The small woman smiles at me from the corner of her eye.

They all smile at me now. The girls in the office. Kelsey, who's always known. They all smirk into their magazines when I walk Granger to her office or when I escort her to the lifts for trial. And I smirk back.

On Wednesday, we finish dinner at a lovely Italian place and she turns to me with soft eyes and says, "Would you like to come over to mine for a drink?"

Her place. Her bed with her sheets that smell like her.

I sigh. "As much as I want to, I can't. There's something I need to get back to at the office tonight." The lie comes easily.

"Is it anything you need help with?"

I stare at her, clenching my jaw to keep from telling her. "Not yet. But possibly soon."

That fucking soup. We'll have it every night if you want.

"—and spend *hours* in that library—"

Her voice trembles. And I really should have known it's the library she'd get emotional about.

Should have shown it to her years ago. Given her the keys.

"I want to be your wife."

My throat closes. My eyes are dry. I can't move.

"And see you in the mornings, and marry you in the gazebo and – and rule the fucking *world* with you."

There's a song playing somewhere, thrumming in time to her voice. Something low and lovely. Pale pinks and periwinkle blues and velvet navy and golden silk dance in a carousel.

Lovegood was right. There are colors. *Everywhere*.

"And I don't know where the wires got crossed along the way, I don't know how things got so twisted. But that's all I've ever wanted."

Where is the fucking ring. Why don't I have it on me. At all times.

Her voice trembles as she continues to wreck me. "When you ask me why I've done the things I have, I want to be able to say it's because I love you." I feel my pulse in my ribs, beating to get out. "That everything has been for you. It's never been about the 'right thing to do.' " She laughs at herself. "It's because I love you."

I'd never imagined her saying it. Never knew what it would sound like from her lips, with that voice that tortured me in my dreams, singing to me in the mornings as I gripped myself, screaming and crying in my nightmares.

It's an exquisite sound. Like the first time you hear a song that you'll come to play on repeat.

"And I want to know you." She's still talking and I just don't know why we're not holding each other yet. "I want to know everything about you. And I understand that I have to ask, but I want to be able to ask. I want you to tell me things when I ask." She's getting off topic now. "But if there's something you can't tell me, not right now, then maybe there's a – a hand signal or something. Like you pull your ear—"

I jump when I realize it's me that she's waiting for. It's me that has to stop this nonsensical monologue.

I move for her, scared to look at her face and see that I dreamed it all.

But she has tears running down her cheeks, looking like she just fought for her life. I step into her, and she breathes deep, waiting.

"Ask," I beg. "Ask me now."

She looks deep into my eyes and says, "Why didn't you identify me that night. At Malfoy Manor."

My fingers part over my eyes and I look down at her, flushed cheeks and swollen lips. She hides a smirk behind her lips, and says, "Tell me if I'm doing it right?"

I take a deep breath as she dips her head, keeping her eyes on me as her tongue slips out, licking the tip. And then she tilts her head so she can lick my shaft. I groan when her tongue finds the underside of my head, all my nerves shaking in my skin.

She blinks at me, watching my face. Her eyes above a book, her eyes over the ledger at Cornerstone, her eyes across my desk. And she licks over the spot again.

My heels dig into the floor on either side of her, my hips begging to thrust, to fuck her. I'm sweating.

She places her lips around the head of my cock, watching my reaction and presses her tongue against the underside, rubbing. My hands reach for her, and stop. My fists drop to the bed. She's too quick of a learner. She watches for pieces to click in the puzzle and then she pushes further. Her tongue runs over and over the head of my cock, and she sucks. Just the head. Soft suction that has my thighs clenching, my balls pulling tight.

My hips jump. Her eyes widen, her tongue sliding along my shaft as I push into her mouth. And before I can apologize she sucks, blinding pressure.

My hand reaches for her. I pull her off of me, grabbing her hair, and dragging her up until I can toss her on the bed.

She breathes into my forehead as I kiss at her chest, pulling off her bra and sucking at her breasts.

I hear myself muttering against her skin.

"... want you to suck me off every morning and every night. Gonna fuck your mouth ten times a day, Granger."

She laughs, gasping, and moaning, her fingers running through my hair as I move aside her knickers, pressing myself to her entrance.

Her nails dig into my back, and I slide in so easily.

"So, good." I mumble. "You'd get an Outstanding in Oral Sex, Granger."

She laughs and says, "So would you—Oh!"

I'm rougher than I've been with her, but she's wet and wrapping herself around me, breathing in my ear such delightful little sounds.

My hips slam into hers, our bones knocking together, and my cock filling her completely. I feel myself cresting, thinking of her mouth on my cock again, thinking of shooting into her mouth—

"Fuck, fuck." And when her back arches, a small groan singing from her lips, I groan, "I love you," into her neck and she shivers, her legs squeezing me, her cunt squeezing me, until she pulses and cries out, her head thrown back against her mattress.

I don't slow down for her. I can't.

And she shakes around me, gasping for air as I thrust against her, pushing our bodies together, until we're blended. My fingers twist into her hair, fisting the curls, burying my face against it, and she might even come again as I pour into her, her walls rolling waves on me, pulling me deeper and keeping me close. I gasp for air into her curls, our bodies slick and sliding together.

Her hand runs through my hair, and I stay inside of her, resting on top of her until she squirms to push me off.

I stare up at her bedroom ceiling. And she curls against my side, and says, "So you like blow jobs, huh?"

I laugh into the humidity of her room. I'm about to say something about making good on my promise to have her ten times a day, when I take in the decorations of her bedroom.

"Granger," I start, sitting up, turning to look at the wall behind me. "Are you in the middle of redecorating?"

"What?" she breathes. She turns to look.

Her walls... are completely blank. A few nails where pictures used to hang. Those pictures sit in the corner of her room. White walls in every direction.

"You'd think after so many speeches from Monsieur DuBois, you would have learned something about decorating. Like... color."

"Oh," she says, laughing a little. Nervously. "I used to... never mind. I had something up, but I took it down a few months ago." She sits in the middle of her bed in only her knickers. "I haven't gotten around to redecorating."

I stare at her as she looks to one of her walls with tight eyes.

"What was it?"

She looks at me, and blushes. "It was nothing. I just..." She looks away biting her lip. I turn her face back to mine with a fingertip. "Tell me?"

Her eyes flicker back and forth between mine, and I see her turn redder. She rolls her eyes and stands. "I... had a... Wall."

"A wall?" I ask, watching as she moves to her old Hogwarts chest in the corner of the room.

"Mm-hmm. I just..." She looks at me. "I told you I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you." I nod at her. "So, I have..." She shakes her head and reaches into the chest, pulling out the picture of us at Fortescue's with Mother. "I saved a few things. And I was trying to piece together a timeline..." She laughs. "It's stupid really."

I stand, slipping my trunks back on and approach her, hoping she won't snap closed the chest before I can see inside.

to understand social cues. She yammers on and on about Wizengamot member and their families, where they've stood on previous issues, who prefers direct eye contact. And all of it is overwhelming Granger.

We have about ten minutes, and she looks like she's focusing on focusing. "Cornelia," I interrupt, and Waterstone stops. "You know what would be most helpful right now?" I turn my Malfoy smile on her. "I think it would put everyone at ease to know when they'll be beginning."

Waterstone looks at me like she's just had a wonderful thought. "I'll head up, and see if I can't watch the Wizengamot as they arrive, shall I?" There it is. "Thank you. What a splendid idea."

Waterstone leaves us alone, taking the lift upstairs. I stand across from Granger, leaning on the wall, hands in my pockets. She chews on her lip, eyes staring wide at the stones in front of her.

"Anxious?"

She laughs lightly.

I guess so.

I watch her mind work. She'll do brilliantly. She's always done brilliantly.

I let her think. I stare at her shoes, fondly remembering her ugly little Ministry shoes she wore to my trial, and every day after. Pansy has her in better shoes, obviously—

"I want to be with you."

The words jar me. I can scarcely believe they came from her.

"I want to date you. In public. Not just lunch in your office."

I swallow my heartbeat, listening to her words, trying to make sense of them.

"I want to come out as a couple to M.C.G., and figure out what to do about the Love Contract and dating policies..."

Her voice dances across the dank stones, quiet and sure. I'm afraid if I lift my eyes to her the spell will break and she'll stop.

"I want to go to dinner with you, and be photographed in the *Prophet*. And hold hands on the way to the Apparition point."

Like we want the same things. Like there's nothing between us any longer and why aren't we just *doing* those things—

"I want to spend the night again—every night."

Yes. Tie you to bed.

"I want to have weekly meals with your mother—"

She'd love that.

"—and let Mippy make me pumpkin soup—"

I nod.

She frowns at me. "Well?"

"Well," what?" I shrug. "We made up. We have a very important week ahead of us." I stare at the carpets, kicking my shoes against it. "... I'm working on a project for her." I look up at Mother and she's waiting for me to continue. "I've been to Australia. I'm working with a doctor to counter-act the memory charm on her parents."

Her lashes flutter, and she takes a slow breath. "And is it working? You're sure the doctor knows what he's doing?"

I think of Jean clutching her robe tightly around herself, looking at me like an intruder. I swallow. "Yes." I look away. "They're lovely people. I can't wait for you to meet them soon."

She hums. "Well, if that's the ace up your sleeve, I hardly need to give you this."

She pulls from her robes a small golden box, opens it, and places it on the end table.

The Malfoy engagement ring sparkles back at me.

"Curse-free," she says.

I stare at it, and shake my head free of the image of it on her finger.

"That's not... I don't need that. Not yet." I press my lips together. "You remember what she said. It's not something she wants."

Mother tilts her head at me. She closes the ring box, stands and walks past me. "I think you'd be surprised at the answer if you just asked her."

She presses the box into my hands, and leaves me alone in the drawing room.

~*~

Monday, March 6, 2000

The lift doors open, and she smiles when her eyes land on me.

"Good morning, Mr. Malfoy," she hums, taking the cup of coffee from my warm fingers and letting me walk her to her office.

"Is there anything I can do for you before we head to the Ministry?"

"No," she breathes. "I just need to gather my things."

"I'll handle Skeeter today. Don't give her a second thought."

She nods at me. "Twenty minutes?"

She disappears into her office, her arm brushing mine.

She's considerably more anxious when I come to collect her. Blaise is visiting her, and I give him a curious look when she doesn't make eye contact with either of us as she heads for the lifts.

Waterstone, Granger, and I make our way to the Apparition point, into the main entrance of the Ministry, and down to the courtrooms. It is now clear to me that Waterstone is not equipped

She bites her lip, and I see newspaper clippings. The same ones that sit in my bottom drawer at home, tucked away under her knickers from the governor's ball and her green silk bra that she left behind.

I smile, but she thinks I'm teasing her.

"I don't mean to be so strange. It's just... I was trying to figure it out. Trying to follow the events." I look at her. "Your blood on my living room walls. The Auction." My eye twitches, and she reaches up to brush the tension away. "I just wanted to know you."

Her eyes are so bright. And they're all mine. Finally.

I kiss her. I reach for my wand, careful not to disturb the ring in my robes. It's not time for that yet. I send the picture of us at Fortescue's to a place on her blank walls. It sticks. She watches as the rest of her pictures and clippings dance out of her chest and stick to her wall, recreating her timeline.

She watches me curiously. And I smile at her.

I'm ready now.

"Let's start from the beginning," I say. I take her hand.

~*~

Sunday, September 1, 1991

The Hogwarts Express chugs us towards Scotland, and I can't help but examine the passengers overstuuffed into this train car.

Blaise Zabini is an odd fellow. He likes to figure out how people tick. Theo Nott is less complicated, and Crabbe and Goyle even less so.

But Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass should really find their own car. Seven of us in one is just obnoxious.

They're talking nail colors and Witch Weekly and really only Theo is engaging with them. Zabini asks me about my family's vineyards and I don't bloody well know, do I?

The door to the car slams open, and a girl our age looks around, searching the floor for the first few seconds while we wait for her to speak.

She's... broad. Everything about her is wide. Her hair is oddly wild like she'd recently been electrified. Her teeth as she opens her mouth are large. And her eyes as she turns them onto me are wide and dark.

She's... unusual. And clearly not well bred if that's how she shows up to the first day of school, slamming compartments open without introducing herself.

"Has anyone seen a toad?" She turns her eyes on Zabini first. He lifts a brow at her.

And I feel like Zabini and I are still waiting to figure out which of us will lead this pack, so I jump on the opportunity before he can even open his mouth.

"One just stumbled in," I say.

Greengrass laughs. Goyle rumbles next to me. And the girl who takes up too much space turns her wide eyes on me.

I smirk.

She lifts a brow. Unimpressed. There's a fire behind her eyes, blazing to fight with me.

"Charming," she says, looking me over. She turns back to the others, and says, "A boy named Neville has lost his pet toad."

She tells them what compartment Neville is in if the toad is found. She introduces herself to Theo when he reaches out his hand. She frowns at Parkinson when she doesn't bother to introduce herself.

But she doesn't look at me again.

"Are you related to Granger the potioneer?" I ask for some reason.

She looks at me. Her eyes sweeping over my hair before returning to my eyes. "No. My parents are Muggles."

And something extinguishes inside me. Ended before it even burned.

The entire compartment shifts, readjusts, turns their back to her. And she feels it. I watch her lips press together, and her feet shift as she says goodbye, not glancing my way again.

People are supposed to cry. They're supposed to feel an insult hit them and crawl away.

The door slaps closed. I'm good at insults. I know how this works.

I'm still thinking about fire when the train stops, thinking about how I can make her cry instead of challenge me. What button I needed to press.

When the Sorting Hat places Hermione Granger in Gryffindor, her tie changing colors, it makes sense. She fights like a lion.

And there's something gold about her.

The End.

I take the vial from the cabinet that I've lovingly labeled "The Slap" and pour it into the Pensieve.

I watch her march towards me as I smirk at her. She slaps it off of me. I laugh at myself, while Jean sucks in a breath, ready to chastise her daughter. I'm still laughing when we pull out of the memory.

I show them the Yule Ball, and I'm careful not to draw attention to my former self, letting them watch her dance and laugh with Krum. Jean leans into me while I watch myself pout in the corner with Pansy on my arm.

"Who is this beefy boy?" she says, vaguely waving at Krum. "You didn't escort her to this?" I smile and swallow. "No, I was..." I look over at myself, glaring at her in disgust wondering if the Mudblood had slipped something into our pumpkin juice at the breakfast table. "I was an idiot." I chuckle.

Jean loops her arm through mine. "Good things come to those who wait."

~*~

Monday, March 6, 2000

They don't recognize me in the morning. Dr. Flanders calms them, and escorts me to the front door, telling me things are normal. And he'll contact me in a few days.

But all I can hear on my way to a quiet corner where I can take my Portkey, is the sound of Jean's trembling voice asking who I was and what I wanted.

But they did ask where their daughter was.

I make it back to the Manor, seeing my bed for the first time in two days.

I'm seconds away from taking a Dreamless Sleep potion when Mippy pops into my bedroom.

"Master Draco! Mistress is worried! You is not home all weekend!"

I roll my eyes, sigh, and place the potion back down on my dresser. I follow the little elf down to the drawing room where Mother is reading a book. She doesn't lift her eyes from the page.

"Oh. You're alive. Splendid."

"Mother." I nod at her.

"For three days now I've donated your dinner scraps to the poor. Like some kind of soup kitchen."

"You, personally, handed out food?" I lift a brow at her.

She lifts one back. "Your father was released back to Azkaban this morning."

"Alright."

"Did you find Hermione on Thursday evening?"

I nod.

"Did you make up?"

I tear my eyes away, as the younger me wets his lips again. I stare down at my feet, feeling frustrated and vile and helpless.

I look up, ready to take them back, and I find Jean Granger watching the boy in the corner lustng after her only daughter. I feel a blush staining my cheeks and neck, and I turn to Henry, eyes still on his daughter; thankfully.

Jean smiles up at me, points to Hermione, and says, "Is this your fiancé?"

My muscles freeze. I stare at her until finally I remember that was my alias. A young man from the U.K. taking his honeymoon alone.

Before I can answer, she leans in and whispers, "You seem to like her."

I know. And so does every-fucking-body else.

I close my eyes, rubbing my jaw.

Jean giggles. And I open my eyes to watch Hermione look up, catch me staring, and quickly look away, wiping her mouth and blushing.

"She likes you, too," Jean says. I roll my eyes, and then she says, "She told me so."

Henry looks at his wife. I wait, heart beating.

Jean's brows knit together and she looks away for a moment. Then back to Hermione.

"Wendell," she says, staring at her daughter with wary eyes. "Who is that?"

Henry steps toward her, taking her arm. "Her name is Hermione."

Jean squints, stepping backwards. "I'd like to go. Can we go home now?"

We leave the memory.

Jean has to go lie down.

And Henry eyes me for the rest of the night.

~*~

Sunday, March 5, 2000

I spend the weekend dropping in on Granger's classes, flirting with Monsieur DuBois and winking at Madame Bernard. I say goodbye to her after every appointment, and head back to Australia.

Jean has a break-through on Saturday, while Henry regresses.

It's incredibly frustrating, watching them take one step forward, and two steps back.

By Sunday evening, they are at the same pace. They know their real names. They know they have a daughter named Hermione. Henry doesn't know more than that, but Jean remembers her at six, learning to ride a bike.

"She skinned her knee and cried for hours. You honestly don't remember, Henry?"

Henry is easily frustrated in these moments. And Dr. Flanders has to dose them with Calming Draught before every session.

It's time for them to see her in different stages of life, and in emotionally different places.

may look real, but they won't be able to affect them. The people in the movie won't be able to see them.

Jean laughs a bit. "How silly. Of course not."

I turn to the Pensieve before I can think too hard on it, and pour the silver wisps into the bowl.

Henry, Jean, and I lean forward, and the Hogwarts library swims into focus. I stand in the middle of it, staring at myself, seated at a table in the corner, working hard on an essay.

Jean gasps to my left. "Oh lovely!"

Almost as if I heard her, the younger version of me looks up, through us to the other side of the aisle.

I turn. Henry is gazing at the vast library, eyes bright with wonder. Jean is staring at the young me with a smile. And behind them sits a bushy-haired know-it-all, researching a golden egg. I gesture for them to turn and see her.

Henry presses his lips together, inhaling quickly. Jean just tilts her head at her daughter. I watch her expression. A simple smile.

Hermione sits back in her chair, and picks up a blue Sugar Quill. I blush, looking down at the Hogwarts library stones, reminding myself that they can't read my thoughts.

Henry chuckles. I look up, watching him watch his daughter. He shakes his head and whispers, "...rot her teeth," under his breath. He leans in to me and asks, "How old is she?"

"Fifteen," I say automatically. I encourage them to move closer. Jean is quick to move, but Henry takes slow steps, walking around the table.

"Sweet thing," Jean murmurs kindly when Hermione tries to write with the wrong quill, jumping and sucking the candy into her mouth while she scribbles with the real one. And some morbid need twists in me. I turn to watch myself watch her. To watch the first moment I'd thought about her mouth consciously.

And it almost knocks me over. The raw desire on my face. The way I lick my lips quickly, gripping at my own quill.

I watch in horror as the younger me watches her. No Occlumency yet. Nothing to shield myself from her. Just an open fixation.

I wait for this boy to tear his eyes away, to look ashamed of himself, but he just stares at her. I'd always wondered how Blaise had figured it out. And now it's just disgusting to me how blatant it all was.

I spend the rest of the day with the Grangers, downing Pepper-Up Potions like candy. Just before dinner, I take my Porkkey back to the U.K., head to the coffee shop on the corner, and walk into the office at 8:45AM with Granger's coffee cup.

I place it on her desk, and tell Carrie I'll be out of the office all day.

I pop back into the Granger's backyard as Jean and Henry serve the lamb chops.

"How was your phone call?" Jean asks, taking my coat.

"Excellent, thank you. Everyone in the U.K. says hello." I grin at Dr. Flanders.

While I do the dishes – with magic, of course; Dr. Flanders disapproves and keeps Jean's attention away from the kitchen – Henry turns to Jean.

"Monica, dear. I think Dr. Flanders and Drake have something exciting to show us."

She looks over at me, and I quickly grab the dish hovering over the sink. "Oh, really? What is it?"

Dr. Flanders grins. "It's like a movie. But it's inside of this bowl!" He places the Pensieve on the dining room table. "Drake is going to show you how it works."

I stare into the suds. I still don't like this. Henry is ready, but Jean? She stares out the window when asked a direct question. She laughs at silence. And she's having issues with basic motor functions. She held the remote control upside down for several minutes, pressing "buttons" on the back. She forgot how to hold her fork at dinner. Henry had to cut her pork chops for her.

But Dr. Flanders says her brain is trying to fight the new information. Every time she has some kind of a relapse moment, he smiles, explaining to me that she wants to remember, but the memory charm is fighting her.

I don't like it. She's going to end up in the bathroom again, locked inside with her husband on the other side of the door. She doesn't even remember she had a daughter at this point.

"What a strange invention," Jean says, staring at the Pensieve. I'm drying my hands when she looks up at me and says, "Did you create this, Draco?"

I blink.

Draco, not Drake.

She smiles at me, and I see her daughter's eyes.
"Not quite." My voice is gone. I clear my throat. "But you might see me inside. Er, in the movie."

"Oh, how fun!" She beams.

I move to the cabinet where we stored the vials. Dr. Flanders said we should start slow. Something without action, without conflict. Just her. And preferably no magic.

My fingers shake as I pluck the vial labeled *January 1995* from the shelf. It's not like they'll read my thoughts. They'll just see the physical moment. Dr. Flanders is explaining that things

Wendell appears behind her. "Ah! Drake!" He holds her shoulders, rubbing her arms. "Darling, you remember Drake. He stopped by the shop. Taking his honeymoon alone, remember?"

Wendell nods at me over her shoulder, lifting his brows meaningfully. He remembers me, but wants me to go slow with her.

She sticks her hand out. "Sorry, I don't quite remember." She grins. "Monica Wilkins. Lovely to meet you."

I swallow, taking her hand, and find a bandage wrapped around her palm.

"Is Dr. Flanders here?" I ask Wendell. I wonder if he's discovered his real name yet.

"Yes, of course," Wendell ushers me inside, and I ignore the way Monica stands for a second too long at the doorway before closing it.

Dr. Flanders is doing the dishes from breakfast. He smiles at me, like he's been expecting me. While Wendell sets Monica up in the living room with a television show, I turn to Dr. Flanders.

"What's wrong with her?"

"All a part of the process, Mr. Malfoy. There's bound to be relapses."

"Is this my fault?" I ask, watching Monica stare at the remote control. A hand on my shoulder. "No, no." Dr. Flanders shakes his head. "The mind is a strange network. Even if we had moved forward with the Pensieve, she might have regressed." He adjusts his glasses and says, "I do apologize, Mr. Malfoy. I suppose I shouldn't have assumed you would want strangers prying into your brain."

Ah, why not. It's all the rage.

"What happened to her hand?"

Dr. Flanders looks down. "That's on me, I'm afraid. She was making tea for us and burned herself. I shouldn't have let her use the stove. And I can't heal her with magic until she *remembers* magic, so..."

I watch as Monica giggles at the television box. Wendell smiles at her.

"Wendell remembers?"

"Yes, he's doing quite well. Henry, actually. He's remembered his name."

Henry and Jean Granger.

"What do you need from me?" I ask.

Dr. Flanders says, "Whatever you're willing to give," and gives me a kind smile.

I watch Jean Granger press a hand to her temple, frowning at something.

"All of it," I say. And I echo back her daughter's words. "Anything they need."

~*~