

Hermione stepped from the floo into the same atrium of the Ministry of Magic that she crossed five—all right, six—days a week. There was a brief moment of silence, a collective intake of breath, and then the reporters rushed her.

“Miss Granger, what’s your response to the Wizengamot denying your appeal of the Ministry-mandated match?”

“Are you accusing the Wizengamot of retaliation after your controversial creature rights bill?”

Hermione set her jaw and began pushing her way through the scrum, toward the lifts. Normally she would be on her way to her office on level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

“Miss Granger, will you be returning to the muggle world?”

Hermione glared but didn’t slow her pace.

“Do you believe Draco Malfoy should still be in Azkaban?”

“Hermione! Did Draco Malfoy torture you during the war?”

Hermione flinched but stared straight ahead as she plowed steadfastly toward the lift.

“Is it true you’re madly in love with Draco Malfoy?”

“Love?” Hermione blurted as, against her will, her head snapped toward the—of course it was *Witch Weekly!*—reporter. “This is a forced marriage!”

Hermione threw herself into the lift and the doors slammed shut, cutting off the cacophony of reporters’ voices. She hit the button for level two, Wizengamot Administrative Services and the Office of the Chief Warlock.



Hermione had imagined negotiating with Narcissa Malfoy—a scene from a soap opera about purebloods’ arranged marriages—but Malfoy had sent lawyers. They were fast and aggressive in their negotiations, and Hermione had decidedly mixed emotions about the results. They had been absolute sods about Malfoy’s dealbreakers. (How could they be dealbreakers? Malfoy couldn’t walk away from this deal!) They simply refused to budge. The Ministry insisted they cohabit, and Malfoy insisted they live in the Manor. He also insisted on Black betrothal jewelry. (Hermione imagined hundreds of years of his Black ancestors rolling over in their graves, but that made her want to melt the rings down, not wear them.) Hermione had tried to counter with demands and stipulations (Maybe Malfoy *would* walk away? All the way to another country?) but the lawyers agreed to them easily—too easily.

“I won’t give up my job. I’ll continue to work during the marriage.”

“Mr. Malfoy insists on it.”

“Because I won’t have access to the Malfoy vaults?”

“You will be given vault access and access to Malfoy holdings upon completion of the marriage bond.”

“But, let me guess, it’s all warded against muggleborns.”

“All wards and curses based on blood status were broken by Ministry cursebreakers as part of Mr. Malfoy’s sentencing terms.”

Hermione sniffed. As good as they were, there was no way the Ministry’s cursebreakers were up to the task when it came to the dark magic woven throughout the Black and Malfoy ancestral lines, and she strongly suspected the Malfoys had successfully hidden dark artefacts from the Auror Department despite several months-long Ministry raids of their properties. (Harry had once admitted to whispers that Nott Manor was still absolutely riddled with them.)

The lawyer continued without acknowledging the skepticism Hermione knew was written across her face. “Mr. Malfoy has engaged Bill Weasley’s team to sweep all Malfoy holdings for anti-muggleborn magic. The cursebreaking process may take up to a year in the case of older, rarer, and more complicated spellwork. During this time, with reasonable notice, Mr. Malfoy will accompany you to any uncleared property, his compliance upon request not to be unreasonably delayed or withheld.”

“I—”

“You will have the right to engage additional cursebreakers of your sole choosing, at Mr. Malfoy’s expense, to audit and/or augment the work of Mr. Malfoy’s cursebreakers.”

“The house elves—”

“Have been freed, clothed, and retained on salary per the terms of Narcissa Malfoy’s probation.”

Hermione closed her mouth with a clack of her teeth. She tried again: “I will have access to the entirety of the Manor.”

“Agreed.”

“I will have my own rooms in the Manor.”

“Agreed.”

“I will be allowed visitors in the Manor.”

“Agreed.”

“My cat’s coming with me.”

“Agreed.” (The lawyer picked a piece of lint off his sleeve with evident distaste.)

“Any terms tied to Reconciliation Act requirements will be void should the Act be repealed or the match revoked.”

“Agreed.”

“I require a vow preventing Malfoy from causing me physical harm.”

“The Black betrothal jewelry ensures that.”

“I require a vow preventing Malfoy from using the imperius curse on me.”

“The Black betrothal jewelry ensures that.”

“I require a vow preventing Malfoy from using anti-contraceptive charms on me.”

“The Black betrothal jewelry ensures that.”

Hermione paused, her grudging appreciation for the Black line’s protective magic warring with her revulsion at their participation in arranged marriages in the first place. Why was Malfoy insisting on these protections? Surely he would prefer . . . Well. Hermione didn’t want to think too hard about what he would prefer.

“I will not be compelled to consummate the marriage.”

“Agreed.”

“I will not be compelled to produce children.”

The lawyer paused. “Agreed.”

Hermione sat back, filled with a strange disquiet. Somehow, Malfoy’s concessions didn’t feel like victories. He gave in so easily, it felt like she was asking for the wrong things. What was she missing? Why was he in such a hurry to wrap things up? Shouldn’t they be prolonging this fight, proving to the Ministry and the Wizengamot that this pairing would never work? Maybe Malfoy anticipated that a stalemate would result in the Ministry stepping in, forcing a bond without a contract. Hermione’s focus drifted across the table as she considered whether this would be preferable. No, definitely not. Marriage bonds were lifelong. She did not want to be bound to Draco Malfoy for life with no rules or protections.

The lawyer cleared his throat. “You should know that the Black betrothal jewelry ensures fidelity.”

Hermione’s head snapped up as she inadvertently locked eyes with the attorney.

The lawyer’s face was a blank page. “Given the possibility of offspring.”

Hermione sneered. So this was it. Malfoy didn’t give a fuck whether she worked or where she lived in the Manor. The only point of the pureblood lines was their continued existence, and he was afraid she’d cuckold him and pollute the Malfoy line with a lovechild. She’d be forced into fidelity and meanwhile—

“I suppose he expects me to adopt his bastards so he’ll have pureblood heirs.”

The lawyer looked offended. “Fidelity of both parties.”

Hermione was nonplussed. Why would Malfoy prevent himself from cheating? He never had in school, if Pansy Parkinson’s hexes were any indication.

“Regardless, I will not be producing children with Mr. Malfoy,” she said firmly.

“Be that as it may,” said the attorney skeptically, *“should a child be produced, Mr. Malfoy has several stipulations.”*

“Of course he does,” said Hermione.

The attorney laid them out: Any and all progeny she had by Malfoy would be recognized as full heirs to the Black and Malfoy lines. They would bear the Malfoy surname. They would be named after constellations. (Hermione rolled her eyes.) They would attend Hogwarts or Durmstrang Institute.

Hermione frowned, forced to imagine these theoretical heirs as actual children who would grow into adults, the terms of their existence predetermined by these arbitrary traditions. She shook it off. There would be no children. She didn't plan to get close enough to the slimy git for naming conventions to be a concern.

But had Malfoy's legal representation failed to realize that by agreeing not to compel consummation while enforcing fidelity, they had doomed Malfoy to the life of a monk? Because she wasn't sleeping with him. Was there a loophole she was missing? Was he asexual? (Certainly not—by a longshot—if the rumors at Hogwarts were to be believed.) Well, who cared. She could live like a nun until Malfoy caved and found a way out—out of the marriage, out of the country, out of the wizarding world. She didn't care. Spite and her hand would get her through.

"Fine," she ground out.



So, in theory, she and Malfoy had agreed to the terms of their Ministry-mandated marriage. (*Ministry-mandated marriage*. Godric.) But, even after receiving the Ministry letter denying her appeal in record time and requesting her appearance before Chief Warlock Warrington, Hermione went into the meeting resolute that this travesty was not happening.

She had heard rumors of couples hurrying to make it official before they could be matched with other partners, but nothing about mandated matches having been bonded. So many of her cohort had married young—the purebloods anxious to avoid babies born out of wedlock, others eager to find stability after the war. Harry and Ginny had married immediately. Ron had married Susan Bones last year after fucking his way through his fan base—he had been easily the most accessible of the Golden Trio and had enjoyed it in a way he had not enjoyed playing second fiddle to either Harry or Hermione. The Reconciliation Act would hit those just graduating Hogwarts hardest. And Hermione was realizing with sickening clarity that she and Malfoy were meant to be the vanguard—proof that anyone (war heroine or Death Eater, Ministry employee or pureblood heir) could be made to comply.

And what an added bonus that the Wizengamot had reason to want to see them each personally brought to heel. Hermione did not think Malfoy should still be in Azkaban, no matter what the press might think. (The Boy Without a Choice—Hermione snorted at the tabloid appellation. She thought Malfoy well and truly had *some* choice. Merlin, he liked to play the victim. But she agreed he'd been a child, forced to become a soldier by the very adults meant to protect him. And he'd lowered his wand in the end. So, no, she didn't think he should be serving a life sentence alongside his father. She and Harry had both testified to as much.)

But she couldn't entirely disagree with those who grumbled that the two years of house arrest following his two years in Azkaban hardly seemed like a hardship when he had, by all accounts, spent them aggressively steering the Malfoy estate back into business. And now, as reclusive and elusive as Draco Malfoy was—Hermione had not laid eyes on him personally since his Wizengamot trial and he was rarely pictured in the press—it was increasingly impossible to ignore the fact that, only a handful of years after a war in which he'd played a key and contemptible role, he was back to living in enormous comfort and wealth. And while he might still be a social pariah—shunned by those on the right side of the war as well as those very much on the *wrong* side, a Death Eater who waited until the very last moment to fail Voldemort—with wealth always came influence. Just look at Narcissa. As soon as the Ministry had unfrozen the Malfoy vaults, she had begun buying her way back into society's good graces, one tastefully large charitable donation at a time.

And Hermione had to admit she'd been a recipient. S.P.E.W. Muggle Studies. Outreach to Fenrir Greyback's victims. Narcissa had donated to every cause Hermione had ever championed, and Hermione

bedraggled Hermione wiped away tears in a loop on the left, while on the right a gaunt, hollow-eyed Malfoy sneered from the cage in his trial before the Wizengamot.

"You know what I mean," said Harry, dropping into his chair with a groan. "This proves true everything we said in opposition to the bill! Even if they were telling the truth about the matches being magically determined, you'd think they'd step in to break this one. It's the worst possible outcome—for everyone involved!"

"Is it, though?" asked Ron, tilting his head toward Harry with eyebrows raised. "I can think of—"

"Those prats really do hate me," snarled Hermione as she flung open the door to Harry's office, her hair frizzed to new heights around her head, and stepped into Ron.

She collapsed against his broad chest as he closed his arms around her, holding her tightly and resting his chin on the crown of her head. "I'm sorry, Mione," he murmured into her hair.

"Have you heard from him yet?" asked Harry, rising and walking around his desk.

"Yes," said Hermione, disentangling herself from Ron and turning to Harry to give him a quick, hard hug. "Owled me at an obscene hour this morning, right after I got the Ministry letter."

She stepped back, her expression darkening. "He wants to enter into contract negotiations."

Ron snorted while Harry stared at Hermione, his hands on his hips. "He's not going to appeal the match?"

Ron quickly shook his head. "They've already leaked it to the *Prophet*. They can't back down now, not for Malfoy—they've already spent years claiming Lucius isn't still blackmailing them from Azkaban."

"Ron's right," said Hermione. "Malfoy and I are *both* appealing, but it's a toss-up which one of us the Wizengamot wants to be seen appeasing less." She impatiently pulled back her hair, just to let it fall loose over her shoulders again. "Godric, how am I in the same boat with the Wizengamot as fucking Malfoy? How am I in the *same boat* at all as fucking Malfoy? How am I about to be fucking Malfoy?"

Harry reflexively cast a muffliato as Ron yelled "Hermione!" and Hermione primal screamed.

"No one is fucking Malfoy!" yelled Harry.

"I know, I know," said Hermione. "But *you know* that's the whole point of this law—"

"Yes, I know," snapped Harry. "So how many years without an heir before Malfoy gives up and fucks off to France? He has a vineyard and a chateau. Why is he even *here*? No one wants him here and he knows it. Why doesn't he just *leave*?"

"That's just it—he won't." Hermione dug through her beaded bag and produced a wrinkled piece of parchment that had clearly been crumpled into a tight ball before being flattened out again. "He included a draft of the marital contract with his opening terms. He's insisting on maintaining residence at the Manor, ostensibly to enjoy full use of the blood wards and other protective enchantments since his marriage to me—" Hermione stopped to close her eyes and breath out sharply through her nose before continuing with rolled eyes. "His marriage to me will place him under increased threat from both 'my fans' and the death-to-blood-traitors contingent."

Harry and Ron exchanged wary, contemplative looks.

"And the threat to *you* . . ." began Harry.

"Will also be kept out by hundreds of years' worth of wards at Malfoy Manor," said Ron, "unless the bigger threat to you is what's *inside* the Manor."

"Malfoy can't kill you, Hermione," said Harry. "He knows it'll be a death sentence."

"He doesn't have to kill me to hurt me, Harry! What if he doesn't care? What if he loses control?" Hermione took a deep breath and her face unclenched, the wrinkles between her eyebrows smoothing out. "What if I kill him first?"



MONDAY JULY 7, 2003

"He does have an industrial greenhouse of carnivorous plants he *doesn't bother to ward*." Theo's tone turned speculative: "I suppose it's free fertilizer. They say the last person to wander too close lost an arm before he got out."

Pansy snorted, but Draco's gaze was level. "Flint was permanently blinded—"

"He got back sight in one eye." Theo scoffed. "He should have known better than to drink tea Longbottom served him *during an extortion attempt*."

"But that's the point, Pans," said Draco, leaning forward onto his elbows. "Know better. He came out of the war different. You won't get a rise out of him, but you will get a reaction."

Pansy hummed, her eyes narrowing.

"Why do I get the feeling," drawled Theo, flopping back onto the settee, "that this little talk has not had its intended effect?"

"But enough about me," said Pansy, turning to him with a vulpine smile. "Who's *your* intended, Theo?"

"Oh, me?" Theo took a slow sip of his drink. "No one. Got an exemption. The Ministry agreed it just wouldn't be fair, making some poor innocent witch shackle herself to me for life when I'm criminally insane."

"*What?*" snapped Draco, and suddenly he was twelve again, whingeing about Dumbledore's obvious favoritism toward Gryffindor. "But they're making someone marry *me*?"

"Theo?" Pansy smacked his shoulder. "Since when are you insane?"

"Since I was subjected to a whole battery of tests when they were deciding whether I was to stand trial or just hang around the house for a couple years. It went down on my permanent record. No sense of right and wrong. Tenuous grasp on reality. Zero ability to empathize." He flashed a wide smile. "Poor breeding stock."

"But Theo," said Pansy, "you're *perfectly normal*."

Draco shot her a dubious look.

"What can I say, love?" His head lolled against the back of the settee. "I'm just *very good* at taking tests."

"So Longbottom is fine but they think *you're* going to chop up any Lady Nott they give you?" Pansy scoffed.

"Well, my *father* did," said Theo, slapping his glass onto the end table with a sharp crack.

Pansy didn't flinch, but her whole face tightened before she tossed her hair and plucked the firewhisky bottle from the bar cart. "Yes, dear, I know. Draco, your manners are atrocious. I hope you get a muggleborn who doesn't know any better."

"Of course I will," said Draco, unconsciously tensing his shoulders so that the runes and numbers on the right side of his neck, already angled toward the shadowed corners of the room, dipped below the collar of his shirt. "The Wizengamot has never forgiven itself for not ending the Malfoy line when it had the chance."

"So they're hoping you *do* chop up your Lady Malfoy." Pansy smiled as she poured a generous measure into her conjured glass.

"Oh, Pans," said Draco fondly. "The Black betrothal rings will never allow it. But the Ministry would *love* it if I'd try."



TUESDAY JULY 1, 2003

WAR HEROINE PROMISED TO WAR CRIMINAL screamed the front page of the Daily Prophet.

"How is *this* the publicity they want for this asinine law?" muttered Harry, tossing the paper onto his cluttered desk with a look of disgust.

"How is *that* your focus here?" snapped Ron, snatching the *Prophet* up, the veins in his thickly muscled forearm jumping as his hand flexed on the wrinkled pages. Above the fold, a five-year-old photo of a

had felt a strange twist in her stomach when she'd seen the numbers, but she'd never told the organizations to return the funds. She and Harry had testified on Narcissa's behalf too. And though she had complicated feelings about Narcissa Black Malfoy, Hermione had been greedy for good deeds after the war, impatient to make changes, whatever it took. Which was why, currently, the Wizengamot hated her. She was supposed to be Harry Potter's swotty muggleborn *sidekick*. She was supposed to pose by his side, and receive her Order of Merlin: First Class, and then *go away*. Like Ron.

Well, no, not like Ron—that wasn't fair. Ron was an amazing auror. Brave, good with strategy, hard-working—but not *too* hard-working. He would work a case as long as it took, as hard as it took—but then he knew how to knock off, let it go, go out to the pub. He didn't lecture everyone all night long about what they could have done differently. He didn't pepper the Wizengamot with reform bills.

Hermione made people crazy—she knew it, all right, she *knew*. But, Merlin, she was just doing her job. It wasn't that hard for people to do *theirs*. Just basic competence, was that too much to ask? Maybe a little drive, a little ambition, just a little effort to look around and make some connections and do something with them. Why wouldn't you want to do that? It wasn't that *hard*. It didn't take a genius to see what she saw—this stuff was pretty obvious, wasn't it? Was it *too* obvious, and everyone else saw it, they were just too jaded to care? Hermione knew she sometimes came across as a little naïve, a little goody goody. (She really *wasn't*.) And, yes, having been late to the wizarding world, she did sometimes worry, just a little, that no one else cared for some startlingly mundane reason she was missing. Was she being obtuse? But, Godric, it really did seem like everyone else was. Like it was all so obvious, and why didn't anyone ever want to talk about it? Why did everyone act like she was so hard-driving when she just wanted to get things done?

Anyway.

Anyway. That's why they didn't like her. And now they had to chance to show her—though this law that was supposedly about everyone, for the good of all of wizarding society, that had nothing to do with her personally, and wasn't she just a prat if she wanted special treatment now—that they could put her in her place. Yes, she was a war heroine. Yes, she was a Ministry employee. Yes, she was (ugh) the Golden Girl of the Golden Trio. And that was precisely why they *didn't* want to make an exception for her. Merlin forbid she start to think she could get what she wanted from them.

Still. *Still*. She walked into the meeting thinking this was all so obviously a bad idea that she'd just point that out and, somehow, for once—for once—everyone would agree. Somehow.

She nodded to the Chief Warlock's secretary. She was on time. She was expected.

She yanked open the door, her head held high.

She stepped into the office in her sensible heels, her robes swaying around her.

Shit.

There was Malfoy. Sat to her left.

Of course he was here. Why was she surprised? *Why?*

He looked over immediately.

"Granger." His voice was calm, pitched low, almost confidential. His face utterly neutral.

His gray eyes flicked all the way down, all the way back up. He looked away, face back to front—back to Warrington, behind his desk. He didn't curl his lip. He didn't wrinkle his nose. He didn't insult her. He just looked her up and down and looked away.

Somehow Hermione knew right then that she wasn't going to win. But she didn't want to admit it to herself, not yet.

The meeting went just as Hermione should have expected. Malfoy sat, impassive. (Coward. She'd thought he would be angry. She'd thought he would have *something* to say.) Warrington baited her until she screamed at him. He told her she could go back to the muggle world if she didn't appreciate the Wizengamot's good faith efforts to heal the post-war wizarding world, counteract pureblood inbreeding, let magic lead the way instead of prejudice and ideological divide. She tuned him out when he started mixing metaphors about mending fences and building bridges, biting back a comment that forced

marriage wasn't what anyone had had in mind when they suggested the Ministry go all-in on Infrastructure Week.

It was all so predictable. Hermione stole a glance at Malfoy. He was sitting just slightly slouched, his face just shy of sullen, balefully watching the Chief Warlock's performance. No longer emaciated, he was still pointy—an aristocratic nose balanced by a jaw that could cut glass, narrowing to a sharp chin. Long fingers. Prominent knuckles. The Malfoy signet ring Hermione recognized from Hogwarts joined by what she guessed was a signet ring from the Noble House of Black. His hair was perfect. Of course it was.

"So I offer you a choice, and you *will* be choosing one of these options in the next five minutes," growled Warrington.

Hermione snapped to. *What was he saying?*

"You can execute the marriage bond here, in this office, right now. Or I can snap your wands."

Hermione inhaled harshly through her nose, her mouth pressing into a hard line. *I am going to fucking hex you until—*

Her head twitched to the left, drawn by a sharp movement caught in the corner of her eye. Malfoy's chin had dropped down, his eyes never leaving the Chief Warlock. He no longer looked like a sixteen-year-old sulking in the headmaster's office. He looked dangerous.

This was the man she was about to marry?

Because she *was* about to marry him. She wasn't snapping her godsdamned wand.

"Let's get this over with," she snarled.

Malfoy's head whipped around, his eyes narrowing. "Yes, *let's*, darling."



Twenty minutes later, Hermione was in shock. Malfoy had produced the marriage contract with a precise filip of his wand. She had signed. In blood. The Chief Warlock had performed the marriage bond, his secretary acting as witness. (Was Malfoy upset that Narcissa wasn't there? He hadn't shown it.) She hadn't even had a chance to call Harry and Ron to her, and they were *in the building*. (They knew she had this meeting today—she was supposed to tell them how it went after.) Malfoy's hand on her wrist was light but unwavering, his House of Malfoy signet ring still bloodied from the contract; her hand on his was trembling.

Immediately afterward, to her surprise, he had drawn a ring box from the pocket of his robes. He was dressed in black, the robes tailored tightly across the hard line of his shoulders. He was taller than she remembered but still lean. "Events have proceeded out of order," he said dryly, "but it's now appropriate you have this, Mrs. Malfoy."

Hermione flinched as he opened the box to reveal an enormous diamond flanked by sapphires. Her birthstone, she thought stupidly. A strange coincidence in heirloom jewelry.

He removed the ring with long, bony fingers, his large left hand palming the box while also reaching for her hand.

Hermione balked, shifting back onto her heels. "That's not necessary."

She had agreed to the ring in theory—in contract language—but she hadn't expected to put it on so soon. All she could think about was the deep, dark magic thrumming through the Black bloodline. She hadn't had a chance to research this ring properly. She hadn't had her own cursebreaker examine it. (Who would she hire but Bill?) What was Malfoy trapping her into?

"It is," he said calmly.

"I don't need it," she said, shaking her head.

"You *do*," he said, his voice suddenly low and menacing. "You are now a member of my house, and this idiotic law has made you an even bigger target than your own idiotic actions have done. I will not have you harmed while under my protection, and I will not have you saying I harmed you. You are *putting on this ring*."



MONDAY JUNE 30, 2003

The Daily Prophet: RECONCILIATION ACT PASSES: MINISTRY-MANDATED MARRIAGES TO BE ANNOUNCED

The floo flashed green and Pansy Parkinson stepped into Draco Malfoy's dimly lit study to the familiar sight of Draco behind his desk, a lanky Theo Nott lounging on the settee nearest the fireplace, tumbler in hand. Theo's collar was unbuttoned, his wavy hair mussed. Draco's shirt was as crisp as his features.

"I got the plant man," said Pansy, brushing soot off the pointelle knit of her Givenchy with a half-hearted sneer.

"Longbottom?" Theo looked to Draco as they both sat up straighter. Draco's quill hovered over an open ledger.

Pansy caught the movement, her eyes darting between them. "What? What'd I miss?"

"A lot," said Theo, settling back onto dark green velvet, "if you think you can push him around the way you do us."

"When have I ever—"

Theo burst out laughing. Draco raised one eyebrow.

"All right, fine." Pansy wrinkled her nose. "And of course I can. I know he has that little plant empire—"

"An extensive inventory of the rarest and most dangerous plants known to the wizarding world," said Draco dryly, returning to his ledger.

"And who else," said Theo, his legs crossed, foot bouncing, "do you think knows about that little empire? Only every dark potionmaster, illicit apothecary, creature smuggler, socialite looking to be rid of a husband—"

Pansy's eyes lit up, her hand moving to her cocked hip.

"—and at least two muggle pharmaceutical companies."

"And yet," said Draco, "he remains alive and unmolested, his company still independently owned."

"One of you two hasn't bought him out? Wasn't it *reparation* money—"

Draco waved her off. "I don't fuck with Longbottom. I conduct what business of my own I need to with him and stay out of his."

"But, Pans," said Theo, uncrossing his legs to lean forward on the settee, "if you're about to be the woman inside the *little plant empire*—"

"If you *are*," said Draco, turning to Theo, "then *don't* underestimate him."

Pansy glared at Draco. "You're acting like he's going to chop me up and feed me to his little darlings."

"Well . . ." said Theo.

"Well, *what*?" said Pansy, canting her head.

**SELLING FANFICTION IS
ILLEGAL.
DON'T DO IT.
IF YOU BOUGHT THIS,
SHAME ON YOU.
IF YOU BOUND THIS
YOURSELF. IM SO PROUD
OF YOU!
-XOXO SENNA**

"I am *not*," Hermione ground out, twisting away—too late—as Malfoy, his touch no longer light, snatched her left hand and *crammed* the ring onto her finger, the band instantly resizing to a tight fit. Magic, warm and dark, surged through her, feeling for her edges. The scar on her left forearm lit up with pain.

"Malfoy!" gasped Hermione, wrenching her hand out of his grasp.

"And *now*," he said, grabbing her right hand, the bones grinding in his grip as he flipped up the top of the ring box with his left thumb, "you are putting this ring on me."

Inside, a corresponding band of diamonds, surprisingly delicate, surprisingly bright.

The magic invading her crackled in acknowledgment.

"I thought *this thing*," grunted Hermione as she fought him with tense, jerky movements, "prevented you from *hurting me*."

"Believe me," he hissed, a barely perceptible shudder moving through him, "I can feel the magic's displeasure."

Hermione stopped struggling—she plucked out the ring and grabbed his hand, her grip awkward against the box still tucked against his palm. Then she dug her nails into his flesh and shoved the ring onto his finger. She hoped it electrocuted him. This close, she could feel the heat radiating off him, waves of citrus and cloves filling her nose—the scents of once-rare and valuable imports. House Malfoy had long been involved in shipping and trade.

"There," she said, staring him down. "Happy?"

"Yes, sweetheart, you make me the happiest man in the world," he said, monotone, his pale gray eyes boring into hers.

Abruptly, he dropped her hand and turned to the Chief Warlock, his face now a mask of polite indifference. "Well, if our business here is concluded, we'll take our leave."

"Yes, yes!" Warrington sprang into action, herding them with his bulk toward the door, his secretary darting out ahead of them.

Merlin, Hermione had forgotten she was there. The woman had seen her *physically fighting* with Malfoy like Hogwarts first years over these cursed rings.

Hermione found herself, face flushed, her left forearm aching, trapped between the Chief Warlock and Malfoy—his godsdamned hand at the small of her back—as they all pushed toward the door.

"Many happy returns," said Warrington, stopped just inside the door, his hand held out as though to usher them back into the world, "Mr. Malfoy. Mrs. Malfoy."

Just for one second, Hermione felt herself united in spirit with Malfoy, as they both stared daggers at the man, their mouths twisted into identical sneers.



Hermione lunged out of the Chief Warlock's office and directly into Ron, promptly—and to her surprise—bursting into tears when his arms wrapped around her, his smell comfortingly familiar.

"Weasley. Potter," a newly and uncomfortably familiar voice drawled behind her. "Already making my wife cry?"

Hermione jerked back as Ron and Harry growled "Malfoy!" nearly in unison.

"Sorry, Weasel, did I steal your girl?" The words were taunting but Malfoy's voice was emotionless. "I'm lying. I'm not actually sorry."

"Godsdammit, Malfoy—"

"Ron and I stopped dating ages ago," Hermione said, turning to Malfoy with an icy smile. "But you wouldn't know that because—oh, that's right—you were in *prison*."

"Well, darling—"

"What just happened here?" demanded Harry, running a hand through his already disheveled hair.

"It was marry this git on the spot," Hermione jerked her chin toward Malfoy, "or snap my wand. I chose *poorly*."

"Oh, Hermione, I'm so sorry." Harry clapped a warm hand on her shoulder, his face pained.

"Thanks, Potter," drawled Malfoy. "Now get your hand off my wife."

"Malfoy?" snapped Hermione.

"Yes, *Mrs.* Malfoy?" He stepped closer, crowding her.

"Stop calling me that," she ground out.

"I won't," he said, voice low as he leaned over her. He wasn't as tall as Ron, was leaner than either Ron or Harry, but there was a coiled power in the stillness of his body.

Hermione softened her features and peered up at him through her lashes. "Do these rings prevent me from causing physical harm to you?"

"No," he whispered.

Hermione immediately punched him in the chest.

Malfoy rocked back onto his heels and caught himself with a step back. His hand went to his torso, the diamond band flashing, as a wide smile broke across his face. Godsdammit, he was *laughing*.

The first genuine laugh she'd heard out of him since—Merlin—third year?

Surely his friends had heard his real laugh since then. Did Malfoy have friends anymore? Fuck, she might be about to find out.

Ron was shaking his head, trying to decide whether he was angry or amused. Harry had his head thrown back, sighing as loudly as he could. "Merlin, fuck, godsdammit."

He dropped his chin, leveling a dead-eyed glower on them. "C'mon, you two. We have to get you past the press."

Malfoy's laughter cut off as the smile dropped from his face.



"Hermione! Hermione! Why have you been crying?"

"Hermione! Has Draco Malfoy hurt you?"

"Did Draco Malfoy torture you during the war?"

"Miss Granger, how do you feel about marrying a Death Eater?"

"Flash the ring, hon! We want to see it!"

Hermione kept her head down as Ron and Harry pushed roughly through the crowd of reporters, wands holstered but forearms raised to eye-level like shields, their faces grim. Malfoy, his face blank when she looked over, ushered her just in front of him, his goddamned hand at the small of her back.

How were there so many reporters here? The wizarding world wasn't that big! Was this international news? How did they already know? Were they blocking the fucking floo?

Hermione found herself boxed in by the press as quick-quotes quills hovered nearby, Ron and Harry lost in the crowd but Malfoy glued to her side.

"Hermione! Are you afraid for your life?"

"Hermione! Blink if Draco Malfoy is holding you captive!"

Beside her, Malfoy drew himself up to his full height and Hermione looked up to see him transformed. His impassive face now looked hard and cruel, the hollows of his cheeks shadowed under his sharp cheekbones, his upper lip just beginning to curl. His white-blond hair caught the light, striking in its contrast to his black—his *all black* clothing. How had Hermione not noticed until now? Black robes, black shirt, black waistcoat, black dragonskin boots. He almost looked—was he *trying* to look like a Death Eater?

He straightened and his collar slid down, revealing the runes and numbers of his Azkaban prisoner tattoo, still starkly black against his snow-white skin. Hermione's breath caught as every flashbulb went off.

The tattoos were impossible to glamour, Hermione knew—the whole point was to prevent prisoners from obscuring their identities and escaped convicts from going unnoticed, and conservative wizarding society didn't care if one's debt had been paid. Once a convict, always identifiable as such. And the

"In my humble opinion there's only three things that men should be and that's bloody, slutty, and pathetic"

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"In my humble opinion there's only three things that men should be and that is bloody, slutty, and pathetic."
And, on a good day, Draco Malfoy can be all three.

When war heroine Hermione Granger and Azkaban-tattooed war criminal Draco Malfoy are forced to wed as part of Shacklebolt's controversial Reconciliation Act, they openly fight the match and each other—their public brawls breathlessly reported by the press.

Secretly, a deeply traumatized Draco delights in Hermione's attention and pines for a real marriage with her—even as her forced proximity to the Black family magic irritates the cursed scar Bellatrix left on her arm, reminding her why she can never truly trust [REDACTED] or forgive him. Then Hermione discovers that

Draco's blood will soothe the scar . . . and Draco is willing to trade his blood for her body.
(With post-war blood purity politics, black market potioners, Pansy Parkinson's career advice, the Malfoys blackmailing Hermione's Wizengamot opposition, BDE Neville Longbottom hunting Death Eaters, a slutty Theo Nott serving as Draco's right-hand man, and Crookshanks loose in Malfoy Manor.)

TYPESET BY SENNA SLYTHERIN 2024

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Wizengamot had made sure that young Draco Malfoy did just enough time to earn the tattoo, even if those two years would be a tiny portion of his time alive. (Well, when he was seventeen, no one thought Draco Malfoy would spend much time alive.)

Hermione knew he had the tattoo. She knew he couldn't glamour it. But it was still somehow shocking to see it here, in broad daylight, on his otherwise perfectly aristocratic form. Draco Malfoy, forever marked a war criminal.

Malfoy raised his chin, standing tall in his black robes, his Azkaban runes uncovered, looking every inch the disreputable former Death Eater the press claimed him to be. (Not just claimed. He was. He was.) His hand was gripping her elbow, his fingers too tight.

"Hermione! Will you be staying at Malfoy Manor after being tortured there?"

"Hermione! Did Draco Malfoy crucio you during the war?"

"Mr. Malfoy! Mr. Malfoy! Where will you and Mrs. Malfoy be living?"

Malfoy turned lazily to the reporter, his eyes half-lidded. "I'll be keeping her in the dungeons, of course," he drawled.

"Malfoy!" she hissed under her breath. She violently elbowed him in the ribs. He was too close. His fingers were digging in. Everyone was too close.

He ignored her.

"Apologies," he said to the reporter, his tone egregiously insincere. "I meant she'll be chained to my bed."

"Malfoy!" Hermione howled, preparing to rip her arm from his grasp.

"Yes, love?" Malfoy looked down, smiling nastily at her as he roughly jerked her to him and spun on his heel, disappearing them without warning.

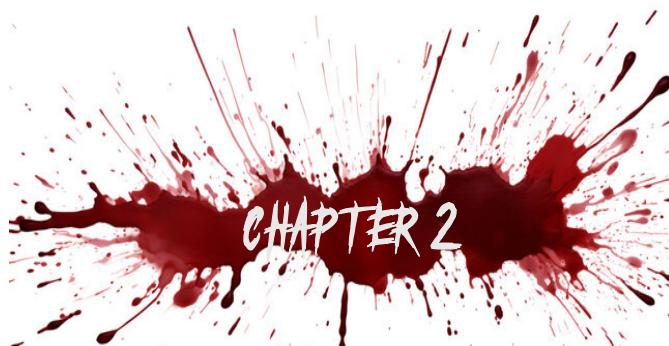
BLOODY, SLUTTY & PATHETIC

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They landed in a heap, Hermione falling away from him as he dropped her arm.

"Merlin's tits, love, you're lucky we didn't splinch with you fighting me like that. You're welcome, by the way." Malfoy shot his cuffs with a look of distaste, as though her grubby paws had wrinkled his bespoke sleeves. (They had.)

Hermione was up in an instant, leaping into his face. "You're welcome? What could I possibly be thanking you for? You didn't even *try* to get us out of this farce of a marriage and now you can't even apparate me into a wall and put me out of my misery."

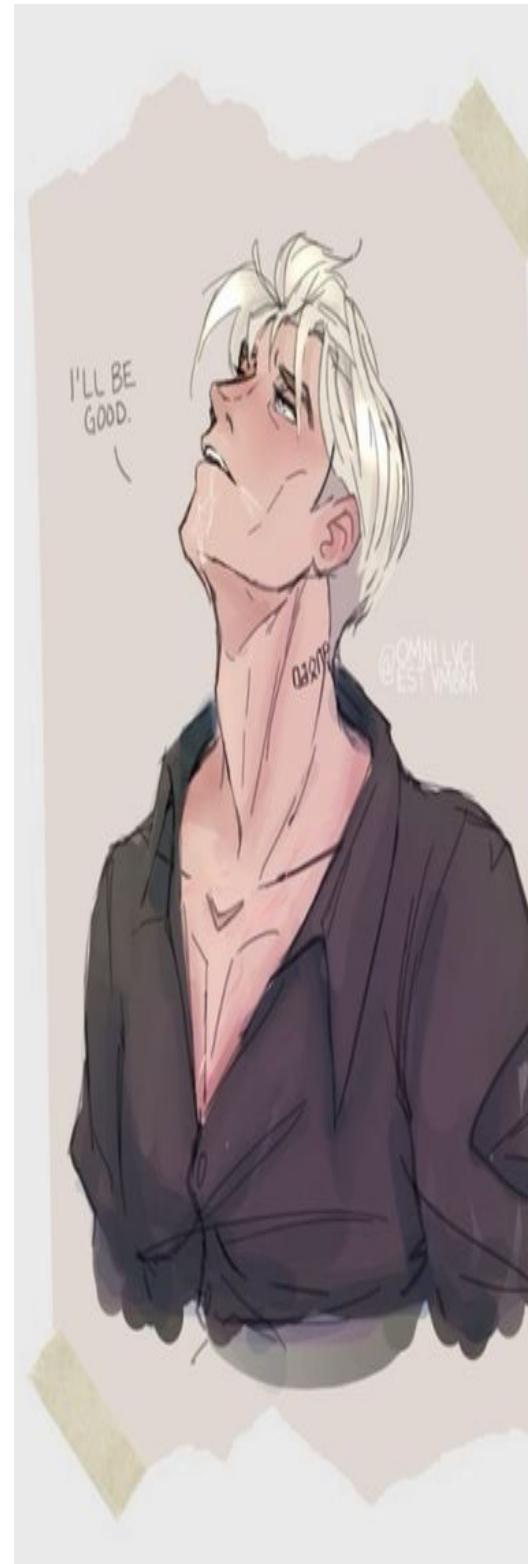
"You want me to put you into a wall?" growled Malfoy, surging forward, sending Hermione stumbling back . . . into, yes, a wall. They were on the pavement in front of Hermione's flat, her back against the front garden wall. He leaned forward, his forearms against the bricks on either side of her head, his body scrupulously an inch off hers.

Hermione could feel her wards welcoming her home, warning her that a stranger was close enough to breach—yes, she was *aware*. Her chest and back were tingling—like something good was happening, like something very bad was inevitable. Citrus. Cloves. The anger rolled off him in waves.

"There. You can *thank me* for taking direction. You can thank me for getting you out of there. You can thank me for making you look *so good* in comparison. Everyone thinks you're *so good* now, don't they?"

Hermione sneered at him. She hated that, being called good. People only said it when they were about to insult her or manipulate her and then expected her to lap it up. *Be a good girl* was always followed by something that was decidedly not good for *her*. Case in point: the wizard assaulting her now.

"It won't last, you know." He smirked but there was no humor in it.



Before Hermione could ask what *that* meant, he pushed off the wall, stepped away. “Right. Add me to the wards, love. Or don’t. Up to you. I’ll be back for you in a few hours. I must tell my mother I’m wed.”

He looked like he was about to say something more, then stopped. He turned on his heel and, with a wisp of black smoke, he was gone.

Hermione thought back to Malfoy asking Ron if he’d stolen his girl. She wondered if he’d been seeing someone, if there was a pureblood betrothal from childhood—Pansy?—he’d now have to break. It was strange, to think of Malfoy courting like that. An unfortunate series of shags with ferret boy, sure. She’d heard the rumors at school. But did Malfoy . . . care about someone? Did someone care about him? Hermione pushed off the wall with a shudder. No, surely not.

◆

MINISTRY GIVES GOLDEN GIRL TO DEATH EATER: Hermione Granger Forcibly Wed to War Criminal Draco Malfoy in Reconciliation Act Shock!

The special edition of the *Prophet* was nearly instantaneous. Hermione told herself she didn’t care, but after Ginny stepped through her flat’s floo with a copy in hand, she found herself poring over it, a hissing Crookshanks clutched to her chest, Ginny hovering over her.

The article painted Hermione as a weeping damsel in distress, Malfoy her sinister soon-to-be-rapist. They ran Malfoy’s quotes unironically. (“Merlin, he really said that?” murmured Ginny. She leaned closer, sniffing. “Well, he is rather fit. Creepy, but fit. *What?*”)

But the pictures told a slightly different story. Hermione was puffy-eyed, blank-faced, her curls flying up from her head as though electrified. Obviously shell-shocked. But then she viciously jabbed him in the ribs—it was clear, even in the press of bodies—and he violently jerked her into his side, his eyes burning above the nasty grin. The photos were edited—it hadn’t been *bang bang* like that—but they weren’t edited *that* much. She had elbowed him. He had jerked her back. His eyes—Jesus, there was no editing that.

The two of them looked . . . Well, Hermione didn’t know. Part of her thought: Good for her. She wasn’t a damsel in distress. She was fighting back. She *should* fight back. She deserved to be angry. And part of her thought: It looked bad. Malfoy was a psycho. But she was down in the dirt with him. She didn’t look sweet when she was fighting him—and she shouldn’t have to look sweet, godsdammit, but people sure liked her better when she did. Did she not look like the victim, if she was elbowing him like that? *Why should she have to look like a victim?* But Hermione knew why. If she were the victim, people would stay on her side. Maybe she could get this law repealed. Reconciliation was one thing, but forced marriage was going too far. People could see—right here!—why it was a bad idea. Inhumane! Barbaric!

But fight him too much and, well, she looked barbaric, too. Like maybe they weren’t such an uneven match after all. Like maybe—Merlin, his lips pulled back, his teeth showing—some part of them enjoyed this. Sick.

I won’t last, you know.

A shiver ran through Hermione.

“Godric, is that Malfoy’s ring?” Ginny snatched up her hand, tilting it back and forth so that the diamond caught the light.

“Narcissa’s,” said Hermione. The scar along her forearm was prickling and stinging and she longed to yank her sleeve up and examine it. Alone—where she wouldn’t have to pretend it didn’t bother her. “Black betrothal jewelry. It prevents the groom—”

“From immediately offing the bride for her dowry,” said Ginny, nodding. “Yeah. Pureblood shit.” She dropped Hermione’s hand and looked to her. “But why did Malfoy give this to *you*? No offense but—”

"But he hates me. And everyone knows it." Hermione held up her hand with a wry look. "This is his alibi. He doesn't want to go straight back to Azkaban if something happens to me."

"But he already has his Azkaban number and everything," said Ginny sweetly. "They could show him right back to his cell."

Hermione snorted and wrapped Ginny in a hug. "What am I going to *do*?" she groaned.

"Make him sorry he ever met you," said Ginny.



Pansy pulled hard on the greenhouse door (it was too heavy to fling open the way she'd like) and strode over the threshold (unwarded, just as Theo had said), her heels clicking on the cracked tile floor, her skirt (this season's Dior) swishing with the sway of her hips.

Hazy sunlight filtered in through the rain-speckled glass panes, past the leaves and trailing vines that Pansy was careful not to brush even as she walked with lazy authority down the central aisle, the plants pressing more tightly toward her the further in she went. The air was warm, humid, fecund. Luckily, Pansy had had the hair straightening charm down since she was a first year.

Finally, she saw a figure kneeling ahead of her. He had his back to her, hunched in front of a large, potted Venomous Tentacula, partially obscured by fronds.

Pansy slowly walked within five feet—he was ignoring her; she didn't like to be ignored—and dropped her handbag to the tile with a thump.

"Oi, plant daddy." She crossed her arms, cocking her hip. "You got the Death Eater bitch."

Neville Longbottom finally stood up—and up and up (Salazar, he was so much taller than she remembered)—and turned to Pansy. (For fuck's sake, at some point he'd fixed his mouth and grown a chin.) He smiled faintly, brushing off his (yes, large) hands and sliding them into his pockets before stepping toward her. His shirt sleeves were rolled to the elbows, his forearms muscular and prominently veined. He wore dark muggle trousers, a dusting of dirt across his knees.

"Pansy Parkinson," he said quietly, canting his head. He settled in front of her, his gaze focused solely on her face, despite everything else there was to see. He smelled like dark soil, sweat, and spices.

Pansy jutted her chin out. She was used to looking up. She didn't have to be taller to dominate.

"You know," said Longbottom evenly, "plants do better when you speak to them nicely. You can call me Daddy if you want to—"

Pansy's lips parted.

"But don't talk about yourself that way. Not in front of the plants. Not in front of me."

Pansy blinked, her nose wrinkling. "Well, I'm not *nice*."

"Spiky? Thorny? Venomous? Deadly?" Longbottom smiled his faint smile. "I can still take care of that. Every plant is nicer when its needs are met."

Pansy felt her neck prickle. (What was that? She didn't *blush*.) "You don't know anything about me, Longbottom," she said coolly. "And I can talk however I want."

"You can." He shrugged slightly. "And I can walk away. We can try again later."

He turned and actually began to walk away. From her! Just like that! Pansy's eyes narrowed.

"C'mon, Parkinson," Longbottom called over his shoulder, still sauntering into the depths of the greenhouse. "I'll make you some tea."

"Trying to poison me already, Longbottom?" she called to his back. "I've heard about you."

Longbottom stopped and turned to her with a laugh, his smile wider now. "Are you here to extort me? I'll make it in front of you. You don't have to drink it if you don't trust me yet. C'mon, Parkinson. Come tell me about your needs. Ideal growing conditions. What it'll take to make you thrive."

I'm thriving now. That's what she wanted to say. That's what she *should* say. But her stomach clenched and, sweet fucking Salazar's godsdamned poxy dick, the lie caught in her throat. She wasn't *thriving*, alone in the family manor with her Death Eater father in Azkaban and her worthless mother fucked off abroad, running the estate on her own. She wasn't *bad* at it, and Draco and Theo were both in the same boat. It

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WHATMURDAH

was fine. They were all doing fine. She was filthy rich. And she was a fantastic fucking liar. So why wouldn't the lie come out now?

"What do you care?" Pansy huffed instead, crossing her arms tighter against her chest. She shouldn't have said that. It was a dead giveaway. But suddenly she really wanted to know.

Longbottom shrugged, looking amused. "I like taking care of things."

Pansy hesitated, fighting the impulse to chew on her lower lip. (She bit her lip when it looked coy and alluring; she didn't *chew* on it like an uncertain child.)

"Pansy," Longbottom said, his voice mild and even, his eyes serious. "Come with me."

Pansy stood still for a moment.

He looked at her, holding her gaze.

Then she bent down to pick up her handbag, the bottom now speckled with loose dirt, and straightened.

She looked at him, waiting patiently for her. And then she followed.



"You got fucking married without me?" howled Theo. "I was meant to be there, Dray! I was going to be your *flower boy*!"

"How do you—What the fuck is a flower boy?" snapped Draco. "I keep telling you I'm never doing a threesome with you again—"

"Well, not now that you're *married*. This Mrs. Malfoy doesn't look like—"

"You can stop right there, mate. I don't want you looking at *either* Mrs. Malfoy—"

"A boy can dr—"

"Not about *Malfoy witches*—"

"Hey, hands to yourself, Lord Malfoy!" Theo danced away from him, putting the settee between them. "And don't even think about hexing me! The Ministry's going to be here doing wand checks after they see this—" He spun the paper toward Draco with a flick of his wrist, like skipping a stone. "Special edition, fuckol! Very nice!"

Draco snatched the *Prophet* out of the air, the pages rustling, a scowl etched into his face.

"Yes, yes! That's the spirit! Keep looking at everyone like you want to kill them, let's see how that goes." Theo quick-stepped closer to him, sidling up to scan the front page over his shoulder. His chin dug in when he dropped his head to whisper into Draco's ear: "Though it doesn't look to me like *killing* is what you want to do to Granger—"

"That's *Mrs. Malfoy* to you, and—"

"Look at that jab! Are your ribs bruised? Does she still have that right hook?"

"Merlin, I hope so." Draco smacked Theo's hands as they sought out his, yes, bruised ribs. "I hope she uses it on *you*—"

"*Wha-hey!* Not a chance, mate. Everyone loves me. Present company very much included—you know I like it rough. C'mon, don't stop."

"Theo, *thank you* for bringing me the paper." Draco turned and shoved it into his chest, eyebrows raised. "But I have to go speak with the other Mrs. Malfoy and, no, you are not coming along to flirt with Narcissa."

"But Narcissa loves—"

"Yes, yes, everyone loves you. So go find your own wife to—My mother is *still married*, Theo! Go find your own wife to torment. I don't care if you're insane."

"Well, I just might." Theo grabbed the crumpled paper from Draco, smoothing out the front page to stare fondly at Draco and his new bride angrily grappling with each other. "Because you two make marriage look *fun*."

"Yes," said Draco dryly. "It's a riot."

"My money's on her, you know."

"Unfortunately," sighed Draco, "so is mine."



Three hours later, Draco was stood on the pavement, watching a window open to reveal a mass of ginger hair and freckles.

"Oi! Ferret!"

"Weaselette," Draco called back. "Tell Mrs. Malfoy to *let me in!*"

"The flat or her knick—"

"*Ginny!*"

The She-Weasel was jerked abruptly from view and Draco felt the wards drop. He set a brisk pace up the garden walk, brushing past the youngest Weasley when she unceremoniously yanked open the door. But she was faster than he expected—she played chaser for the Harpies, he remembered now—elbowing him in the torso as he passed.

"Sorry about that, Ferret. Must have slipped. Are those ribs bruised, maybe?"

"Tell me, Weaselette, have you divorced Potter yet?"

"Not yet!" she sang with a facetious smile, carelessly flinging the door shut behind them.

"A pity. I have just the match for you, next time you're in the market."

"Ooh, I'll let Harry know I have options, then." The Weaselette winked and elbowed him in the ribs again as she pushed past him in the narrow hall.

Merlin, he might have to revisit his rankings of Weasleys Most In Need of Dying In a Fire. He just wasn't sure whether the She-Weasel was moving up or down the list.

"Salazar's sacred ball sack," hissed Draco, nearly falling into the parlor. "Weaselette, did I just trip over a sentient hairball of yours?"

"Crookshanks!"

Finally, his wife appeared, in muggle jeans and a flimsy muggle peasant blouse, only to scoop up the orange demon with a look at Draco that could have taken out a horcrux. "You did *not* just kick my cat."

"Correct. That is neither a cat nor did I kick it. It did, however, try to kill me."

"That's my good boy," crooned his wife.

Fuck. Draco did *not* need to know how badly he wanted to hear her say that again.

Her moving on top of him, lowering her face toward his, her hair tenting around him, blocking out everything but her, her lips brushing his ear, her voice whispering, "That's my good boy."

Draco blinked as all the blood in his body seemed to flow toward his cock.

He fixed his face into a sneer. "Say your goodbyes. That thing is *not* coming to the Manor."

"Clause 24(g), Malfoy! I've already settled this with your attorney. Maybe next time do your dirty work yourself, hm?" This time, her glare was triumphant.

Draco pursed his lips to keep himself from smiling at her flushed cheeks, the gleam in her eye. "Clearly, I will be hexing Mr. Bockius next time I see him. As you wish, then, Mrs. Malfoy. Bring the beast. I will tell the house elves not to kill it."

An outraged squeak, but Draco rolled right over it. "The tapestries have updated themselves. The contract has added you to the blood wards. The goblins, naturally, were notified immediately. Your Gringotts key awaits at the Manor. Your rooms are ready, and the elves will move in your belongings—which I see now can all safely be burned. No, save your words! The elves handle the Manor's rubbish—I really wouldn't know the details—so I will leave the matter between them and you."

Draco almost laughed now at the fury twisting her face.

"Posh twat," muttered the She-Weasel, her arms crossed against her chest.

"That reminds me, dearest wife. I will need a list of approved visitors for the wards on your private floo. I'm feeling generous, so: no cap on the number of Weasleys. I assume you, Weaselette, for reasons that escape me, will make the cut."

Draco cocked his head in a patently false show of fondness (a bluff—he *was* feeling fond of her, he didn’t know why) and smirked at his wife, whose indignation was visibly reaching dangerous levels. “Your turn, love. Let me have it.”

“You slimy little cockroach!”

Draco gave her his winningest smile.

“There is nothing wrong with my things! They do not need to be burned, and I certainly do not need house elves to move them. I will do it myself!”

“Oh, let the elves have their fun,” Draco said in his most condescending tone. “*Mrs. Malfoy*, you are now a member of a household that includes in its number several generations of elves, and the current generation is *bored*, their magic and talents going to waste. They run an enormous doll house with only two dolls to dress and feed—”

“I am not a doll.” Her tone low and warning.

Draco smiled indulgently. “Oh, but you are. And bored elves make for a fractious and resentful staff. We employ them but we cannot fire them. We are at their mercy when they are displeased. The Ministry’s continued insistence on controlling even the most private aspects of my blighted existence has deprived Narcissa of one of her most fervently anticipated joys: her only son’s wedding. But my mother isn’t the only one who’d been planning my nuptials since my birth. As you also intend to deprive the household of my child, please do indulge them just this once and let the elves move you in. Do it, or you will offend them.”

Draco watched as she shook her hair out of her face and raised her chin. He’d first seen the exact same gesture when they were eleven.

“Fine. I will cooperate with the Manor’s elves and be civil to your mother. You do not need to lay these elaborate guilt trips at my feet to ensure what is only decent behavior. But I’m sure the concept of a simple human interaction absent multiple layers of egregious emotional manipulation is completely foreign to you. It’s clear the only relationships you understand are transactional.”

“Well, we’ll never know, *will we*,” said Draco, “since the Ministry saw fit to give its Golden Girl to an ex-Death Eater in exchange for my continued *public humiliation* and that’s now the only marriage I’ll ever have.”

“Oh, so being seen with me is a public humiliation for *you*?” She practically threw down the deformed cat to shove him back a step.

“Come off it, Malfoy!” The She-Weasel’s pointy finger was jabbing at his face. “Your parents sold you off in an arranged marriage before you were even born.”

“And the Wizengamot made sure the other family was *horified* at the prospect of being held to it,” Draco spat, resisting the urge to claw at his neck. Sometimes he thought he could still feel the runes burning there.

Something should be burning—he should be punished—because it was a blatant lie. He was lying. The Greengrasses had been undeterred. They’d emerged from the war largely unscathed—Slytherin blood purists, but not ones anything could be pinned on. They’d been circumspect and strategic. They were sympathetic to the plight of the Malfoys, and especially sympathetic to the fact that the Malfoy vaults were still packed to the rafters with gold, even after the hefty fines and reparations payments.

Daphne had married Adrian, but Draco had been promised to Astoria, the beautiful little idiot. Draco knew he was meant to see it as him getting her, but after the war—after Azkaban—it had indeed felt like he was the one being sold off, Narcissa paying the Greengrasses in Malfoy gold, blood, and spunk for the favor of them rehabilitating Draco with Astoria’s now-higher social standing. And the Malfoys had enough gold, enough pure blood, that the Greengrasses were still eager to enforce the contract, even when Draco was fresh out of Azkaban and couldn’t—well, couldn’t imagine sitting in a room with other people without screaming. They’d pushed it, and his mother had pushed him—too early. The Greengrasses had come to collect—everyone too eager to move on too fast from the war—and Narcissa had the gold, had the blood, but Draco was the third part of the payment. He was the breeding stock—it was fine to say it, he’d always known that was his job. And the stock was tainted, ruined.

They'd come to the Manor. A minor humiliation—the Manor was still in pieces after the war and the Ministry raids; Draco hadn't yet taken over the extensive renovations that would be necessary to cover everything that could never be erased. His mother was still careworn; too thin, her smile too tight. (She'd worked so hard to be able to look happy now.) It would have been better to go to the Greengrasses, but he was under house arrest—and maybe Narcissa felt it was only fair that they know what they were getting. And what they were meant to get was Draco—hugging the walls, haunting the halls, still struggling with all the open space after his cell. His face blank, his eyes dead, occluded out of his mind. They'd taken one look at the line of black runes tattooed below his skull-like visage and blanched. How were they supposed to send Tori to a ball with *this*? How were they supposed to send Tori into a *bedroom* with him?

If it had only been a year—if he hadn't been held long enough to be inked—maybe he still would have been sane when the Greengrasses came to poke and prod him. Maybe he could have fulfilled his purpose for the Black and Malfoy lines; maybe his mother would have a grandchild now. So Draco blamed the Wizengamot.

But that was a lie, wasn't it? Because it was his own fault he was in front of the Wizengamot in the first place. And he could easily have been sentenced to longer. He'd got off lightly—everyone said it—because of the charity of Saint Potter and the Golden Girl, their disgustingly self-righteous insistence on testifying on his behalf, the contortions they put themselves through to interpret his cowardice as something nobler. And then, then—he could have pulled it together for his mother's sake, could have made a better showing. But no, he couldn't imagine any future with Astoria—couldn't imagine any future with anyone—and so he'd made sure there wasn't one, hadn't he? He'd let the tattoo show, he'd let the dead space behind his eyes show—and the Greengrasses had finally understood what they'd be getting and run.

"You can't blame the Wizengamot for your own actions!" said his wife, as if she were a legitimens. "Godric, your complete refusal to take accountability is disgusting."

"For once, love, we are in agreement. I deserve every punishment the Wizengamot has given me. After all, they gave me *you*," snarled Draco. "And so maybe you will have to admit that the Wizengamot was right when it decided, in its infinite wisdom, that what *you* deserved was *me*."

"I have *never* deserved *this*." She was incandescent with self-righteousness. Merlin, he couldn't wait to wrap his arms around her and drag her down with him.

"That's right, because I'm disgusting and you're so much better than me," Draco ground out, his fury cooling into something hard and icy.

"I am in every way that matters." She held his stare, the gold flecks in her eyes shining.

"You might be right, love. But we'll see how long the public feels that way, *Mrs. Malfoy*, seeing you by my side," he grabbed her left hand and held it up, "wearing my ring."

Instantly, she jerked her hand away and he let her. She snatched at the ring—Merlin, she was predictable. She wanted to yank it off and throw it across the room, he knew. He watched through narrowed eyes as she tried and the ring only cinched tighter. She made a noise in the back of her throat, her lips pressed in a tight line. She didn't want to admit it hurt.

"Only I can take it off," said Draco low, almost a whisper. And she'd have to take off his first.

"Take. It. Off," she said through clenched teeth.

No, he mouthed, his eyes on hers.

"*Fine*." And she lunged, scratching, for his left hand, trying to take off the ring she could control.

But he'd anticipated her, and he was taller and stronger. He fisted his hand, holding it back and away, and wrapped his other arm around her waist as she collided with him, scrabbling at him. He pulled her tighter to him, neutralizing her energy, and her knees knocked into his legs. Her breasts moved against his chest as she struggled against him, hopping up on tiptoe, the hard line of the zipper on her muggle jeans rubbing painfully, wonderfully against his cock. Draco slowly cinched her closer, until, biting his lip, he lowered his head and whispered in her ear, "Are you enjoying this as much as I am, love?"

She froze, his erection pushing against her. Then she shoved him away.

He stepped back, smirking. His heart was racing—Merlin, this felt good. Almost like he was alive again.

Then he remembered Ginevra Weasley was still in the room. He looked over—it was a risk to take his eyes off the panting lioness in front of him, but she currently didn't want to get too close to him—expecting to see the Weaselette's wand raised, a stunner headed his way. The Gryffindors were quick to violence. Why hadn't she already stupefied him?

She was shaking her head, her eyes wide. "Godric. I don't know about you two."

Maybe even a Weasley knew enough about pureblood traditions to know that Draco was well within his rights here. The contract, the rings—they were godsdamned progressive compared to the toxic shit other Sacred 28 got up to. They mostly protected *her*. The Wizengamot had decided—this marriage was happening whether they liked it or not. Draco wouldn't take off the rings.

Draco let his lip curl. "Tell Potter I won't press charges, though this is the second time my lovely wife has assaulted me in front of witnesses. I couldn't bear it if she spent our wedding night in a cell."

"I would *gladly* go to Azkaban if—"

"No, dear." Draco turned to her, a sad smile on his lips. "You wouldn't."

At that, the wind went out of her sails. She sighed and bent down to pick up the cat—looking, Draco thought, lost as to how she'd got to this moment.

"Come, Mrs. Malfoy. Bring that abomination and I'll show you to your rooms in the Manor." Draco ushered her toward her own floo, unsure how he'd got to this moment himself. And he'd been so enjoying her a moment before. "Weaselette—"

"Ferret—"

"Always a pleasure."

"Go fuck yourself," she said sweetly.

Up. Ginevra Potter was going up in the rankings of Most Tolerable Weasley.



TUESDAY JULY 8, 2003

"Hermione! Do you feel safe in the Manor?"

Godsdammit! Hermione had thought that arriving to work two hours early would allow her to escape the press. How were these vultures already here? (This was unfair to vultures, who were a valuable part of the ecosystem.)

"Hermione! Hermione! Are you quitting your job now that you have access to the Malfoy millions?"

There it was—the Ministry's hope that they could marry her off to her worst enemy (everyone higher on the list now being dead except for Rita Skeeter, which could be corrected) and be rid of her in one fell swoop. Well, Draco Malfoy could literally be made of gold and it would not make a sickle's difference to her newfound dedication to burning the Ministry down from the inside. Her detractors claimed she was overly motivated by idealism; they'd be happy to learn they'd helped swap idealism for spite. They were all about to find out which was more effective.

"Mrs. Malfoy! When can we expect a pregnancy announcement?"

Hermione spun around to glare at the—*Witch Weekly*, of course!—reporter before the lift doors slammed shut.

The answer was never. He would have to rape her first.

She should turn around and say that to the *Witch Weekly* reporter. The press, she noted, were too cowardly to ask about Malfoy's boast that he would chain her to his bed. It was almost like he was helping her make the point that this law was nothing so much as government-mandated rape. But since when had Malfoy been helpful?

No, he was just a scumbag. And now she supposed she was meant to be grateful that he hadn't made good on the threat the night before.

Hermione had been trembling with adrenaline when she'd stepped out of the Manor's main floor, Crookshanks held tightly to her chest. As if in acknowledgment of this—Godric, he must have felt her shaking against him—Malfoy had dropped her elbow and taken a step away, grit and soot sliding between the soles of his dragonskin boots and the stone of the hearth.

"Where is Narcissa?" asked Hermione, her eyes darting along the dark walls, the ornately patterned rug, the silently sneering portraits she wished weren't familiar at all. She'd expected to be greeted by the Malfoy matriarch.

"My mother," said Malfoy, watching her closely, "has gone to France for the season."

Hermione's head whipped around as she fixed him with a hard stare. "Because she is too disgusted by me to be in the same building."

"Rather the opposite," said Malfoy, his tone clipped, his stare just as hard. "My mother fears that being in the Manor will be upsetting for you, and that seeing her here will add to your discomfort. She hopes to ease your transition by allowing you a period of time to explore and acclimate to your new home on your own terms, without feeling that you are her guest. With my father in Azkaban—you're aware, as your testimony helped put him there—I am now the Lord of the Manor. As my wife, you are now the Lady. My mother is your guest here, rather than the other way round."

"She left us here alone together," said Hermione flatly.

"If you are asking whether my mother hopes we'll fuck in every room of the house and twice in the kitchens and be well on our way to producing an heir by the time she gets back," said Malfoy darkly, "the answer is yes."

"That is—"

"We can also fuck in the stables, the gardens, the gazebo, the broom shed, the graveyard—"

"I get the picture, Malfoy."

"Really? I could use some visual aids." But his tone was wry, the leer perfunctory. "Right," he said, turning toward the dark hall, "your rooms."

Hermione had hoped her rooms would be in an entirely different wing than Malfoy's—she had plans to be famously estranged from her husband, and what better way to start from day one than with sleeping arrangements that allowed them to never, ever see each other? Surely Malfoy didn't want to see *her*, either, despite his attempts to degrade her with sexual innuendo. As anyone who had ever attended Hogwarts within earshot of him knew, he found her particularly aesthetically unpleasant. But, to her dismay, her rooms were right beside his, connected by a shared sitting room.

The sitting room was dark and sumptuous, the settees velvet, the walls devoid of family portraits. Hermione flinched when she realized the gold accents on one side of the room led to the doors to her suite, the silver on the other presumably to Malfoy's, the silver and gold intertwining along the central fireplace in an unwarranted promise of unity. Unless Lucius and Narcissa had always planned to marry Malfoy to a Gryffindor (doubtful), the elves had been at work here.

Malfoy opened the doors to her suite but lingered before them like a vampire in need of an invitation.

"Your rooms. Your guests may be received in your sitting room if you do not wish to use either of the Manor's. Your study is smaller, it being assumed by the Manor's original architects that the Lady would primarily use it for letter- and memoir-writing. I assume you will thus be spending all your waking hours in the Manor's library—"

Hermione felt a stir of interest despite herself.

"I am available to fuck in the restricted section if you wish to fulfill your Hogwarts fantasies—"

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"—though I must warn you that the Ministry's Unspeakables confiscated most of the more interesting volumes. If you find the Lady's bedroom too small for your needs, you may share my bed, as the Lord's bedroom was intended to be the master. The beast may not, however, and I will *not* be sharing my dressing room."

she was, admitted to his class at school, and she was *strange*. Her clothes were all wrong, and she used odd words and phrases he'd never heard before, as though everyone should know what she meant. And in class—she came out of nowhere and knew almost everything. How did she know? She was bizarrely, infuriatingly good at magic. But then he would overhear Weaselbee explaining the most basic thing to her. Draco used to look for her when they went to Hogsmeade, wondering what she would wear, what she would exclaim over. She should have asked *him* how things worked—he knew so much better than Weasley.

But of course she was adopted by Weasley and Potter—they were all mental, and she was *rough*. The hair, the teeth, she was always covered in ink smudges. (*See*, Draco thought, *muggles* were *dirty*)—though Goyle also couldn't tuck in his shirt or cap an inkwell.) She didn't sit down right, or cross her ankles the way girls were meant to. Pansy or Millie would slug you in the arm and give you the two-finger salute and they'd still cross their ankles, but she'd clearly never been to comportment classes. And Potter and Weasley were hopeless—morons who let her act like an idiot, shooting her hand up in class and lecturing everyone and starting ridiculous campaigns.

Draco used to watch her, confused and fascinated. He would think he had her figured out, and then she'd do something so weird. She was unpredictable—like the punch he hadn't seen coming. Feral. She'd sneer at him like he wasn't better than her. At a certain point, he'd stopped being able to make her cry. He'd used to wonder if he could, still, if he got her alone. If she'd claw at him or surrender. If she came back from summers in the muggle world knowing about things he didn't.

He had been rough with girls when he was young and didn't know what he was doing. And then sometimes when he did know. Theo used to kiss him in the common room when they were drunk at parties. Blaise always pushed Theo away, but Draco didn't mind it. Theo was gentle, it was nice—lots of tongue and his hands in Draco's hair and holding his jaw—and being drunk was an excuse for Draco to be gentle too. It got the girls excited. Pansy always made a show of reclaiming him—"Warming him up for me, Nott? C'mon, Draco, I've got a better use for your mouth."—and Draco would grin as everyone whooped while she pulled him away. He didn't know how to be gentle with Pansy. That didn't seem to be the point of it for either of them.

He didn't want to be rough with his wife. He wanted to learn to be gentle with her. He wanted her to give him the chance to be.

But sometimes, like right now, he also wanted her to beat the shit out of him.



Pansy pulled the greenhouse door open and walked inside, her heels clicking on the cracked tile, her skirt (Prada) swishing with the sway of her hips. She walked down the long center aisle until she found Longbottom at the worn wooden table in back where he'd made her tea.

"Hiya," she said.

He smiled faintly at her. "Hiya."

She watched him repot a plant, mostly by hand.

"Did you get the invitation to the Ministry's reception?" she asked.

"I did."

She made a show of tilting her head, looking up at him, swiveling one foot on its stiletto heel. A person who was not shy pretending to be shy. "Will you be my date?"

"I will." He smiled.

Last time, at this table, she had told him . . . a lot. She wasn't sure how it happened. The thing about Longbottom, she realized, was that he was no longer afraid. Of anything. She wasn't sure if he had used up all his fear in the war and run out, or if he had just decided that he had already faced the worst and he refused to be afraid of anything else. But he wasn't afraid of her. And he wasn't afraid of her feelings.

It wasn't fair to say Slytherins didn't do feelings. Salazar, Theo and Draco were the biggest drama queens she knew. And she loved them like brothers. She would always be there for them. She could tell them anything . . . except how she felt about what she'd just told them.

She could tell Theo anything, and he'd give her a sad look and then he'd make a joke—a very, very inappropriate joke. And she'd laugh, and he'd say, "C'mon, let's go find some firewhisky." She could tell Draco anything and he'd swear—"Fucking hell, Pansy"—and he'd sling a rough arm around her neck, offer to kick someone's teeth in, and they'd go sit by the Black Lake. All the feelings inside her had nowhere to go, but that's how it was for everyone. You just sat together and knew they'd felt those feelings too, and that was the best you could do.

They'd had periods of being truly nasty to each other, back when Pansy was trying to date Draco, and Draco and Blaise were trying to screw anything in a skirt, and Theo was trying to convince all of them to be pansexual. The kind of nasty, Pansy imagined, you could only be with a sister or brother—someone who already thought the worst of you but had to love you anyway. Slytherins didn't do apologies and they didn't do forgiveness. But they stuck by their own. No matter how much they hurt each other, they'd always have each other. Or that's what Pansy had thought before the war.

After the war, when half of her house's year was dead or in prison, she had found Theo again. And she and Theo had found Draco when he got out of Azkaban. It had been bad. She would never abandon either one of them. She knew they would never abandon her.

But the war had broken them. There was something wrong with them now. They had thought they were meant to rule. They had imagined they were in control. And then the war had happened and they'd had no control—of their lives, their bodies, their minds. And to survive meant giving up their autonomy and self-respect too. Public trials and raids and reparations and probation and wand checks. And they had got off easy—so, so easy. And how could Pansy complain when their parents had believed some truly vile things and she had swallowed them down and parroted them back without question? She had been an idiot. (But, Merlin, who questions what everyone—*everyone*—around them believes?)

But the thing was, they *had* got off easy. And now they had their money and their freedom and they could do anything—anything! And yet they still believed they couldn't. They no longer believed they had control over their lives.

And so the Reconciliation Act was announced and Pansy and Draco bitched and moaned about the Ministry interfering in their lives and did exactly . . . nothing. They didn't marry each other. They didn't leave the country. They didn't move into Muggle London. They just waited to see what would happen to them.

When everything you think you know about yourself and the world turns out to be wrong—violently, horribly wrong—how do you trust yourself to make the next decision? How do you try to make changes with no faith that the world will react the way you expect, that those changes are even possible? Pansy thought now that she and Draco did nothing because they wanted their lives to change. With no faith in themselves, they waited to see what the world would give them. And if it had been something bad, it would have been a familiar disappointment they believed they deserved.

But she'd decided that Neville Longbottom was something good. Because when she told him something, he didn't make a joke like Theo or get angry like Draco. He just asked her to tell him more, without letting her hide behind jokes or anger either. She didn't have to be nice, she just had to be honest. He wasn't always nice either. He wasn't afraid of hurting her feelings.

Or, she'd discovered when she rather threw herself at him last time, shagging her senseless.

Now she drifted closer as he finished and set the plant to the side, scourgified his hands. His fingers were criss-crossed with faint scars.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"Kiss me?"

"Come here."

Behind the table was a wooden sideboard and when she joined him on his side of the table, he pushed aside the tea service, put his hands on her hips, and easily lifted her up to sit on the sideboard's counter.

Hands still on her, he leaned in and kissed her lightly. She dangled her hands over his shoulders, riffling the hair at his nape, and nipped at him. One large hand was on her knee, fingers just slightly gripping the edges of her kneecap.

"May I?" he murmured against her lips.

"Yes."

He slid his calloused hand under her skirt, squeezing the muscle that flexed as she hooked her ankle around his leg. His kisses were open-mouthed, unhurried. The fabric of her skirt shuffled up over his forearm as he ran his hand up her thigh until his fingers were at her hip, his thumb deep in the crease of her leg.

"Yes," she said into his mouth.

His wide hand shifted, his thumb stretching to find her clit.

She kissed him hungrily as his thumb circled.

His other hand moved from her hip, sliding up her back as he leaned into the kiss. His hand settled on the nape of her neck, his thumb lined up along one side of her throat, his fingers reaching around to the other.

He held the back of her neck in his hand, and when he deepened the kiss, he gently squeezed. Pansy felt her shoulders drop as she sighed into the kiss. His thumb pushed against her clit. He kissed her until she was lightheaded.

She gasped for air when he moved to her jaw. "You can—"

"No." His mouth was back, hovering above hers. "I'm doing this for a while."

"Shit," said Theo, looking to the leaded window as a beak began to tap. "Ministry owl." He turned to Draco. "Listen, mate, if this is a raid, I may have a few items in the old stables—" "Nott," growled Draco. "I told you—"

"Pip said I could!"

"Why would—"

"Pip loves me!"

"Godsdammit!" Draco threw the paper down and vanished his drink as he leapt to his feet. He stepped quickly around his desk and to the window, jerking it open and snatching the scroll the owl offered him. The owl gave him a dark look and left without waiting for a treat.

Draco smoothed the scroll open on his desk. "I'm commanded to attend a reception to be held in celebration of the Reconciliation Act. The Ministry has decided that the answer to its public relations problem—"

"Which is you," said Theo helpfully.

"—is a party."

"Brilliant. Can I be your plus-one?" asked Theo brightly.



Draco hummed to himself, fisting his cock while he watched her lunge for him in a loop. A shameful, shameful display. Covered in blood and jeering on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*—Lucius and Narcissa would both be furious. But . . . hmm, here was Hermione Malfoy, fighting to get her hands on him.

If they'd been alone . . . Draco would have let her keep coming for him. Let her smear his blood over her hands as she hit him in the face, let his blood splatter onto her chest, her face. He would have grabbed at her, held her hard, shoved the blood in his mouth into hers with his tongue. Let her push him down, shove his face against the floor, her palm slipping in the blood smeared across his cheek. He would have let her climb on top of him, her hands pressing her weight into his chest, her legs scrabbling over his, her cunt hot over his cock. She could ride him while the blood from his nose ran down the back of his throat. He'd let her press his wrists into the floor above his head, though he was strong enough to buck her off. Why would he want to? He wanted her to hold him down and hurt him and pay attention to him.

He didn't know why it always got so physical, so rough with her.

He did know—it was because he was eleven and fifteen and twenty-three when he was with her. Draco's daily life now was the least physical it had ever been. His childhood hadn't been violent—just roughhousing with the boys and Pansy, falling off his broom. Hogwarts had been rough—tripping in the halls, sharp elbows on the stairs, wrenched arms, fistfights, hazing behind the quidditch bleachers, older boys you had to avoid. Bludgers, biting books, hexes, the Weasleys jumping the quidditch, Potter almost killing him. Then Voldemort, his aunt, the war . . . He got out of Azkaban without being raped—he wasn't sure how. And then, after years of the ever-present threat of violence, he was left alone in the Manor.

Purebloods liked to pretend that only muggles were violent, that boarding school was all lighthearted pranks, that they didn't rape each other and duel at parties, that his wife punching him in the face was shocking. Draco didn't want to live in fear but sometimes he felt like the world he lived in now wasn't real. It was a lie he had to pretend made sense—like it made sense that they had been in a war and now they weren't, that they had killed each other and now they shook hands and danced. If he had married Tori, fighting would have looked like closed doors and silences and walking away; he couldn't imagine doing more than gripping her wrist too tightly at a party. Their fighting would have been as much of a pantomime as their fucking—part of his fake life now. But when his wife elbowed him in the ribs, when she shoved him and punched him, it felt like they were eleven and thirteen and sixteen again—and like someone else remembered the truth.

It was ironic *she* was the one he felt this with now, when she had seemed so different—exotic—when he'd met her. He'd grown up hearing that muggles were stupid, dirty, grasping creatures and then there

The howlers were coming in. Half of them screamed at her that she was a dirty, ungrateful muggle who didn't deserve the Malfoy necklace. Half of them screamed at her that she was a gold-digging Death Eater sell-out for letting the Malfoy necklace anywhere near her.

Hermione's hand jerked up to take the thing off, her nails scrabbling at the clasp. It was tricky. Required both hands. It was stuck. It wouldn't—

She fought with it for ten minutes before she admitted to herself that it was spelled not to come off. *Godsdammit*. She would be *buried* in it before she would ask for Malfoy's help.



"So she *does* still have the right hook?" Theo studied the front page of the *Prophet* as Draco stepped out of the floo into his own study. "Hmm, you look delish. Bloody, slutty . . . *pathetic*."

He looked up into Draco's weary expression, straightening from the side table he was propped against.

"C'mon, lover—" With two fingers, Theo gave a little push to the center of Draco's chest until he dropped back onto the settee. Theo reached a long arm over and snagged the firewhisky bottle from the drinks cart, pouring into a conjured glass while looking Draco over. "Who did this shoddy episkey on you?"

"Weaselbee."

Theo handed him the glass. "Right. Let's get you sorted."

Theo's casting was elegant and precise, his control and focus a surprise to people who didn't pay attention.

Theo scourgified the last traces of blood and stood twirling his wand, casually considering Draco. "What did you say to get her to punch you?"

"Good girl."

Theo peered intently at Draco. "So you're telling me that Hermione Granger *doesn't* have a praise kink?" His face twitched as he processed this information, head canted, nose wrinkling, one eye narrowing. "Huh."

Finally, he spun on his heel and dropped down beside Draco on the settee. "Well, let's see what your adoring fans have to say . . ."

He snapped open the *Prophet*, the paper crackling. "Hmm . . . our intrepid reporter has uncovered a long history of antagonism between Draco Malfoy and the former Miss Granger. *Who knew?* . . . Some Hufflepuff grassing her out for punching you third year . . . Draco Malfoy was a big ol' bully . . . opposing sides during the war . . . torture, torture, blah blah blah . . . and—*here we go!* Was the Ministry negligent in its use of Sorting Hat magic to determine marital pairings? Yes, *do tell* . . . imprecise . . . has been called into question previously . . . *Quite*. Was nearly sorted into Ravenclaw, myself—"

"Wait a bloody minute!" Draco sat up. "They let the sodding *Sorting Hat* pick—"

"Don't think it's the Hat itself, right, more the underlying—"

"So all they had to do was whisper 'ruin Draco Malfoy's life' into that rag's ear and—"

"Oh, *she's* the one ruining your life, eh?"

"How are *you* the voice of reason here?" Draco huffed.

"You're in a bad way, mate." Theo patted his knee. "And I'm *often* the voice of reason. For instance, hats don't have ears . . ."

Draco slumped back, morosely sipping his drink.

"Where were we? The former Miss Granger is a violent muggleborn with controversial opinions—"

"True." Draco nodded sagely.

"And you're an irredeemable monster, etcetera, etcetera."

"Obviously."

"And the Ministry maintains this is *clearly* an ideal match because their magic is never wrong. Unless your Dark Mark is corrupting everything. So, there you have it!"

Draco scowled. "Give me that," he snapped, reaching for the paper.



WEDNESDAY JULY 16, 2003

Draco didn't know how the flat-faced demon was getting past his wards. His rooms were heavily protected, the spells frequently reinforced. He kept waking up with the cursed kneazle hairball on his pillow, watching him. He woke gasping for air in the middle of the night—he'd been holding her down, carving his name into her arm, and then the chandelier fell on him, the broken glass spraying into his eyes, his throat—with it sleeping on his face.

Draco considered whether he could kill the monster. His wife would be angry with him. She had attacked him for far less. (Hmhhh, yes, she had.) However, she was currently ignoring him. She flooded directly to and from the Ministry from her sitting room. She'd been working longer and longer hours over the week she'd been avoiding him, seemingly taking her meals in her Ministry office. He'd been spending his evenings brewing in the lab. He would rather she attack him.

(His rooms were not warded against her. She could slip into his bedroom at any time. She could come in the night and hold her wand to his throat. She could climb into his bed and slide a knife between his ribs. He would wake before she did. But he might not stop her. He'd like to find out.)

(*You may share my bed.* Draco had said it as though in passing, a taunt, but he'd never had that and he thought he might like it, a witch in his bed most nights, every night. A wife he could roll over and pull close, lining up her back against his chest, curling behind her. Maybe with his cock inside her. That close. He wanted to snake his hand over her ribs and up to her throat, holding her against him while he bucked up into her, his other arm around her, hand on her clit, her sighing and squirming against him, her cunt clenching while he thrust into her and whispered in her ear.)

So, a point in favor of killing the beast, if it would mean his wife's attention. Unless she was so angry she never spoke to him again. A point against. He would also probably be in breach of contract—he'd have to check the subclauses. The penalties would be steeper if he'd killed a dependent rather than damaged property.

The war had proved Draco not to be a killer, but Draco knew it was only because he did not hate anything then. His anger was fear, his disgust was fear, his desire to save himself and his parents was fear. It was a shallow, immature fear—a fear that sought to save a past and a future that were already gone. Even if he did everything Voldemort ordered, even if Voldemort won, he was never getting his old life back—but his fear hadn't caught up to that fact then.

Now Draco knew that anything in his life could change at any time, for any reason. His father could die in prison. His mother could be killed by purists. The Ministry could seize the Manor. Shacklebolt could legislate away his marriage, take back his wife. Anything—everything—could be taken from him in an instant.

Draco had grown up with a conception of himself entirely in context—his parents, his bloodline, his wealth, his school house, his family's place in the pecking order of the 28. He was a tiny thread in a

tapestry, held firmly in place by everything around him. Always, everyone—his friends, his professors, the girls he shagged in the prefects' baths, the Golden Trio—related to him as the Malfoy heir, his personal traits and deeds expected or excused as such.

Pansy used to bitch and moan about her terrible family (and Theo's family—Salazar, it was a surprise he was alive) but Draco was loved and spoiled, and he was good at being the Malfoy heir. The security to fuck around and always have a place at home felt like freedom—the tedious comportment exercises, the dance lessons that Draco secretly enjoyed, the lectures about his duty easily bearable in exchange.

The moments when Draco had had that context ripped away from him—in isolation in Azkaban, drunk for days in a muggle hotel—had been nearly unbearable. His body kept living but his mind had no edges to contain it. He was untethered, amorphous. What did anything matter? It was like he didn't exist. He could do anything but none of it *mattered*. There was no meaning without context.

Draco had worked to shore that context back up. He came back to his mother and the Manor and duty—always his duty to family and increasingly only his duty to family. But just under the surface of his skin lurked the feeling that it was all meaningless—because if it could change so easily, did it even exist? Maybe it was only a construct in his mind. Like so many other things that felt intricately real and tangible—reputation, influence, his place in society, the inherent worth and meaning of being a Malfoy, the future laid out for him—that were then simply flipped on their heads or waved away like smoke.

His fear was no longer shallow and immature; it was no longer driven by a need to save things that could not be saved. It was now a furious resignation to losing everything. The anger felt like real anger now, like he really did hate everything. Like he wanted to be as cruel as he expected life to be to him.

Before, being mean had been easy—Draco was rich and good-looking, it was like people *wanted* to be bullied by him, and they certainly wanted to see him bully other people—and it didn't really mean anything. Now being mean came at a cost, but Draco meant it more. Oh, he meant it. And he suspected he could hate enough to kill now, especially if he loved someone enough to kill for them. Not himself. But a wife, a child? He would like to have that context.

Draco watched the orange abomination stretch languorously across his sheets and thought about the best way to get revenge.



THURSDAY JULY 17, 2003

He was sat slouched behind her desk—in *her* chair, in *her* Ministry office. He was wearing a muggle tuxedo, exquisitely tailored, and glaring at her files.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded.

He looked up. "I'm your husband." He said it as though surprised she would ask, as though that answered her question.

Fuck her life, maybe it did. She hadn't been able to get Malfoy's name off her door and interoffice memos. The wizarding world cared deeply about marital and blood affiliations—they had a nasty habit of being life or death—and she had signed that godsdamned contract in blood. The goblins weren't the only ones who knew immediately. Her wand registration had been updated—everything had been updated. He was probably allowed access to her office as her next of kin, in case of emergencies. That was of no help when *he* was the emergency.

His eyes locked onto the sapphire necklace still firmly clasped around her neck. His expression turned greedy. The back of her neck prickled. She had a bad feeling he was picturing her in only the necklace. In the bath, or in bed. Where, yes, she had been wearing it because only he could take it off.

Hermione tried again. "What are you doing in my office?"

He schooled his face into aristocratic annoyance and went on the offensive. "I know that you are prone to pointless overwork, but you spend too much time in this office. Either your workload is unmanageable, you have an important piece of legislation coming up, or you are having an *extremely unsatisfying affair*—"

"Malfoy," she said preemptively, "I am not a doll for you to dress up."

"Then dress yourself so I don't have to *come dress you*." His grip on her tightened. "I can only assume you are baiting me into becoming your personal valet, dear. After all, I have no work of my own. I am free to come to your dressing room each morning to dress you and every evening to undress you. You need only say the word. You know I take orders."

Godric, his low, murmuring voice was obscene.

"I think we're done here," she said, pulling away.

He straightened, smiling down at her indulgently. He whispered it. "*Good girl*."

She swung on him.

He let her.

The crack of her fist against his face, the pain shooting from her knuckles to her wrist—

Then Harry and Ron were there, pulling them apart.

Malfoy's perfect nose was crooked, blood gushing over his lips, blood smeared across his teeth because he was smiling, laughing in her face. He wasn't resisting. Ron—the tallest and most thickly muscled of them—had the easiest job. It was Harry—wrapping Hermione up while she nonsensically yelled "I keep my promises, Malfoy!"—who had to plant his feet and jerk her back.

Ron stepped in front of Malfoy and cast a lazy episkey like this was just another pub brawl. He crossed his arms and regarded the other man. "Why don't you go home, Malfoy."

"You're not going to ask me if I'd like to press charges?" Malfoy stood slouched, all aristocratic ease despite his ruined face. "I think it's clear I'm the victim here."

"Would you like to press charges, sir? We can bring the Auror Department out to the Manor, make sure we fill out all the paperwork right," said Ron, deadpan. He hadn't moved.

"Thanks, Weasley," Malfoy quirked his bloody lips, "but I think my work here is done. I only came to deliver my wife's necklace, and I've done so."

Malfoy straightened, called over Ron's shoulder: "Potter! Give Mrs. Potter my best—"

"What the fuck?" muttered Harry.

"Mrs. Malfoy! I'll see you at home tonight, darling." Said loudly, so the crowd could hear. Then he turned, chuckling, and walked away, blood dripping down his sharp chin.

Hermione stood, Harry's arms still loosely wrapped around her, feeling utterly defeated.



FORCED MARRIAGE FIREWORKS!: Draco and Hermione Fight It Out

Once again, the *Prophet's* special edition was nearly instantaneous. (Did Malfoy alert the press before he left the house?) Two large photos told the story: Malfoy whispering to her, her eyes cast down demurely, the necklace and betrothal ring sparkling. Then Hermione, feral, fighting to get at him, his blood-smeared smile, his pupils blown wide, him leaning toward her like . . . like . . . Well, he wasn't trying to get away from her. Sick, they looked sick. Absolutely unhinged.

Could you still be the victim if your husband brought you priceless jewelry and you punched him in the face?

Of course you could. Material objects didn't make up for being a slimy, controlling git who staged these ridiculous scenes and then baited her. No one else knew what he'd said to her before she'd swung. He'd murmured vile things to her . . . though Hermione was at a loss to explain what was so infuriating about them now. A reference to undressing her, some innuendo about her ordering him around . . . She shivered.

Hadn't she heard worse every day in the Great Hall at Hogwarts? Didn't Ginny make crasser jokes now?

Why did he get under her skin like that? Why did—Merlin, what did he want from her? *It won't last, you know.*

Hermione was twisting the string of her teabag around the tip of her finger—cutting off the circulation, turning the flesh an angry red and white—while she contemplated how horrible he was, when she heard it.

No. No!

The horrible, posh voice of her horrible, posh husband was coming toward her. A sneak attack from the rear.

“Mrs. Maalfooy!” he called.

Hermione’s head whipped around, her eyes narrowed, her mouth tight, her hair swinging into her face. She was early but it wasn’t *that* early. The cafeteria was *packed*.

A camera flash went off.

Malfoy was striding toward her, his back straight. He was wearing a black muggle suit, black shirt, black tie, black dragonskin shoes. The signet rings on his right hand. The diamond band glinting on his left. His hair was swept up off his forehead, bright in the overhead light. The Azkaban tattoo was clearly visible on his neck.

He looked strikingly beautiful and absolutely, entirely disreputable.

He looked like a wizard who wore a muggle suit because he crossed in and out of Muggle London, selling dark artefacts to mob bosses.

Hermione was suddenly sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he had an unregistered wand the Ministry raids had missed.

She smoothed out her face and stood to meet him, so he wouldn’t loom over her at the table.

“Malfoy.”

“*Mrs. Malfoy.*” He stepped close to her and leaned in, a parody of an intimate moment in front of a hundred witnesses. “You forgot your necklace, darling. Pip asked me to bring it to you.”

“You take orders from house elves now?” It was a low blow. What was wrong with her? She distrusted his motives and now *she* was the one sneering about house elves?

“I take orders from everyone nowadays,” said Malfoy pleasantly, cocking his head, a faint smile as though he was fond of her. Merlin, he was putting on a show. “Here, sweetheart, let me put it on you.”

He pulled the glittering goblin-wrought silver and sapphires from his pocket, letting the necklace catch the light, and a nearby woman actually gasped. Hermione tamped down her desire to glare at the witch, glaring at Malfoy instead.

Malfoy held it up, stretched between his hands, on full display. “Dearest, pull your hair back for me?”

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. She was trapped. If she refused, everyone would watch while Malfoy acted out a whole stage play of hurt and confusion at his wife’s harsh rejection of his lovely gift. Maybe she could blush prettily and insist it was too much? No, Hermione was not a pretty blusher, and it would only prolong the moment as Malfoy insisted how much he wanted her to have it. She had to get this over with, which meant—godsdammit—gathering her hair off her shoulders and submissively bowing her head toward him so that he could reach around her neck and fasten the clasp.

“Goo—”

“If you say ‘good girl,’ I will break your nose.”

“There,” he said with satisfaction, his hands dropping.

Hermione released her hair and straightened, and he had the audacity to reach out his godsdamned hand and center the necklace against her chest. A tiny second of skin-to-skin contact—something a real husband and wife would do any day in passing—but Hermione’s whole front and back tingled the way it had against her garden wall, like she was waiting to see how badly a cut would bleed.

She heard at least one breathy sigh and knew these absolute morons surrounding them were ready to break into applause. (That wasn’t fair! Her colleagues—most of them—weren’t morons. She didn’t really think that. Godric, Malfoy brought out the worst in her.)

Malfoy pulled her in close by the elbow, tucking her into him. Citrus. Cloves. The heat of his body.

Hermione resisted the urge to jerk her elbow away and use it on his ribs. He leaned his head in as though to whisper sweet nothings into her ear.

“Any affair I had would be extremely satisfying—”

“Not with that ring on, love.”

“Maybe I’m having an emotional affair. Maybe we just talk.”

“With someone who isn’t me?”

“Yes, that would be the whole point—”

“Impossible. Don’t try to pretend, love. I know no one else is smart enough for you.”

“I—” Was he complimenting her, or just himself? “There are plenty of smart men I could be talking to.”

“Then give me a list, *love*. I want to meet them. Tell them your husband *just wants to talk*.” Malfoy twirled his wand between his ringed fingers.

“Malfoy, how do you even—*Did you avenseguim this ring?*”

“Yes.” He didn’t have the good grace to look abashed. “It gives me great comfort to know where my wife is, how she spends her days. I must have some way of knowing you’re safe, since you won’t *just talk* to me.”

“You controlling, possessive, stalker piece of—”

“It truly hurts my feelings, dearest, that you have not asked whether you can track *me*—”

“I have *no interest* in knowing where you are—”

“A wise choice, Mrs. Malfoy. Many Malfoy women prefer to have plausible deniability in case of a trial—”

“The only trial that’s happening is when I murder you—”

“Will you use your bare hands, *love*?” Malfoy licked his lips. “Will you wrap your fingers around my neck and *squeeze*? ”

“I will avada you from a great distance with your own wand,” she said flatly.

“Spoken like a true Slytherin. Thank Salazar our child will wear green and silver after all.”

“I will avada myself first.”

“That’s just the overwork talking, dear. Which brings me to my point. I’ve hired you a private secretary—”

“A spy.”

“A distant cousin of Zabini’s—just out of Hogwarts. Against my personal preference, a Hufflepuff. He’ll be loyal and hardworking, and the Puffs are good with violent animals—”

“Magical creatures are not *violent animals*—”

“I was referring to you, dear one.” Malfoy casually turned his head as though giving her a better look at his—perfectly fine—nose. “If he is not up to the task, fire him and select someone who is. If you do not trust him, make him take a vow. He will not be reporting to me. His loyalty is to you, not me or the Ministry. Put him to work.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why, so that you might have more time to accomplish what you wish to accomplish. Whether that is more work or whatever it is you and the She-Weasel get up to—” A dubious look. “Or simply eating your dinner someplace other than this desk.” He stared down the offending piece of furniture, lip curled. “I do not, contrary to your hurtful accusations, control you. I wish merely to support your every endeavor.”

“Even if my endeavor is to get rid of you?”

“Yes. Please put me out of my misery, love. Use your bare hands.” His eyes bore into hers as he looked up to her from behind the desk, his lips parted, his head cocked so that his neck elongated, putting the Azkaban tattoo on full display. She could smell citrus and cloves.

He straightened without breaking eye contact, leaned forward to place a forearm on her desk, taking over her space, gazing up at her. “Unfortunately, Mrs. Malfoy, I must first escort you to tonight’s reception. I believe it is in our honor.”

“I’m not going.”

"Godsdammit, darling, now I owe Nott fifty galleons and the first dance." A careless shrug as he leaned back again. "No matter. Theo will let me lead—" A pointed look. "And it's worth it to see you break with Shacklebolt."

"I'm not *breaking* with Shacklebolt," said Hermione, aware she was being baited but unable to resist the lure.

"Then transfigure that dress. I'll be just outside. Unless you require my—"

"Get out, Malfoy."

"Immediately, dear."



Malfoy did not, unfortunately, fuck off while she changed. He lurked outside her office door while she retrieved her reception dress and shoes from her extended bag. She'd told him she wasn't going, but she'd known the second she got the invitation that her curiosity and sense of duty would win out. (Just, why were these Ministry events always on weeknights, when she had to change in her office or transfigure what she wore to work?)

Now she grimly tugged on the dress, her emotions and instincts battling within her. Hermione had mostly concentrated her ire on the Wizengamot as a familiar and safe antagonist in this debacle, but Malfoy's reference to Shacklebolt—how did he always do this?—had got under her skin. Shacklebolt was a great wizard—a wartime leader, a peacetime reformer, a kind of mentor to Hermione, though she wished she didn't have to say *kind of*. But Malfoy had this way—with one little comment—of pointing out the thought Hermione was trying to deny: that Shacklebolt had betrayed her.

Because how else could Hermione feel, when he'd sacrificed her to his broader goals? She'd thought he saw her as a real person, but it turned out she was just a body he could trade away. Now all she felt was hurt and fear and distrust—a desperate need to protect herself because no one else would. And it felt so much safer to be angry instead of sad and scared. But she wasn't even allowed that. Because everyone hated an angry witch. She had the howlers to prove it. She was meant to be likeable—sweet and helpful and open to being used. She didn't want to be open. She wanted to curl into a tight little ball under a hard protective shell and never let anyone near her ever again.

Malfoy already thought she was an animal—she could be angry in front of him. But she needed Shacklebolt's support to advance her reforms. The more she fought the Ministry, the more she damaged her own career. But to fall into line was to be complicit in her own abuse. But to walk away in protest was to allow her enemies to win. Her thoughts went round and round.

Hermione felt as though she had been out-maneuvered the moment she signed that marriage contract. She should never have agreed. But what choice did she have? To snap her wand? They would say she'd had a choice and had chosen to marry Malfoy, but that was no choice. They'd trapped her in an impossible dilemma. Yet somehow it felt like this was all her fault, like she should have been smart enough, brave enough to find a solution.

Hermione looked at the scar—pink and irritated. Sometimes you were smart and brave and it happened anyway.

She took a deep breath, her chest so tight. She cast a glamour over her forearm. Then she walked out the door, warding her office behind her. (What was even the point, when Malfoy strolled right in?)

Malfoy straightened from his slouch against the wall, where he'd been conjuring butterflies, and openly appraised her.

Once more, she couldn't win. A muggle dress, and she heard the Chief Warlock telling her to go back to Muggle London if she didn't like their laws. But, at the moment, dress robes felt like insisting too loudly that she did belong, like Malfoy was dressing her up as a pretend pureblood. So she'd chosen a

up at her, batting his lashes. "I'm just asking my wife to wear some decent jewelry so that everyone knows I'm *wealthy* Death Eater scum."

His wife's mouth twisted as she considered this barrage of misdirection. "I suppose you have instructions for how I'm to wear my hair," she said dryly.

"Of course not," said Draco, standing from the settee. "That would be classic controlling behavior. I have no right."

He turned for his suite, fighting a smile at her look of utter disgust.

He slipped inside the doors, calling over his shoulder, "Wear the jewelry, love. Or I'll have Pip replace all your lingerie with Slytherin green."



WEDNESDAY JULY 9, 2003

They will have ill effects for anyone outside the Houses Black or Malfoy

Hermione took a sip of her tea—the Ministry's coffee was shite—and replayed Malfoy's words from the previous night. She was meant to meet Harry and Ron for breakfast in the Ministry's terrible cafeteria and was early—predictably, as she'd wanted to get out of the Manor. Now she considered the possibility that Malfoy didn't know what the ring was doing to the scar on her arm.

The logical theory was that Malfoy—who hated her, resented being forcibly married to her, and was vulnerable to Ministry scrutiny—was encouraging her to wear jewelry he knew would slowly poison her. He did, after all, have a history with cursed jewelry and convoluted assassination plots.

But Hermione didn't buy it. She'd known Malfoy a long time, and Malfoy liked you to *know* when he was making fun of you. There had been no smug looks toward her arm, so sardonic emphasis on her being the *anyone outside*. He seemed—contradictory as this was—sincere in the pretense that she had become Lady Malfoy.

More important, Bill Weasley had confirmed the jewelry was safe, and Hermione trusted Bill.

No, Hermione reluctantly concluded that Malfoy was dressing her up solely to serve his own ego and frustrate hers.

The previous evening, she'd left the jewelry boxes in the sitting room and torn through her wardrobe in a fury, fixated on the least of her worries because it felt like the one she was most able to control. But the more she examined what Pip had given her, the more confused she became. Instead of the Stepford Wife robes Hermione had been expecting, it all looked like her clothing . . . but better. The fabric was higher quality, the proportions subtly more flattering, the fit tailored, the colors more coordinated. It was Hermione's style but expensive.

And then Hermione had opened the door to another cabinet inside the wardrobe and the despair fueling the last of her rage had shifted. Pip had saved her sentimental items. Her father's worn T-shirt, the silk scarf her mother had owned, her Gryffindor robes from Hogwarts, her favorite jumper. It was all there. Hermione had not wanted to face how frantically, desperately gutted she was at the idea of losing these things. She was sure Malfoy had had them burned. And too afraid of the emotional firestorm that discovery would cause to even fully admit the thought to herself until now. Somehow Pip had known—maybe by what was oldest, most worn, more muggle—what was most loved. Maybe they had soaked up some of Hermione's magic.

It was a dirty trick, making her feel grateful that her own things hadn't been stolen from her and destroyed. Every time Malfoy gave her something, he took something deeper away. Did he even know how effectively he did it? Did he plan it out? Or was it just instinct for him to be a miserable, manipulative bastard?

"I told Pip to launder or repair anything not up to her standards for the Manor."

"Malfoy, she replaced my *entire wardrobe*." She shook the mass of fabric fisted in her hand.

"I think that says more about your wardrobe than anything *I've* done," said Draco reproachfully. "Now you're wrinkling that . . . item."

His wife threw it to the floor. "Malfoy, you cannot do this! It is classic controlling behavior. You have no right!"

"Clause 10(c), Mrs. Malfoy. I'm to provide for your material needs—"

"I have my own money!"

"—at a standard—"

"I do not need you to buy—"

"—no less than that which the other members of the household enjoy."

"I don't want bespoke clothing!"

"Too bad," said Draco. "I won't have people saying I'm keeping you in rags. They'll never believe we can't afford to dress you—" He waved a showy hand at the immaculately tailored shirt hugging his torso. "They'll think it's because of blood prejudice, and I won't have your stubbornness slandering me. Not about that."

"You're the one who told the press you were keeping me in the dungeons," she hissed.

"Yes, I'm hilarious," said Draco. "Now, about your jewelry—"

"*Malfoy*." Said in a warning tone with a dark look.

"*Mrs. Malfoy*. I visited the vaults this afternoon, after a . . . meeting this morning, and selected a few pieces appropriate for the workday."

He summoned the boxes, flipping the velvet lids open with a flick of his wand, and drank in her increasingly incredulous expression.

"These are hardly appropriate for—"

"Love, my mother wouldn't wear these to fertilize her roses. As we've covered—do keep up—I'm now the head of house. My Lady Malfoy cannot be dressed as a pauper. The press will speculate that you cannot wear the family's jewelry because it is cursed against you. Again, I will not have your stubbornness slander me as a blood supremacist."

"You are a—"

"Not anymore," he ground out. "Bill Weasley's team has confirmed these pieces are safe for you to wear. However—" He paused and she looked up, as he'd wanted her to, her expression harder than he'd expected. "They will have ill effects for anyone outside the Houses Black or Malfoy. Do not give this jewelry away. If these pieces are not on your person or in your rooms, Pip will retrieve them. Like me, Pip lives to serve you, but please do not annoy her by trying to discard them."

His wife frowned down at the rubies and sapphires in goblin-wrought silver, clearly calculating whether Pip could get past the Ministry's anti-apparition wards if she locked the necklaces inside her desk drawer.

Draco wondered whether he could get her into emeralds.

She shook her head. "Malfoy, this makes no sense. Everyone knows this was a forced marriage. You are trying to tart me up as though you care—"

"About my own name. Which the press have recently reminded everyone is usually proceeded or appended by 'Death Eater scum.'" He smiled nastily. "That is fine. But I share my name with my mother, who has worked hard to shed certain old-fashioned views and step into the modern age. And I now share my name with you, like it or not—no need to clarify, I know you do not."

He broke eye contact to toy lazily with his cufflinks, though they were perfectly in place. "Obviously, I do not care about your job. Perhaps you think dressing like a shipwreck victim whose spouse cannot stand her garners respect at the Ministry? Or perhaps reminding the Wizengamot that they've given you access to my vaults and my family connections—oh, I know you would never use them—might have a different effect. It's a mystery to me, I'll confess. Of course I have no idea how politics work." He smiled

muggle dress, because fuck the purebloods. Delicate straps and sapphire blue silk—because, yes, she was still wearing this godsdamn necklace.

Malfoy eyed her hungrily, steadily. The butterflies circled her.

Hermione thought about how you could be disgusted by someone and still want to fuck them.

He offered her his arm. She hesitated but took it. Being rude would just make her feel grubby.

He matched her pace in her heels as they strode down the nearly empty Ministry halls. Effortlessly the gentleman.

Finally, fingers on his sleeve, she asked, "Why are you wearing this?"

He looked over at her. "I don't understand the question. We're going to a reception. It's after six."

"It's muggle."

His shoulders twitched in a nearly imperceptible shrug. "Pansy told me to wear it. She says it's on-trend."

Hermione realized this was true—she'd noticed younger witches and wizards flaunting the novelty of muggle fashion, more monied families scrambling to distance themselves from the blood supremacist aesthetic, post-war.

She felt a fury rising in her. People had died in the war because of Malfoy's blood supremacist beliefs and now he could shed them like a bespoke jacket, adopt decency like it was a designer he didn't understand but had heard some people thought was cool.

She silently finited the glamour hiding the scar on her arm. Let people see, she thought, that bigotry wasn't so easily forgotten by its victims.

"And you wear what Pansy tells you to wear," she said nastily.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Why didn't you and Pansy get married?" She said it like a gibe but now she really did want to know.

"You could have consolidated your fortunes, had little pureblood babies, prevented this nightmare—"

"Pansy is like a sister."

"A sister you used to—"

"Fuck."

"Date."

"No, love." He smirked. "It was fucking."

Hermione's lip curled.

"Now you're imagining me fucking," he said, pleased with himself. "Now you're jealous."

"Please," she said. "You're disgusting."

"You have no idea," he purred.



"*Mr. Malfoy! Mr. Malfoy! Is Hermione Granger a violent muggleborn?*"

"*Hermione! You're wearing the necklace! Does this mean you've forgiven your husband?*"

The press had caught them entering the Ministry ballroom and Hermione knew the pictures would show Malfoy looking cruelly amused while she looked murderous. She could only hope these photos made it to press; if they didn't, it would be because they were replaced by worse ones taken later in the evening.

She had intended to storm away to find someone she *actually liked*, but Malfoy had swept her inside and handed her a flute of champagne smoothly plucked from a passing tray and somehow she found herself still beside him in a silent détente. Just for the moment, she felt what she supposed was solidarity. They both hated everything and weren't hiding that from the other. It was almost relaxing, not having to pretend.

Malfoy was stood, spine straight, with his head thrown back so he could look down his pointy nose at everyone. His hair swept off his forehead, his sharp chin jutted, the long line of his throat exposed—

Hermione remembered him standing this way at school, so sure of his superiority. Now it put his Azkaban tattoo on display. Hermione was torn between thinking it was unconscious—he had so many little mannerisms he thought were normal that were so laughably Lord of the Manor—and thinking that Draco Malfoy never posed in a room without knowing it. It looked like defiance but Hermione wondered if it was something else.

Because I'm disgusting and you're so much better than me . . .

I take orders from everyone nowadays . . .

Please put me out of my misery, love.

Hermione saw Ravenclaw eyes flicking to the runes, subtle grimaces of distaste. Hufflepuff sneers that weren't subtle at all. Slytherin chins raising in acknowledgment. Slytherin heads quickly turning away. Soon a Gryffindor would challenge him.

No, it was Avery walking toward them. She loathed Avery.



"Miss Granger. I see the Ministry has given you your own pet Death Eater," said Avery, who was most certainly a Voldemort supporter, one of his parents' generation.

"And yet you never pet me, dear," said Draco, his face tilted toward her, his eyes on the older man.

"Avery," she ground out. But Avery was already ignoring her to focus on Draco, as though the adults were speaking.

"Short lead?" said Avery.

"Choke chain," said Draco. He turned to his wife. "Mrs. Malfoy, may I be allowed to speak to my house alumnus here? Only with your permission, of course. I don't wish to be beaten again."

"Good Godric," she muttered and stalked off, her skirt swirling.

"My thanks, Mrs. Malfoy!" Draco called to her back, enjoying the heads turning near them. He cast a multicorfs before she disappeared into the crowd, turning the silk to Slytherin green.

He turned back to Avery, who was regarding him with a gimlet eye.

"I must say, Draco, your father is either a genius or a madman."

"Why not both?" asked Draco mildly.

"No, I don't think Lucius is mad," said Avery with a dark laugh, turning slightly to survey the room over the rim of his glass as he sipped firewhisky. "I'll admit to—well, let's just say I never thought I'd see the day . . . But he always plays the long game, doesn't he?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," drawled Draco, taking a drink. "I simply mismanaged my calendar. Forgot to flee to France."

"How droll. It's Argentina you should be looking to if you want to reconnect with blood relations—"

"Oh?" Draco raised an eyebrow.

"I know you've had your difficulties, Draco, but . . . well, you needn't think you wouldn't be welcomed by like-minded people." An assessing look before Avery cast his gaze over the ballroom. "Take a trip to Bariloche when you tire of this dance with the Ministry."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Draco, throwing back the last of his champagne as his tuxedo transfigured into bright Gryffindor red.

"It appears I have been summoned." Draco set the flute on a passing tray. "Oh, and Avery, next time do address my wife properly. It's Lady Malfoy."

Avery snorted and clapped him on the shoulder as he walked away. "Whatever you say, Draco."

Draco looked but he did not see his wife anywhere.



But he wasn't grateful, was he? He was furious. Why couldn't she see? No one else saw the precious little boy she saw. They saw scum. They didn't want him. His wife didn't want him. She wasn't going to smile at him on the dancefloor and make everyone fall in love with him. It was going to be the opposite. He was going to tarnish her. He was going to ruin her reputation. He was going to make the Golden Girl dirty, just by standing next to her.

It was generous, he supposed, that his father let him know his willingness to recognize Draco's future half-blood child as a Malfoy heir. The Malfoy vaults contained more gold than Draco could ever mismanage; the family's political aspirations were likewise, ultimately, superfluous to their survival. No, Draco's one real purpose in life was to make a pureblood baby—and, with Malfoys, there was usually only one—to carry on the line. The only real way he could fail was to fail in this. And so he could appreciate Lucius setting aside his entire belief system in order to decide Draco was not worthless now, in order to tell Draco he would not fail after all.

But Draco was going to fail. Because his wife would not touch him except to claw his eyes out. She stiffened at even the brush of his hand against her back. She shoved him away when she felt him hard against her. She would not have a child with him.

Any pureblood wife would have, no matter how much she loathed him. Tori would have taken a wrath into her bedroom and produced an heir. He would have a baby now if he had married Tori. He had been selfish. But he did not think Tori deserved that. He didn't think he deserved it either.

Maybe his wife would someday decide she wanted a child badly enough to begrudgingly have one with him. Draco knew he would love the child no matter how much his wife hated him. He liked the idea of a baby—he couldn't help it. He had had a good childhood. He had looked up to his father then. He wanted to be a father too. But he didn't want it to be that way for her.

It was sick, that it mattered to Draco whether a man serving a life sentence in Azkaban was proud of him. He couldn't help that he still wanted to hear it, even if it made him angry when he did. His wife was never going to say she was proud of him. He couldn't help turning the disappointment he felt about that into anger too.



"Malfoy, you scabrous snake! Get in here!"

Draco had been waiting for her in the shared sitting room, reading the latest potions journal in his shirtsleeves and trousers, when he felt the wards warm and heard her floo ignite, angry footsteps, and then this. At once, he apparaeted to her side in—her dressing room.

Brilliant.

Draco began unbuttoning his shirt with a flourish. "We're consummating, then?"

"What? No! Get out!"

"Immediately, dear."

Draco apparaeted back to the sitting room and affected a casual pose on his settee facing her suite's double doors, rebuttoning his shirt while he waited.

"Malfoy?" She burst out of her doors, as expected. Her face was flushed, her curls floating around her head, her eyes wonderfully alive. Draco was meant to be smirking but he found himself in danger of slipping into a real smile.

"Mrs. Malfoy. My apologies, the way you called me to you, I just assumed—"

"Of course you would have a degradation kink," she muttered, hand on hip.

Draco smiled widely. "Let's find out together, dear." He was bluffing. He now knew, horribly, how much he wanted to hear her praise him.

She ignored him, holding up a wad of dark, unidentifiable fabric. "Malfoy, did you replace all my clothes?"

"No," he said in his most reasonable tone. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Did you tell the elves to replace my clothes?"

"Or a position to destroy it," echoed Lucius. "I believe that is what your wife's enemies want. They believe we will miss the other opportunities presented us because we are too short-sighted, too driven by hatred—"

"Maybe I *am* too driven by hatred," bit out Draco.

"You hate her that much?" asked Lucius, his tone mild.

"I hate everyone," said Draco off-handedly, all heat gone.

Lucius smiled. "Maybe you will see other opportunities I have missed. I am here and you are out in the world, conducting the estate's business. Despite anything I may have said that suggested otherwise to you, I do have faith in you, Draco. Your mother and I are both proud of you."

Draco nodded but he could not meet his father's eyes. His parents had always told him they were proud of him, had spoiled him when he was younger. He was lucky compared to Pansy, who hadn't heard these words since she was very young, compared to Theo, who had never heard them. Part of him was grateful, pathetically grateful. The other part of him was furious.



Draco sat in his study, looking out at the grounds in the rain, the albino peacocks nowhere to be seen. The fire was blazing in the hearth but he still felt the chill of Azkaban.

Lucius and Narcissa both thought it was so godsdamned easy. He would just take a turn around the dancefloor with his lovely bride and donate to her favorite charity and then society would welcome the youngest-ever ex-Death Eater back with open arms. His parents were so used to chasing power, so used to just having it, that—even now—they couldn't imagine the Malfoy name not meaning something.

And they were right—it meant something. It meant he was filthy rich, and that meant there was always someone—some disreputable, some just amoral—who wanted access to his galleons. He could have invested in a new scheme every day, slept with a different witch every night, if he'd just accepted that his most likely path forward was organized crime. A little torture—performed by him, performed on him—and he could have redeemed himself with the blood purists. His bloodline was just too irresistible to them if he'd been willing to grovel to a series of mini-Voldemorts, convince them Azkaban had transformed him into their kind of killer, paraded around the barely faded Dark Mark on his arm. A scummy, slummy existence spent listening to grown men whinge about how they should have won the war, how they were the victims of the people they wanted to eradicate, while he bribed Ministry goons and bullied rivals.

Well. Draco could be a bully.

He wasn't above bribes. (He currently budgeted for them, though his father had a complicated system for doling them out that Draco refused to concern himself with. The Ministry audits were laughably, no doubt intentionally insufficient to discover this sort of line item in the Malfoy ledgers.)

He did do business with disreputable people. (He was interested in charms and potions, including some illegal ones, and drawn to dark artefacts. What could he say?)

Some prejudices remained. (He could appreciate muggle art and inventions. Malfoy LTD did extensive business in the muggle world. He just had very little personal interest in anyone without magic.)

But after Azkaban, he'd had zero interest in going back to that way of life—the constant fear, the incessant need to posture, the demand that there be no limits to the violence he would inflict for other people's goals. The blood supremacists offended his sensibilities—they weren't just wrong, they were bores. Tedious. Embarrassing. He wasn't going to kiss up to them. He didn't want to be stuck in their company.

The Gryffindor heroes were also tedious bores. Draco didn't want to kiss up to them either.

Merlin, he owed Narcissa so much. She had done the work he didn't want to do to get them a toehold back into society. She had been brilliant while he hid at home. He should be more grateful.

The blonde witch tittered and touched Draco's arm and he morosely considered how vastly he'd underestimated the moral rot of the wizarding world. It appeared half the room was ready to sleep with him tonight and only a quarter would pause to ask whether he still had access to his Gringotts key.

The witch's eyes traveled over the Azkaban tattoo on his neck and she licked her engorged lips.

Coward. Traitor. War criminal. Convict. They didn't care.

The Black betrothal magic reached out to him, questioning, as he imagined pushing this witch up against a wall, twisting her arm, pinching her hard, telling her, *I'm going to use you. I'm going to bully you and hurt you and be a selfish prick. I'm a bad man and I'm going to be bad to you.* And she'd bat her eyelashes and say, *You can't be that bad.* He was. His wife knew. She would never say that to him. She'd knee him in the bollocks and push his hand away. Slap him hard across the face. Draco's cock stirred. The Black magic thrummed, satisfied. No part of him didn't know that he could only enjoy his wife.

"Oi, Ferret." A sharp jab to his torso from behind, jarring him from his reverie. "Sorry, must have slipped. Are those ribs still bruised?"

"You know," he said to the blonde, "Gryffindors are prone to uncontrolled violence. It's the first trait the Sorting Hat looks for—Oh, it's you, Weaselette." He struck out blindly with an elbow that she easily dodged. "I've missed you. Won't happen again."

"You always were a shit seeker." She grinned, crowding the blonde to stand in front of him. She was in spangly gold dress robes—tacky, but not-terrible with her fiery hair.

"And you're wasted as a chaser. You are clearly a bludger."

"A bludger to the face is what you need to complete this ensemble," she said, looking his still-red tux up and down. "Oh, you dress to the left. How sinister."

The blonde witch gasped, hiding a giggle behind her hand.

"Shove off, twat," said the ginger.

"Why! I—" She let her lips hang open, an implicit promise to Draco if he would defend her.

His wife in his sheets, her lips around his cock, her tongue laving its head, his hand loose in her hair, her gold-flecked eyes on his. She takes him deeper and he whimpers.

"Red's my wife's owl," he told the witch blandly. "You'll have to shove off."

She huffed and turned on her heel.

The She-Weasel watched her go then looped her arm through his, knocking her shoulder against him. "You're welcome."

"Subtle as a bludger, Weaselette. Now that you have me," Draco raised an eyebrow, "take me to the hero of Gryffindor."

"You mean—"

"I mean Longbottom. Obviously."



"Hullo, Luna," said Theo, rolling the stem of his glass between his fingers as he scanned the room over the shorter girl's head. (Every girl was shorter than Theo.) He'd crashed the party but now he was bored. The Ministry employees were so deadly earnest, and no one was drunk enough yet. "Get matched yet?"

"Oh, Rolf and I are already married," said Luna. Her earrings looked like metallic waterfalls. There were stars on her skirt. She was Draco's cousin but they'd never been close at school. "Legally."

Theo focused in. "Oh, and illegally?"

"Oh, well, heteronormative marriage, monogamy—they're all just social constructs, aren't they?" Luna's eyes were wide and unwavering. Theo's roaming gaze took in the delicate skin of her neck, the rise of her chest. "Rolf and I believe in an approach more in tune with nature. When we're together, we're together. When we're not, we're not."

"Hm, so true," said Theo into his drink. "And at the moment?"

"Oh, well, Rolf is currently in Canada, doing field research on Nargles." Luna smiled sweetly. "I'm glad I was able to be here to experience this with so many of my old friends. I like to experience new things with my friends. And to make new friends." She blinked at Theo.

Theo blinked back. "Yes, well, call me crazy, but I think you might be on to something there, Luna." Theo was rocking heel to toe, heel to toe, as he looked down at her, a smile tugging at his lips. "I like to make new friends, too."

"I would never call you crazy, Theo." Luna looked up at him seriously, placing a light hand on his wrist.

Theo stilled.

"After all, you're just as sane as I am."

"Exactly!" Theo beamed down at her, his smile wide and delighted.

Luna smiled back.

"Say, Luna, it occurs to me—" Theo chuckled his chin at a rangy, square-jawed ginger currently in conversation with a small group of men, waving his hands as he told a story that seemed to involve fire. "Do you know the dragon Weasley over there?"

"Oh, Charlie! Yes," she said, nodding. "I've visited him at the preserve in Romania. I'm very interested in the work he's doing there."

"Hm, yes. Well, I'm very interested in the work he might do on me here."

Luna kept nodding.

"What do you say, Luna? Are you in? That boy looks like he could tear right through me." Theo smiled his biggest smile. "Wanna help?"

Luna cocked her head. "I think it would be a good idea if I did, Theo. It sounds like you could use all the help you can get."

"Finally! Someone who gets it!" Theo slung a long arm over Luna's shoulder, turning her toward Charlie and bending toward her ear as they walked. "Introduce us, love," he murmured. "Draco says I'm selfish in bed, but I promise I don't have to be."



"For shame, Draco!" Pansy's hands were on her hips, her face a mask of indignation.

"Red," she said to the Weaselette. Turning back to Draco: "And Red. I can barely tell you two Gryffindors apart."

The Weaselette smirked. "Watch out, then, Parkinson—you're outnumbered. Hiya, Neville."

"Hiya, Gin." A real smile between the house compatriots. Longbottom was stood just behind Pansy, a glass in his large hand, his posture relaxed.

"I see Pansy is dressing you too, Longbottom." Draco saluted him with the champagne flute he'd acquired on the way. The Weaselette had blundered a path through the crowd with sharp elbows, unerringly dragging him toward the Gryffindors clustered along one wall. Great Hall habits died hard, it seemed.

"And his looks good because he hasn't mucked about with it," said Pansy, charming Draco's tux back to black with impatient wandwork. "There," she said, adjusting his pocket square, "I've left your wife's marker."

Draco looked down to find the silk still Gryffindor red and raised a brow. "Going soft, Pansy?"

"I think that's your department," sniffed Pansy and the Weaselette whooped.

"She's fun, Ferret! Pansy, come tell me everything!" And the absolute traitor reached out her hand to his former best friend.

Draco gave them the sour look they were hoping for. "Longbottom, a word?"

Longbottom lifted his chin in acknowledgment, and stepped to the side, allowing Draco to make the approach. One hand was tucked into the trouser pocket of his muggle tuxedo, the jacket crisp on his broad shoulders. Draco suspected his cufflinks were from the Parkinson vaults, Pansy's own marker.

Draco's thought process stuttered to a halt. This was not the direction he had expected this conversation to take. "How do I intend—"

Lucius allowed a carefully meted fraction of his frustration to show.

"Father," Draco said slowly, "you do not *agree* with my wife's agenda."

Lucius waved an impatient hand. "I am well aware of your wife's beliefs. They are influenced by her background and, for the moment, they are in fashion. But she has had difficulty enacting her legislative proposals and advancing within the Ministry in the face of entrenched opposition. She is clever and ambitious but lacks political savvy. Which was all well and good when she was Miss Granger. But now she is Mrs. Malfoy."

Draco frowned. "Father, you overestimate the degree to which she is willing to be associated with me. She hardly flaunts the name."

"Immaterial." Lucius's tone was businesslike. "She *is* associated with you. Her defeats reflect on us. Her victories strengthen our influence. I may no longer be the head of this house—my own missteps mean that title and duty have fallen to you prematurely, and for that, I am sorry, Draco, though I *do* have full faith in you—but I would not see a member of my house disrespected. A Malfoy will not be a laughingstock, whether by her own efforts or those of her enemies. She shares your name. She is under your protection. Would you have others say that we are powerless to defend or advance our own?"

Draco regarded his father silently. He *did* have thoughts—many of them—about his father's past failures on this count, and the grandiose expectations that had led to them. But however justified, the anger and pain he harbored—would always harbor—felt childish. He could rage and scream at his father about his terrible, terrible decisions and his father could scream and condescend back about the terrible, terrible choices he and Draco's mother had faced. They had done their best. Their best should have been better. Draco could say the same about himself.

It was an old, unproductive argument. The emotions associated with it made Draco feel like a child. And he would sound like a child, whingeing about the past. Draco's heart was pounding as he walled off the anger and shame. His family had failed him. Always, always he was failing his family.

"Power is power, Draco," said Lucius evenly. "Today she is advancing legislation I do not personally care for. But tomorrow she is the Minister of Magic. It is better to be in power than not."

"They will *never* allow her to become Minister while she is married to me," spat Draco.

"Then replace 'them,'" snarled Lucius. "She is barely out of school. You have *decades*."

"She will have killed me by then."

"So be it," said Lucius, looking away, bored of Draco's excuses.

"Father," said Draco quietly, "do you really believe she can become Minister of Magic?"

"Of course," sniffed Lucius. "She is the brightest witch of her age, and she is a Malfoy. You have all the weapons you need."

Draco stared at his father.

"Then there is the matter of Potter," continued Lucius. "And his own political ambitions—"

"He has none," said Draco quickly.

"Yes, yes." Lucius was too well bred to roll his eyes. "He says that now. He is young, still surprised to be alive. But between his hero complex and the pull of martyrdom, he will be convinced—by himself or others—that he is needed to save the wizarding world from itself once more. It is inevitable. The details do not matter at the moment. The point is only, Draco, that power, politics—it is all cyclical. The young Gryffindors are pushing at the gates of government while your generation of Slytherins rot in here with me or sit sucking their thumbs, blaming their parents—"

"Father!" growled Draco, lurching forward.

"I concede there is blame to be assigned!" Lucius snapped. He sighed, unable to meet Draco's eyes. "The point, Draco," he said finally, his gaze fixing upon him, "is that you are now, through the Ministry's actions, in proximity to potential power, in a position to influence it."

"Or a position to destroy it," said Draco flatly.

"So I saw," drawled Lucius, raising one eyebrow. "Your mother has worked so diligently to restore the family's place in society, and you would undo her efforts with this ridiculous display? *The dungeons?* Really, Draco."

"I was only endeavoring, as I always have, to do what's expected of me," said Draco, his drawl a perfect mimicry of his father's.

Lucius snorted. "You care about the wrong people's opinions."

"Do I really, Father?" Draco's tone was mild, but the rebuke was clear.

Lucius eyed him sardonically. "Should I assume, Draco, that this was a deliberate strategy on your part? You are hoping that, should you mistreat your new wife often enough in public, the Wizengamot will take pity on her, and dissolve your bond? If so, I fear you are very much mistaken. Society has never cared about the mistreatment of wives—that is why it is our duty to protect *our* wives *ourselves*. And the mistreatment of one girl will not accomplish what the objections of the entire Sacred 28 have not."

Draco hummed noncommittally. "This girl is a war heroine, the brightest witch of her age, and Harry Potter's best friend."

"Which is why the Wizengamot fears and distrusts her!" snapped Lucius.

"Then she and I finally share an accomplishment," Draco ground out. "The Wizengamot hates us both."

Lucius favored him with a small, tight smile. "And so you have taken it upon yourself to remind the public at large of the very great contrast between you? Of how much they love her when they see how much you don't?"

Draco stared dolefully at his father, his chest heavy.

"Draco, you know very well that your mother would like to take advantage of this pairing." Lucius paused. "Your mother and I are in agreement."

Draco felt his carefully controlled expression flicker. "You do not wish to see the bond broken."

Lucius pursed his lips. "I very much doubt it can be. I have considered your options—"

Draco knew this meant his father had plotted how to kill his wife. The Black betrothal magic prevented anyone of the groom's bloodline from causing intentional harm to the bride, but there were always work-arounds.

"—but the political situation is what it is, and I believe we must play the hand we are dealt. The revivalists would like to see her disposed of. The radicals on her side would like to see her divested of you. Both would dearly love to see our family pay the price of doing so. But Draco," and here Lucius gestured to his surroundings in a way that encompassed everything beyond them as well, "our current difficulties are but a fleeting moment in the long and noble histories of the Houses Black and Malfoy. And—whatever you may think about my past failures on this count—I will not sacrifice our future to appease extremists on either side of our current ideological divide." Lucius sat forward. "The radicals have always fundamentally misunderstood our values. We want simply to protect our own. To survive. To continue. And while I personally will mourn the lost purity of our bloodline—"

Draco's expression soured.

"—it is perhaps fanciful to imagine that the Black and Malfoy lines have never included exceptions along the way. I am prepared to accept that your wife's particular exceptionality—"

Draco raised an eyebrow at this magnanimity.

"—makes her preferable to the inbred dullards and sycophants of the lesser 28, should the Ministry have even allowed such a match. So, no, my current priority is not attempting to dissolve the bond. It is a shame the Greengrass agreement was broken—"

Lucius's look was chastising, Draco's blank.

"—but if the Ministry aims to degrade us with this obviously orchestrated pairing, then it has woefully underestimated House Malfoy and inadvertently given us an opportunity *you* must not squander. So, Draco, tell me—how do you intend to advance your wife's agenda within the Ministry and with the Wizengamot?"

"Longbottom—" Draco's tone was confidential but not suspiciously so. "About one of your, ah, side projects?"

Longbottom's eyebrow flickered, his face neutral.

"If you have any associates in the field, they may want to look for specimens in South America. Argentina, perhaps. Avery tells me Bariloche's climate is quite hospitable this time of year."

"Interesting," said Longbottom, swirling his drink. "And in exchange?"

"Nothing," said Draco. "I've no investment in that endeavor. It's a free tip. Happy hunting."

"Always," said Longbottom. He took a drink of his firewhisky and studied Draco with calculating eyes.

"*Scum.*" Draco looked over just in time to see Seamus Finnegan spit at Pansy's high-heeled feet. "Really, Ginny? You too?"

"Fuck you, Seamus." Ginny pushed his arm, her eyes flashing. And then they were nose to nose in a half-whispered, half-shouted fight.

Draco looked to Pansy, knowing the haughty look on her face must mirror his own feigned indifference. He didn't give a shit about Seamus Finnegan. He did give a shit about having to stand for insults, being shoved in the back in Diagon Alley, spat on in stores. Draco no longer went to Diagon Alley because there was no answer to be made. What defense did he have? He and Pansy had been on the wrong side.

Longbottom shifted toward Pansy, and Draco watched as he placed his hand on the back of her neck. His palm spanned her nape, his thumb along one side of her neck, his fingers wrapping to the other. His touch was light but deliberate, his body close to hers without leaning into her. His fingers held but did not squeeze.

Draco watched as her shoulders dropped, and she seemed to sigh. She looked up at Longbottom, and Draco's stomach twisted. Longbottom met her gaze, his eyes steady.

"Dance with me?" she said.

"Yes." Then he looked over, his expression placid. "Seamus."

Finnegan's head swiveled toward him, his face locked in a sneer.

"Pansy's with me," said Longbottom.

Finnegan went still. His eyes traveled rapidly from Longbottom to the floor by Pansy's feet to Pansy to Longbottom's face and back to Pansy. "Apologies, Parkinson," he barked. He looked to Longbottom again. Then he pushed past the She-Weasel.

Longbottom watched him for a beat and then his attention was back to Pansy. His hand dropped to the small of her back, and as she let Longbottom lead her away, Pansy flashed Draco a smile he hadn't seen in a long time—real and fleeting. She looked younger. Draco's wife would never look at him with trust in her eyes; she would never give him that kind of smile.

Draco turned his back on the Gryffindors and scanned the room, furiously gulping his drink, his chest tight.

He could see his wife on the dancefloor, laughing with Weaselbee.

He found Shacklebolt, left his glass on a passing tray, and walked over to start a fight.

The Minister sensed his presence as he neared, turning to Draco with an appraising look. "Mr. Malfoy."

"Minister." Draco did not offer his hand. "A word?"

"By all means, Mr. Malfoy." His tone crisp and sardonic. "How can I help you?"

Draco settled in, hands in his pockets. "You can stop wasting my wife's time—"

"Mist—"

"The brightest witch of her age and you have her playing parole auror to me. Or maybe she's meant to fuck some good into me?"

Shacklebolt's gaze sharpened, his voice lowering. "That language is inappro—"

"What's inappropriate is my wife's desk."

"Excuse me?" A flicker of real confusion.

"It is insufficient, groaning under the weight of the research material necessary to do her job," clipped out Draco. "Her office is too small. Her department is unstaffed. It appears *she* is the department. She will require a real desk, a larger office, a budget commensurate with—"

"Mr. Malfoy." A little laugh. A look around. "I know your family is obsessed with status—"

"My wife's *status* is that of a war heroine, a recipient of the Order of Merlin: First Class, and the top of her Hogwarts class. What other status would be necessary? It is not my ego you fail to recognize when you allot her fewer resources than a head girl's," snapped Draco, enjoying the anger heating his chest, the frisson of self-righteousness he so infrequently got to feel. "I have already had to step in—"

"Malfoy, I will not tolerate your interference in—"

"I am dutybound, *Minister*." They were face to face now. Draco had leaned in, his hands still in his pockets—he was not threatening the Minister of Magic, no. "Have you not apprehended what placing my wife into my house means for you? The sole advantage she has lacked is a house to advocate for her, as she has naturally had only her school house. You have now given her that house. You have placed her in *my* house. In doing so, you have given her to a man she loathes. She will not share my bed. She will not bear my child. Her sole focus is the work she does here. My sole focus is my duty to family. If her focus is here, my focus follows. Do you see what you have done, *Minister*? She is under my protection, and I cannot see her mistreated—"

"And yet we have *all* seen you brawling with her—"

"And whose doing is that? Have I raised my wand to her? My wife is free to abuse me—and does. I can scarcely defend myself, as you well knew when you arranged this publicity stunt of a marriage to further your own ends. Did you think the Golden Girl would so easily fall into line against her own interests? Do you think she will ever stop fighting? Have you *met* her?"

"Draco . . . Draco . . ."

He almost laughed as Shacklebolt's tone turned soothing, an obvious change in tack.

"This is not against anyone's interests if you and Hermione could only see the larger picture. Yes, Hermione is a rising star—"

Draco raised his eyebrow at this flattery for a witch the Minister had moldering in a broom closet of an office.

"—who is *bright enough* to see the greater good that reconciliation across the current ideological divide could have for the wizarding world. And you, my boy, are a symbol of lost potential for so many in our society, who I know—deep down—wishes to redeem himself—"

Draco allowed his resentment to harden his expression.

"I know change is painful. But the magic—the *magic*—has told us you are the best match. I am certain Hermione will remember she is the best of your generation, a witch who will do anything she can to improve our world. And you—"

"Am a villain who will extort you. Do you see my wife on the dancefloor, all eyes on her?" Draco chucked his sharp chin toward where Potter clumsily twirled her. "I am going to go tell her I've killed her cat. She will avada me on the spot, and the Wizengamot will send the Golden Girl to Azkaban. The *Prophet* will love it. Or . . . you can give my wife the resources she needs."

Shacklebolt sighed, his expression sour and resigned.

"Minister." Draco bowed and turned on his heel.

Draco stalked away, the partygoers around him instinctively shifting to avoid him. *Lost potential.* Indeed. It was inarguable.

His wife smiling. "Go on—" A fat baby, wisps of blond hair. Draco picking him up. His nose nuzzled against the boy's cheek, breathing him in. His wife's hand on his arm, warm.

Draco pushed everything into the knot in his chest that was growing large enough to choke him.

Was his wife still on the dancefloor? He wanted her to slap him.

He locked in on the She-Weasel, who was laughing with Cho Chang, and slowed his pace to a saunter. The Ravenclaw took one look at Draco and abruptly walked away. The ginger turned, scowling.

"Merlin's saggy tits, Malfoy!"

"Please do," said Draco dryly.

"Good thing Draco gets off on being beat up in public," said Theo in a confiding tone. "I don't think he and Granger will be making new memories in the bedroom anytime soon."

"Mrs. Malfoy and I share a wealth of feeling that goes beyond mere physical sensation, thank you."

"I suppose hatred is a feeling," said Pansy contemplatively.

"One of my favorites!" said Theo, raising his glass.

"Quite," muttered Draco.

"Draco," said Pansy. "I'm going to ask Narcissa to help plan my wedding."

Draco looked up, his expression softening. "That's brilliant, Pans. She'll love that. She's in France—fire-call her at the chateau."

"So you're splashing out on it, eh?" Theo jostled Pansy good-naturedly.

"If Longbottom doesn't mind being seen with me. You know: *War Hero Promised to War Criminal*."

"C'mon, Pans," said Theo. "You were never convicted."

"That man doesn't mind anything," said Draco, shuffling more parchment.

"Yeah," said Pansy, with a strangely shy smile. "He said he'd do it if it met my needs."

"Ew! Pansy! I don't want to hear that kinky shit!" Theo grimaced and shrank back.

"And what I need—"

"Ew!"

"Is for you bitches to be my bridesmaids."

"Yes!" Theo leapt up and ran a lap around the settee, his drink spilling on the Persian rug, his hands raised in a victory cheer as Pansy laughed. He darted over to Draco at this desk. "High five, Draco! We're doing it! We're doing it!"

Draco rolled his eyes, batting Theo's hand away, but he couldn't hide his smile as he looked over at Pansy.

"Get up, you magnificent psycho!" Theo pulled Pansy into a hug, rocking her side to side, his drink sloshing, as he chanted, "We're doing it, we're doing it!"

"Pans," said Theo, pulling away and beginning to pace as she collapsed back onto the settee. "Will we wear green? Tell the Plant King I don't want my bouquet to eat me. A little bloodshed is expected, but I hate going to St. Mungo's."

"Relax," drawled Draco. "If anything gets loose, the Gryffindors will all sacrifice themselves first."

"True," said Theo. "Maybe we can set something loose?"

"Pansy," said Draco, "ask Longbottom if he has anything that might accidentally eat a demon pretending to be a cat."



Draco had used every charm he could, a petty reminder that he still could. His robes would not wrinkle, his boots could not scuff, his hair was perfect. Like his mother, he had always been good with charms.

Nevertheless, when he found himself in Lucius's cell, his father paced the small space with a natural ease that made even his prison garb look bespoke. Of course, he had enough guards on the take that perhaps it was. The room was suspiciously cool and dry, in contrast to the wet, raw chill that had seeped into Draco's bones during his stay. Even now, Draco wore his heaviest cloak, and he would feel the cold that night in his dreams.

Finally, Lucius settled across the small table from him. Draco eyed the familiar tattoo across the right side of Lucius's neck. Lucius's eyes dropped to Draco's own. No doubt he had some thoughts about how Draco could be working harder to circumvent the anti-glamour enchantments. What was he supposed to do? Flay himself? Live permanently in a polyjuiced body?

"Father," said Draco. "I've come to tell you I've married."



TUESDAY JULY 8, 2003

The floor flashed green and Pansy stepped into Draco's dimly lit study to the familiar sight of Draco behind his desk, Theo lounging on the settee nearest the fireplace, tumbler in hand.

"Congratulations, Draco," said Pansy, brushing soot off her black Valentino jacket. "Where's Granger?"

"Mrs. Malfoy is at work," said Draco, looking up from his correspondence.

"At this hour?" sniffed Pansy.

"Yes, Pansy, some people work at—" He cast a tempus. "Nine a.m. I am working at nine a.m."

"Gross," said Pansy.

"Don't mind him, Pans," said Theo, waving his tumbler. "How did it go with Longbottom? Do we have an in with the Plant King now? Wait . . . wait. Pans! Are you blushing? Pans! Pans! Does this mean the Plant King has an *in* with us?"

"Theodore Nott!" Pansy lunged, smacking Theo about the head and neck with her open hand. "I am going to beat you to death with my shoe!"

"Yes, Pansy, I want that too," cooed Theo, ducking and grabbing for her wrist. "But I can't let you cheat on the Plant King with me. I'm hoping—" He burst out laughing. "Ow! Not the face! Ow! I'm hoping he'll let me invest!"

"You never tell me anything about your business dealings," said Pansy sulkily, throwing herself onto the settee cushion next to his. "I have no idea what you're doing."

"I have no idea what I'm doing either!" said Theo cheerfully.

"I have no idea why I haven't reset the wards," muttered Draco.

"Besides, he's not going to need your money. He's going to have mine," said Pansy archly.

Draco looked up. "You're giving him a key to the vaults?"

"Did you give Granger a key to yours?" Pansy asked waspishly.

"Of course Mrs. Malfoy has a key," said Draco with some venom.

"Not worried he's going to poison you for the Parkinson fortune, then, Pans?" asked Theo.

"Not worried at all," said Pansy, stealing the tumbler from Theo to take a sip. "He said he's going to take care of me, and I'm going to take care of him."

"So it's a suicide pa—"

"No, you idiot." She made a winking motion with her hand.

"Oh ho! So you're telling me Neville Longbottom has a big dick." Theo wagged his head, considering. "All right, I can see that."

"Not without Pansy's permission," said Draco, unrolling a scroll. "Don't let him talk you into a threesome, Pans. Nott is selfish in bed."

"One time, Draco! One time. I will oblige you."

"Wife swap, Weaselette," said Draco. "Our spouses are making a spectacle of themselves on the dancefloor. It's time to trade you in."

"Harry for you, Ferret?" She grinned sharply. "That's a deal anyone would take."

"So pleased we're in agreement, Red. Shall we?" Draco formally offered his arm and then they were off, the Weaselette elbowing him in the ribs as many times as she could along the way.

They reached the dancefloor, where his wife and Potter were making an absolute mess of a Viennese waltz. Really, it was atrocious. The Weaselette was not-terrible, which Draco put down to general athletic ability rather than training. Her broom-calloused hand in his, she kept up a cheerful stream of insults as Draco steered her across the floor, toward their targets.

"Hiya, babe!" she called to Potter, who was laughing as he stepped on Draco's wife's toes. His wife's eyes were shining, her smile wide. Draco wanted to wipe the happiness right off her face. He wanted to see it every day across from him.

"Potter," drawled Draco on the turn, "I'm cutting in. Please let your wife lead, for all our sakes."

"Hermione! You'll never guess what Parkinson told me about the Ferret!" yelled the worst person Draco had ever danced with.

The smile was still on his wife's face. Her eyes were lit up in anticipation.

"That's enough of that," said Draco, and he cut in.

A flail of arms as the Weaselette grabbed at Potter and he her, but Draco was focused on his hand on his wife's shoulder blade, only a thin strap over her bare flesh. The dress was back to sapphire blue. He allowed himself to stroke her skin before settling his hand on her, the pads of his fingers pressing in.

His hand squeezing her hip, a sharp tug and she's pressed against his hard cock, his hand sliding down over her arse, her pebbled nipples pushing into his chest. He lowers his head and bites her neck where it meets her shoulder. She shudders, her whole body rippling against him.

He pulled her close, her thigh against him, their chests nearly touching.

Her hands were light on his shoulder, in his hand. Her smile had dimmed but she wasn't yet frowning. She would be soon enough.



The dance was done and Hermione was dizzy with citrus and cloves and exertion, the silk tight against her ribs, her chest rising against his as she drew in breath, the delicate straps of her dress beginning to dig in. Malfoy had spun her quickly, confidently across the floor, his fingertips guiding her this way and that, such a contrast to the silly, laughing hour she'd spent avoiding him with Harry and Ron and Susan.

His arms had been like steel, his thigh firm between hers as he pressed her close, heat radiating off him. He had looked down his nose to watch her face, his eyes drifting down to her mouth, the necklace glittering on her clavicle, but didn't speak and she chose to experience this as another détente.

Malfoy had not yet stepped back from her when it happened.

"Really, Malfoy! You and Potter's mudblood?"

Hermione flinched despite herself, hearing the oily voice of Marcus Flint so near her. How had he ever avoided Azkaban? He must have agreed to the pensieve and sung like a Fwooper. When she looked over her shoulder, he was as well dressed as ever but his face appeared puffy and sallow, one eye clearly glamoured.

"You'll not call her that," said Malfoy with a hard look for the taller man.

"What's the fuss, Malfoy?" Hermione startled as Flint reached across her to grab her wrist, roughly pulling her arm up to expose the scar on her forearm. "She comes clearly labeled."

Hermione angrily wrenched her arm away, her face burning, her wrist twisting in his grasp. Flint fought her, his hand instinctively tightening, and she could feel something—the sharp edge of his ring—cut her. Then her hand was free just as Malfoy caught hold of Flint's wrist, the diamond band on his finger glinting.

They were close together, Flint sneering, Hermione stumbling back from them. Malfoy's grip was hard, the skin tight over his knuckles, his thumb digging into Flint's palm, pushing his hand back, the fingers splayed.

Malfoy gave Flint's hand a jerk. His wand was out. He didn't hesitate.

"Sectum," said Malfoy, his jaw clenched, pale eyes cold, and he brought his wand down, slicing the fingers cleanly off Flint's hand.

Blood. Screams. Flint loosed an agonized cry, his body jolting. He tried to pull away, but Malfoy was already wrestling him closer, the fabric of the tuxedo jacket taut and straining across his back and biceps.

Hermione's hands were up, her wand raised—pulled from the pocket of her skirt.

Malfoy's hand was wrapped in Flint's shirtfront, the sharp point of his wand under Flint's chin, drawing blood, the taller man's face pulled down close enough to kiss. Malfoy's teeth were bared. "Don't touch my witch."

Flint roared and cast awkwardly, his mutilated paw flinging blood, his wand hand intact but his body too close to Malfoy—flames sprayed into onlookers to a wave of screams and shouted protegos. Blood was running down Flint's throat, into his collar.

Malfoy, his face falling blank, shoved Flint back to cast on him—

"Stand down, Malfoy!" shouted Harry, his wand drawn, as an expelliarmus and incarcerous hit Flint in quick succession, Ron stepping toward him.

Harry looked determined, angry—but it was nothing like the terror of the war. Ron moved professionally—no fear, no mad scramble. They were aurors. Trained. Experienced. It wasn't the war. But Hermione's heart was racing.

"Potter, he assaulted my wife," called Malfoy, finally lowering his wand, disappearing it into a pocket. "You know I have the right—"

"Don't do that—" said Hermione, stepping into him. "Use me—"

She gasped as Malfoy spun abruptly and snatched up her arm, turning it open to him. His long, refined fingers were around her wrist, his thumb across her pulse. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand were hard against the bones of her elbow as he lifted her arm to examine it, her forearm now a barrier between them. A rivulet of blood ran from her wrist to the inner crook of her arm, straight over the pink, irritated scar.

"You were harmed," he said. He looked into her eyes, his expression serious.

She was furious. Of course she was harmed. Someone else had grabbed that wrist, held down that arm, carved into her. She carried the harm with her every day. She would always be harmed. He, of all people, knew this. He had let it happen. He had been part of it.

"How dare you," she said, her voice raspy.

Hurt flashed across his face. Then his eyes narrowed.

She stared him down. "You have no right to claim you care, to pretend this pissing match had anything to do with *me*—"

"I have the right to defend what's mine," he said, his beautiful mouth ugly.

"Careful," she said, low, her lip curling. "You might get my dirty blood on your *clean hands*."

Hermione felt as though the room had gone silent, Ginny somewhere behind her, Harry and Ron wand-ready but watching this inevitable confrontation play out. This fight felt familiar, inexorable. Her chest and back were tingling, buzzing.

Malfoy sneered, his gray eyes hard on hers, his hand tightening on her wrist. He jerked her arm up—an echo of Flint's earlier offense. And then he lowered his head and *licked* her inner forearm from her elbow to her wrist, the rivulet of blood disappearing under his tongue.

A sharp intake of breath. Heat pooling low in her belly.

He clamped his mouth over her pulse and sucked on the bloody cut, staring at her over the hand now caught in his. His tongue laved over the wound. Hermione felt her cunt clench.

He pulled his head from her arm, his lips wet and open, his tongue at the corner of his mouth. "It's my blood now," he said.

She slid into the delicate writing desk's chair, barely feeling the upholstered seat beneath her, and carefully picked up the envelope. It sprang open at her touch, the letter unfolding itself gracefully. Hermione scanned quickly, then read slowly. Narcissa's confident, ornate handwriting welcomed her to the Noble House of Malfoy and Malfoy Manor. She gently expressed both regret for the events of the past and her wish that the Manor would someday become a place of security and contentment for Hermione and her children. (Hermione blanched.) Draco would faithfully fulfill his obligations to Hermione, Narcissa wrote, and it was her dearest hope that Hermione would come to see him as a husband worthy of her good regard, in a fruitful marriage that grew into mutual respect and companionship.

I know you hate my son, but please have his babies and learn to tolerate him, Hermione translated.

Hermione felt a deep well of sadness open in her chest. She missed her mother. *Security and contentment . . . good regard . . . mutual respect and companionship.* Coming from Narcissa Malfoy, these goals for Hermione's forced union were simultaneously tepid and wildly optimistic. But Hermione found herself crying and then sobbing, viscerally pained by the knowledge that she would never have a letter from her own mother wishing her these things. She wished she were marrying a man she loved. She wished her mother were writing her a letter full of hopes for happiness and children.

Finally, Hermione heaved a sigh and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. Her parents were gone. Bad things happened every day. Wishes didn't come true.

She pushed her hair back and looked through the desk drawer for parchment, refusing to think further than the task at hand. She could only find heavy, stark white stationery bearing the initials HGM. She stared at it, and then set her jaw and picked up a quill. She wrote her notes to Harry and Ginny and Ron and sent them using Malfoy's horrible eagle owl. She ate her dinner, though she didn't taste it.

Was she safe and unharmed? No. But she was alive.

The next morning—this morning—she had got up early, put on the first work ensemble she recognized in her dressing room, and flooed to the Ministry as quickly as she could. She would *not* be taking time off to honeymoon with Draco Malfoy.

Now she stopped short outside her office. The door read HERMIONE MALFOY. Hermione stared at it. She had agreed her nonexistent future children would take Malfoy's name; she'd never said she would. She cast and then tapped it out with her wand: G-R-A-N-G-E-R. The door flickered and reverted to MALFOY. Hermione tried it nine more times before she screamed.

Hermione pushed through to her cluttered desk and fired off a terse interoffice memo to building maintenance, then shucked off her robes—the fabric of this set nicer than she remembered. She pulled at the sleeve of her dress, resisting the urge to check her scar, and turned to her mail.

A dozen howlers—incendio.

Three missives outright pornographic in their handwringing about what that monster Draco Malfoy was doing to her in his bed—incendio.

Hermione set fire to the rest of the mail without opening it and then screamed one more time, as loudly as she could.

Her breath caught and then her body was reacting. Her wand was up—
“Expelliarmus!” shouted Harry.

The instant humiliation of her wand being ripped from her hand. Hermione looked to Harry—his hair wild, his eyes pained—her own eyes wide.

Malfoy's voice, low, obscene: “You can't curse me any more than I've already been with you.”

Her hand was still raised. Hermione looked back at Malfoy's cruel mouth and pulled back to slap him, but he'd felt her tense and grabbed her wrist, too fast, his other hand still squeezing her elbow.

Malfoy growled and yanked her into him, trapping her against him as she fell forward, his arm hard around her now, his body rigid under the thin layers of fabric separating them. Citrus. Cloves. Blood. Heat.

He ducked his head, bringing his hand up to grip her bare shoulder, angle her toward him as he murmured against her ear: “Hit me again, love, when we get home. I'll lick every inch of you.”

Hermione bucked against him, and he tightened his hold, crushing her chest to his, his fingers digging in. “You're making me so hard, dear. I want to eat your cunt. I want to slide my tongue into you and—”

“Malfoy!” shouted Harry. “Let go of her!”

Malfoy's head snapped up. “It's too late for that, Potter. I'm stuck with her.”



Harry watched as Hermione and Malfoy briskly made their way out of the ballroom, toward the floos, trailed discretely by two aurors and less discretely by at least five members of the press. Their backs were ramrod straight. Harry could imagine the obstinate look on Hermione's face, the sneer on Malfoy's.

Harry shook his head. “Why am I letting Hermione leave with him?”

“That's what I'm asking, mate,” said Ron.

Ginny rubbed circles on Harry's back, her hand moving smoothly across the dark fabric of his dress robes. “I told her I'd leave the floo open. In case anything happens. Or she just changes her mind. You'll see her tomorrow when she comes to get her wand.”

“Be a shame if Malfoy's accidentally gets snapped before he can retrieve it,” said Ron. He looked around, snapping his fingers and pointing to Flint. “Oi, Smith! Over here!”

“You know Hermione can take care of herself,” said Ginny.

Ron turned to where Flint lay and raised his wand. “Wingardium leviosa,” he said in a perfect imitation of Hermione's swot voice, the bloody digits rising. He leaned over Flint, still bound in the incarcerus ropes. “Sir, are these your fingers?”

“I suppose,” said Harry, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

“Smith, there you are.” Ron cast a silencio as Flint swore violently at him. “Portkey this man to St. Mungo's.” As though an afterthought: “Take the fingers.”

Ginny leaned against Harry, toying with the hair at the nape of his neck so that it stood up more. “I just wonder. Does Hermione know that Malfoy's in love with her, you reckon?”

Harry turned to Ginny, his expression incredulous. “Does *Malfoy* know that Malfoy's in love with her, you reckon?”

FRIDAY JULY 18, 2003

"Sweet Salazar's poxy dick, what is that?" said Theo, stepping from the floo into Draco's dimly lit study.

"This is Mrs. Malfoy's progeny," said Draco dryly. The orange abomination sat on his desk, too close to his ledger for comfort. The animal's expression was excessively judgmental. Draco sneered back. "I am not allowed to kill it."

"But where did it *come from?*" asked Theo with distaste.

"Originally? Hell. This morning? Her rooms. It has escaped the wards."

Theo's nose wrinkled. "This thing is loose in the Manor?"

"I do not know, Theo. It simply appears. My rooms. My study. No place is safe. I do not know a moment's peace. I am but fate's plaything."

"Merlin, you need to get laid," said Theo, throwing himself down onto the settee.

"Beast," said Draco, "this is Theo. You are not allowed to kill him."

The floo flashed green, and Pansy stepped through, brushing off her shoulders (Burberry) and rustling a sheaf of newsprint. "Hullo, morons. Let's look at this morning's headlines, shall we?"

She stood in her stilettos, hip cocked, and read them aloud in a quick radio announcer's cadence, tossing papers down into Theo's lap as she did: **"MALFOY MAYHEM: The Ministry's Most Controversial Couple Wreaks Havoc, DRACO DEVASTATED: Malfoy Mad with Jealousy As Wife Dallies with Other Men, HERMIONE'S HEX: Hermione Granger Malfoy's Wand Confiscated, and my favorite, from Witch Weekly, INSIDE THEIR LOVE: Dramione Wears Matching Mugglewear In Nod to Her Heritage."**

"Finally, the press gets it right!" Theo casually lifted a tabloid from his lap. "**Questions about the Ministry of Magic's Reconciliation Act persist as its most prominent match, former Death Eater Draco Malfoy and war heroine Hermione Malfoy, née Granger, show no signs of reconciling'**—all right, good, very nice. '**Last night's reception saw Mrs. Malfoy canoodling with past paramours Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter, while Mr. Malfoy snubbed his new spouse to flirt with Pansy Parkinson, Celeste Sneed, and, most explosively, Mrs. Ginevra Potter. Trouble in paradise for the Chosen One? It seems the Ministry can force these two to wed but can't keep them out of others' beds'**—Oh! Saucy!" The result was a bloody showdown—Draco, you cut off Flint's hand in a fit of jealous rage? Why did I have to learn this from *Wizarding World News*?"

Pansy swatted at him with the *Witch Weekly* she still held. "Because you cut out early, Theo! Is it true you left with Lovegood and the dragon Weasley?"

"Ooh, who is spreading the good word? Is it Charlie? Is he bragging he bagged me? Or Luna. She has a big mou—"

"Theo, it's you! You owled me in the middle of the night!"

Hermione scoffed at the idea of her needing to know any of this, though she was dead curious what books had been taken from the Manor's library.

"I will be in my rooms or my study down the hall. If you need anything other than me or my cock, call for Pip. I will send Ulysses to your study window, so you can owl the Order to let them know I have not murdered you yet. In fact, you are safe and unharmed." He said this as though daring her to disagree. "Right." A small, formal bow. "Good evening, Mrs. Malfoy."

Hermione sighed. "Malfoy," she said, in lieu of thank you or goodnight, both of which felt like false advertising.

Still holding Crookshanks, she crossed the threshold of her suite. When she looked back, he was closing the doors behind her, his expression unreadable.

Hermione found that her sitting room did contain a private floo, her study contained her books as well as dinner for one and a dish for Crookshanks sitting under a stasis charm, her dressing room contained her clothing and an oversized vase full of white tulips, and her bedroom contained an en suite bathroom home to a large clawfoot tub and more white tulips. The bedroom was decidedly not too small for her needs and the entirety of the suite was accented in dark red and gold.

Had the elves defaulted to her school house colors because Hermione had no pureblood family crest to plaster across her sitting room? Or did Malfoy think this would be . . . Hermione's thought process hiccupped. Comforting? Did Malfoy want her to . . . like her rooms? Hermione shook the thought off. He probably thought these colors conveyed that she would always be an outsider in his Slytherin empire. Well, *good*.

In fact, you are safe and unharmed.

Hermione dropped Crookshanks to the fourposter in the bedroom and yanked up her sleeve. Ever since he had forced that ring onto her finger . . . *there*. The scar on her forearm—the slur Bellatrix had carved into her flesh—was pink and prickling, as if the Black magic itself was calling her a mudblood. *Of course* Malfoy's godsdamned fascist bloodline was furious to see her bonded to its precious pureblood heir. Of fucking course the heirloom meant to protect her was protesting her instead. She pulled angrily at the ring but it only held on tighter.

She looked to the door that would lead to her suite's entrance and the shared sitting room beyond, her jaw clenched. She was *not* going to give Malfoy the satisfaction of asking him *again* to take off this ring. She'd have to explain, show him her arm—no, unthinkable. He'd see how badly it had shaken her—maybe he'd *known* this would happen and his success would be confirmed. No, it was too much, to go to him and say *this ring has reminded me that you and your whole family think I deserve to be branded as filth and now the Ministry has given me to you against my will and—oh, I don't know—this whole thing is just really hurting my feelings.*

Ugh, no. Too honest. Too vulnerable. Neither was safe with Malfoy.

Hermione pretended the scar didn't bother her. She had to. Otherwise, the people who hated her were delighted, and the people who cared about her swamped her in pity and revulsion that only amplified her own feelings and made them too much to bear. (It was *horrrifying* to have been mutilated. It was *devastating* to see a slur on her own body, every day, forever. But she couldn't live every day, forever, with that level of horror and devastation in the forefront of her mind.) And worse were those—among both the people who hated her and the people who claimed to love her—who were perversely titillated by her permanent disfigurement. The letters she'd received . . . Godric. It was because of those people that she kept her arm covered or glamoured in public.

Hermione pulled down her sleeve and scrubbed furiously at her inner arm through the cloth, trying to distract from the prickling sensation. She was hungry and thirsty and tired, she realized.

With a heavy sense of resignation, she scooped up Crookshanks and moved them both to the book-lined study, where she intended to eat with one hand while writing letters to Harry and Ginny and Ron, letting them know they didn't need to storm Malfoy Manor.

She stopped when she saw the envelope—heavy, stark white stationery bearing the initials NBM—propped next to her waiting dinner. Hermione slowly set down Crookshanks, then gave him his dish, watching the envelope as though it would bite.



SATURDAY JULY 19, 2003

Theo was already in the dimly lit office when he heard Leech arrive. Leech aborted the lock and stepped inside, the door catching slightly, his robes rustling as he skirted stacks of crates and paperwork on his way to his cluttered desk.

He was sliding behind the scarred wood, muttering to himself, when he startled and went still at the sight of Theo lounged in his guest chair, one leg crossed over the other, his elbows on the chair's arms, twirling his wand between his fingers.

"Nott." His face was blank but his voice was tense.

"Hiya, Leech." Theo spun the wand. "I'm gonna need a list." And he smiled nastily.



Hermione knew what was expected of her. It was expected she would appear in an old T-shirt and muggle jeans, wearing her rattiest trainers, to show Malfoy he couldn't tell her what to do. Then she would be offended when the goblins treated her like a truant sixth year and he would lecture her about how obtuse she was for a supposedly smart witch and she would huff and puff defiance while cutting off her nose to spite her face.

She was choosing her other option, wherein she dressed up like his doll and resented him when it worked.

She wore black. A slim-cut dress. Delicate, fashionable summer robes. Her highest heels, cushioned. The sapphire necklace. (A calculated risk. The goblins would not appreciate wizard ownership of their work but would recognize the piece from the vaults.) She charmed the frizz out of her curls. Applied lip stain. She would not look like Malfoy's impoverished ward.

When she stepped into the shared sitting room, Malfoy was waiting on his settee, conjuring snakes. He looked up when she closed the door behind her and stood, vanishing the writhing mass on the cushion beside him. He was in black, the Azkaban tattoo stark against his pale throat, his hair brushed off his forehead. His eyes swept over her, lingering on the lip stain, the necklace. He said only, "Shall we?"

They made their way to the Leaky Cauldron, his eyes on her clavicle every time she looked over, and stepped out of the floo into the usual chaos. Malfoy kept hold of her elbow, moving her quickly toward Diagon Alley outside, and she could feel the scar prickling and stinging not so far from his bony fingers—not so far from the bank that reminded her of Bellatrix.

"You're tense," hissed Malfoy, as though he were not tense himself.

"The goblins don't like me," said Hermione as Gringotts loomed before them. One of at least five reasons why she was tense.

"That tends to happen whenever you are personally the reason for new security protocols." Malfoy scanned the shoppers surrounding the entrance as he muttered, "And I'm the one they sent to prison."

White marble, white steps, and then burnished bronze doors. Malfoy ushered her inside with his godsdamned hand at the small of her back, the weak morning sunlight giving way to candle smoke, tall tellers' desks, brass scales, Hermione's high heels clicking on the tile floor. Malfoy kept her close as they were shown to a dark, richly furnished office—his body angled toward her, light touches at her back and elbow herding her just slightly before him. When had the boy who felt up girls in the Hogwarts hallways become this man?

Malfoy saw her to her chair before taking his own seat to her left and taking charge of the meeting, his tone much brusquer than Hermione's would have been. He spoke confidently about what she wanted, looking to her for confirmation. She nodded, nonplussed, as he carved out all assets she'd brought into the marriage as well as her future salary and interest.

"Why weren't my wife's original instructions honored?" he asked. "Mrs. Malfoy's authority over the vaults is equal to mine. What must I sign to establish this?"

Hermione stared at Malfoy as their banker grumpily produced more paperwork but he didn't return her gaze. The goblin fussed over the forms, and Malfoy signed and stamped the parchment with his bloodied House of Malfoy signet ring.

Then he was standing and ushering her out of her chair, out of the office, across the lobby.

She turned on him as soon as they were outside. "What the hell was that, Malfoy?"

"What do you mean?" He looked confused, irritated. "I have met your demands."

"You can't seriously ask me to believe," she muttered through clenched teeth, "that you are giving me control over hundreds of years' worth of Malfoy gold."

He leaned down toward her, and now they were face to face on the Gringotts steps, locked in place.

"Did you want a small household budget that I review weekly? You're Lady Malfoy, not staff," he said with disdain before his voice went lower. "But I needn't worry, need I? You can look like a lady—beautiful, powerful, a real wife to me—but you'd rather dress in rags and live on your house elf's salary than touch my bloody gold, wouldn't you?"

His eyes were roaming over her face, her breasts, the necklace at her throat.

"That's right," she said. "I'm *not a real wife* to you. I didn't ask to be lady of your manor, and you would never have chosen me to be—"

"And yet you *are* the lady of my manor, and I cannot marry a different one to do the things for me that you won't." His voice was going lower, a growl, and his left hand was now gripping her bicep.

She jerked against him and he held firm, his fingertips digging in.

"Salazar, I'm yoked to the brightest witch of her age and she insists she remain ignorant of the estate she lives in." Malfoy leaned in, citrus and cloves and heat rolling off him. "Do you wish for my mother to continue running the Manor while you sleep in my linens and bathe in my water? Do you wish to be kept as a pet? Say the word, love, and I will keep you in my bed and fuck that golden cunt of yours five times a day. Please—say the word."

"Keep begging, Malfoy—you will never have me." She thrust her chin out, shaking her hair back. "And I'm going to give all your gold away."

"Try." His pointy chin lifted as he looked down his nose at her, his cheekbones sharp, his beautiful mouth twisting cruelly. "I'm not your weasel ex-boyfriend—you can't spend a hundred galleons and bankrupt me."

"Oi, Hermione!" called a male voice. "Getting paid to suck Death Eater dick?"

"Oh, piss off!" shouted Malfoy, and that was how the first picture captured them, his face snarling, the veins in his temple and throat pulsing, his hand gripping her raised arm as she stopped struggling against him to turn her vicious glare on the reporter.

"*Draco! Does Hermione have access to the Malfoy vaults?*"

"*Miss Granger! Hermione! Do you believe the Malfoy fortune should have been seized as reparations for war crimes?*"

"*Draco! Over here! What do you say to reports your wife is recklessly spending your millions?*"

"Draco! Is it true you made the Golden Girl sign a pre-nup? Mr. Malfoy!"

"Hermione, hon! Who are you wearing? Your dress! Who designed your dress?"

The press had gathered while they'd been inside—tipped off, no doubt, by a patron at the Leaky. She and Malfoy were still, on the steps, within Gringotts's anti-apparition wards.

Malfoy yanked Hermione in front of him as—his touches no longer the light directives they had been inside—he bodily moved her through the scrum of reporters and gathering onlookers, one arm around her, his hand gripping her shoulder, his body angled to make his hard shoulder and elbow a wedge. She was held and jostled against him, all heat and lean muscle and sharp hip bones, his frame a cage around her.

Then they cleared the wards and she shoved him away, her hands on his chest, her heels skittering on the cobblestones. The last thing she saw before she disappeared was him turning on his heel into a twist of black smoke.



Hermione had apparated to Flourish & Blotts, the first comforting place she thought of. It was an uncouth entrance, but she straightened herself out and pretended to browse like this was any ordinary Saturday and she always shopped in heels and sapphires after a public row with the husband she hated.

Soon she wasn't pretending—she was holding three novels she didn't have time to read but couldn't bring herself to reshelve. Her heartrate had slowed; she was no longer self-consciously pulling her hair forward to obscure her face and neck. Still, she ruminated over Malfoy's theatrics from the morning. Imagine, being angry with someone for *not* spending your money. It *had* to be a trap.

And yet you are the lady of my manor, and I cannot marry a different one—

Against her will, Hermione found herself considering the wife Malfoy had expected to marry. An empty-headed society chit or bigoted social climber, Hermione had always assumed. Astoria Greengrass or Pansy Parkinson. Her Hogwarts education for show, her duties consisting of never wearing the same dress twice and fucking Malfoy once for an heir.

To do the things for me that you won't. Sex.

Did you want a small household budget that I review weekly? Do you wish for my mother to continue running the Manor? But maybe not only sex.

Malfoy was, in muggle terms, a billionaire. Hermione had never thought of Narcissa as a *housewife* with a *budget*. Did Malfoy really feel that Hermione was, what, shirking her duties? It was nonsensical that Malfoy would expect his enemy to manage his household. Did he think Hermione was an interchangeable cog in the machine of his pureblood life?

You can look like a lady—beautiful, powerful, a real wife to me. A lady—beautiful, powerful, a real wife to me. Beautiful, powerful, a real wife to me. A real wife to—

“—Death Eater.”

Hermione froze.

The whisper had come from the aisle she'd just left. *There goes Hermione Granger—poor thing was forced to marry a Death Eater.* That was probably what people said when she passed. She was the victim. She hadn't done anything wrong.

We'll see how long the public feels that way, Mrs. Malfoy, seeing you by my side, wearing my ring.

Oi, Hermione! Getting paid to suck Death Eater dick?

Hermione came back to life—stepping quickly to the till, her heels clicking on the floor. She had to get out of here and get out of these clothes.

She made her face agreeable as the manager smiled warmly. “Hermione! So good to see you again. What have we here . . .”

She was back on familiar turf. Chitchat about books. Soliciting the opinions of her favorite bookseller. She was herself again.

He licked and licked and when she was almost finished shaking, he pushed his cock back into her and fucked her fast and hard while she was still boneless, her head thrown back, her breasts bouncing. She hummed with pleasure, watching him with half-lidded eyes. She felt so relaxed, and he was so tense—his taut abdomen, his hard chest, his arms corded with muscle, the veins straining as he gripped her hips and flung himself into her. She clenched her cunt on him and smiled when he swore, fucking her harder. She was so relaxed and he was so desperate . . . it was adorable. He was beautiful. So male in a way she enjoyed—all muscle and vein and musk and stubble and the hard line of his jaw and his calloused hands and sensitive eyes. She was going to keep him. He wanted to come in her so badly right now and she was going to let him. She was going to let him do whatever he wanted to her. He pleased her so well. She was going to keep him and fuck him a lot.

She clenched her cunt on him and he bucked into her hard and fast until he came, collapsing on top of her. And then he was kissing her hard, all tongue, and she pulled his hair, and he kissed her jaw and down the line of her throat, murmuring “perfect, so perfect, Pansy.” He shifted his weight, his cock still in her, his forearm by her head, holding him up, and said low, into her ear, “Next time I’m shagging your arse while I fingerfuck your cunt.”

She hummed. “Do I get to suck your cock first?” she asked sweetly, running her fingertips up his side so that he shivered.

“Yes.”

“All right.”

And he laughed, kissing her face and then grabbing her up and rolling her on top of him so that he could wrap his arms around her. “Perfect, so so perfect, Pansy.”

Yes, she was keeping him.

Pansy kicked out of her heels and unzipped her dress without taking her eyes off him. He had dropped his belt to the floor and was unbuttoning his shirt. She could smell the smoke and scourgified blood wafting off him. Her cunt was wet. She shimmied out of her bra and knickers.

He let his shirt fall from his hand and stepped to her, bending to lick one nipple and then the other with a flat, broad tongue. He lifted his head and her nipples were wet and cold, painfully tight, without his mouth. He chucked his chin toward her bed. “On your knees. Head down. Arse up.”

Pansy was short and the fourposter was tall. She climbed up onto it, watching over her shoulder as he shucked off his trousers and pants. His cock was hard and straining. *Good.* She bit her lip as she wriggled into place, one cheek flat, her hard nipples brushing the fabric under her, her eyes closing as she snaked one hand between her legs to rub her clit.

Pansy remembered sex in school being easier. It wasn’t better—Salazar, it was usually so much worse. But it was new and exciting and everyone around her being extremely randy and largely unsupervised made for effective substitutes for skill. Then the war happened and Pansy hadn’t relaxed since. She could never, ever get out of her head—unless she was too drunk for sex. She was always worried, always thinking about how much worse things would get, how little control she had over everything she was supposed to be controlling. It was exhausting and agitating simultaneously. She tried to touch herself and she couldn’t concentrate or let go.

Pansy needed a lot going on before her brain would give up and let her enjoy it. She needed some help. And Longbottom was good at giving her what she needed.

Pansy was rubbing her clit, the air cold on her wet, exposed cunt, when she felt Longbottom’s large, warm hands palm her arse on both cheeks, opening her wider, and then his hot—so hot—mouth was on her cunt, his tongue licking and delving in to taste her from behind. He lapped at her as she sighed into her bedding and rubbed her clit and then he was licking her arsehole, his tongue aggressive—insistent—and she was breathing harder.

His tongue circled and circled, flat and then hard, and she was sighing, panting, and then he was licking her cunt while the pad of his thumb, slick with spit, was on her arsehole, circling and circling and circling, testing. She pushed her arse higher into the air, her hard nipples dragging against bedding. His tongue was deep in her cunt and his thumb pushed, pushed, and popped into her arse. Pansy exhaled heavily and relaxed, and he pushed his thumb farther in.

Pansy felt her brain slow, tension release as she let the conflicting sensations happen, Longbottom lapping and sucking and nipping at her cunt while his pistoned his thumb into her arse and she rubbed her clit, his other hand still gripping her. He took his time and her thoughts stilled; she only had to push her arse into the air and rub her clit and he decided how fast to finger her, how hard, how long he would eat her cunt. Her clit was swollen and slick, her cunt clenching, her stretched arsehole pleasantly distracting.

Finally, he kissed her cunt and then pushed his thumb in to the hilt, his long fingers spread across her arse as he raised his head and shifted behind her. He pulled her up by her arsehole, positioning her where he wanted her, and then his cock was pushing into her slick cunt, his thumb in her arse holding her in place as he pushed all the way in. She sighed and squirmed, her nipples hard, her arsehole tightening on his thumb. His cock was large, so large, stretching her, and she pushed herself back against him, wanting to feel him fill her.

Then his cock was all the way in, his thumb all the way in, and she was rubbing her clit, squeezing him tight. Full. He stroked his cock slowly in and out of her, his thumb holding her in place, a nice distraction, and then he was pumping faster, his thumb pistonning into her and she was mindless, fucking herself on him, being fucked. She didn’t have to think, just let herself be fucked, just let him fuck her how he wanted, and finally she was coming. And when her fingers on her clit went still, he clamped his hand over hers, pulled his thumb from her, and pushed his weight onto her, collapsing them both onto the bed so that she could spasm against the hard pressure of his hand, her cunt tightening around his cock, everything feeling full and heavy with his bulk on her. He pushed himself back and rolled her over, quickly lowering himself to lick her come out of her while she tremored and quivered, her clit too sensitive to touch now.

“We’ll put this on the Malfoy tab, shall we?” He winked at her—his most loyal costumer, now with an unlimited account.

You’d rather dress in rags and live on your house elf’s salary than touch my bloody gold, wouldn’t you? And her saying: *That’s right.*

“No,” barked Hermione, too loud. “Sorry—I’ll just pay.”

She hadn’t taken a stand just to spend his bloody money not half an hour later. He hadn’t won this fight. Though, Hermione thought, she may have already lost it.

Later, she would see the pictures.

Them fighting each other on the bank’s steps, faces enraged and contemptuous, jaws and arms clenched as they grab and pull at each other, his eyes burning, everyone around them unseen, forgotten.

Then: *Them fighting their way through the crowd, Malfoy’s arm around her, his body shielding hers. Him looking coldly murderous. Her looking ready to ignite.*

It didn’t look like they were enemies. It looked like it was them against the world.

In black, their chins raised, lips twisted, eyes full of hate. The diamonds on their hands, the sapphires at her throat. They looked rich, disreputable, dangerous.

Oh, Godric . . . she looked like a Malfoy.



The floo flashed green and Pansy stepped into Draco’s dimly lit study to find Draco behind his desk and Theo lounging on the settee nearest the fireplace, a tumbler in his hand, a mass of orange fur on his lap.

“Hullo, wankers,” said Pansy, brushing soot off the shoulders of her black Gucci dress.

“Guilty,” said Theo.

“Guilty,” agreed Draco, much less happily. He signed the parchment in front of him with a decisive flourish, spelled the ink dry, and began rolling it for a waiting Ulysses.

Pansy dropped the tabloid she was holding onto the settee. “According to the gossip rags, you’ve cut Granger off, Draco.”

“She insisted on maintaining her own vault,” protested Draco, looking up from handling the eagle owl. “She still has her key! Merlin, I can’t win.”

Theo picked up the paper and burst out laughing. “And yet you keep fighting.”

“You have no idea,” said Draco darkly, sending Ulysses out the window.

“Well, just doing my good deed for the day,” said Pansy. “Now I’m off like an owl.”

“You just got here, Pans! Have a drink!”

“Shan’t.” She smirked. “I’m meeting Longbottom’s granny and I promised I’d be on my best behavior.”

“So you’re going to hex her?”

“No, Theo!” She smacked at his arm. “I can actually be nice to a little old lady for an hour. I had lessons!”

“What about your mother?” asked Draco, looking up from his ledger.

“No, I can’t be nice to her for an hour,” Pansy said snidely.

“I meant,” said Draco, “when are you introducing Longbottom to your mother? You do know—” He raised an eyebrow. “You do know that Longbottom hunts Death Eaters. You know that, Pansy, right?”

She thrust out her chin, hand on hip. “So you’re suggesting,” she said archly, “that I can introduce them and let nature take its course?”

Draco and Theo traded glances, Theo’s face breaking into a wide grin.

“Just wondering if you’ll be helping Longbottom to clean house,” said Draco, sitting back.

“Of course a good wife knows how to clean,” sniffed Pansy (who did not know how to clean). “The Parkinson estate could use some airing out.”

"Good," said Theo firmly after a moment. "That's good, Pans. I'm glad you and Longbottom are working out."

"Thanks, Nott," she said, looking to Theo fondly. "He's just—"

Theo and Draco exchanged a wary look as Pansy's gaze softened. She sighed, as though reliving a recent memory.

Then she shook it off, flashing them a two-fingered salute before turning for the floo. "Laters, losers."

The fire flashed green, and Draco and Theo watched her go.

Theo turned to Draco, his face contemplative as he shifted on the settee. "Was Pansy ever nicer after you shagged her?" he asked.

"No," said Draco. "It made her meaner."

Theo looked at him seriously. "So Longbottom is actually good in bed."

"Better than fifteen-year-old me." Draco tossed down his quill and sighed.

"And fourteen-year-old you?" Theo sniggered.

"I was never fourteen," sniffed Draco. "But I don't think Longbottom's getting cuffed across the back of the head."

Theo snorted and took a sip of his firewhisky. "Tell Granger that's on the table and maybe she'll have a go at you."

"She only beats me in public," said Draco, picking his quill back up.

"Have you considered begging?"

"Theo, that's all I do!" said Draco, not sure whether he was joking. It felt like all he did. Evening hadn't fallen yet, late afternoon sunlight still slanting in from the leaded windows, but already the room felt gloomy.

Theo tapped the toe of his leather shoe on the Persian rug, one hand now occupied with the orange abomination's ruff. "Come here and get on your knees. Let me see your technique."

"I already know that will work on *you*."

"Everything works on me." Theo shrugged. "I'm an opportunist."

"And does anyone ever turn down the opportunity?" muttered Draco, closing his ledger.

Theo canted his head from side to side, running through his mental rolodex. "Some of the boys at school. Blaise. Flint beat me up. Didn't bother with Crabbe or Goyle." Then he grinned. "Not the girls, though."

Draco's eyes shifted to the flat-faced beast purring on Theo's lap. "Not—You would have told me."

Theo raised his eyebrows. "I would *not* have done. I would have let her shag me senseless in the restricted section, probably cried a little, and then we would have compared class notes and finished our essays and her last words to me would have been 'don't tell that prat Malfoy or I'll hex your bollocks off.'"

Draco's eyes narrowed. "Are you *saying*—"

"This is a theoretical exercise, mate. I'm just saying we both know you would have been horrid to her."

Draco's mind was already after the snitch, imagining Nott coming to him in the Slytherin common room and telling him he'd shagged Hermione Granger in the restricted section. Draco would have wanted to know *everything*. How had he managed it? Had he got her bra off? Were the tits as good as Draco suspected? (He still didn't know.) What did she sound like? Had she sucked him off first? He would have asked a million questions. And then he would have wanted to do it himself. No way he would have left that feather in Nott's cap.

No way she would have let him, either. It would have required a degree of bullying (on his part) and self-loathing (on her part) that Draco didn't think—well, yes, he was capable of it. Not now, apparently, because he still hadn't bedded his wife. But when he was fifteen? Jealous of Theo? In a violent rivalry with Potter? Curious about her? Yes. It simply hadn't occurred to him that she could be seduced. If Theo had proved it possible, he would have been off like a shot. He would have been all over her in that library. And then he would have rubbed it in Saint Potter's face that he had fucked the brains of the Gryffindorks'

Humiliating, to have to explain this. And a risk—it might give him ideas. "The Ministry is automatically depositing my salary into your vault—"

"Which is now your vault."

She didn't believe this. The Gringotts key was for show. A trap. He would use it to control her, punish her, or cut her off entirely. She needed access to her own money.

"I would like to maintain my own vault. Keep the salary I earn separate. But Gringotts will not let me do so without your authorization as the primary vault holder."

There it was. The salary she earned was a drop in the ocean of Malfoy's hereditary wealth. He didn't need it. But he was a bully who loved to thwart her. If he would swallow her blood to prove he owned her, what would he do now? Hermione braced for a lengthy fight—or a devastatingly short one.

"All right." He nodded, decisive. "We'll go tomorrow. At ten."

"All right," she said, relieved and wary. She hated being subject to his decrees like this. His quick acquiescence felt like a trick.

His eyes flicked down and up her body, back to her face. "Dress appropriately."

She sneered. "I'm sure the goblins appreciate dirty sweatpants."

His nose wrinkled. "I don't know what sweatpants are, but they sound disgusting."

"They *will be*," she promised.

She tossed her head, just to remind him that he hated her hair, and turned for her suite, Crookshanks warm against her.

"Listen, about your cunt—" he called after her, his tone surprisingly hopeful.

"Goodnight, Malfoy!" She did not look back.



As dusk fell, Neville Longbottom strode through the field from the apparition point at the edge of his property, his long legs covering the ground quickly, his cloak billowing out behind him. His wand was out, his eyes alert and scanning. A shock of hair had fallen over his forehead, and he smelled of blood and smoke and sweat as he neared Pansy, his face relaxing minutely when he saw her waiting outside the greenhouse doors.

She rose on tiptoe and he lowered his head to kiss her chastely. She could smell loam and spices and tea this close. "What have you been up to?" she asked, smiling.

"Seeing to some poachers," he said, smiling his faint smile in return.

"Draco says to tell you there's talk of a mandrake culling." She fussed with his cloak around the clasp, looked up at him.

"I've heard." He put his wand away, his eyes sharp on her. "And Malfoy wants a discount in exchange?"

"No." She snorted. "You should charge him more. He can't buy from anyone else now that you're with me."

"What if we were matched and you didn't like me?" Longbottom asked.

"Who says I like you, Neville Longbottom?" And she fisted the fabric she had been smoothing to pull him down to her mouth.

"Pansy," Longbottom murmured between wet, unhurried kisses, "we're going to go back to yours . . . and I'm going to fingerfuck your arse . . . while I shag you from behind."

She apparaeted them to her bedroom without breaking the kiss.

They landed roughly, her stepping back to find her balance beside her fourposter, surrounded by the familiar black floors, silvery-gray curtains, white orchids on the mirrored bureau. Longbottom dropped his cloak from his shoulders.

"Strip," he said gently, his hand moving to his belt buckle.

Hermione struggled out of her shoes, her dress, her bra—and considered her options as Crookshanks appeared to wend around her ankles. She wasn't going to talk to Malfoy in her pyjamas. She put her bra back on. It was cool in the Manor, no matter the season. She put on a thin camel-colored jumper that was probably cashmere and jeans she suspected cost ten times the price of her discount brand but looked exactly the same. (All right, they looked better.)

She stopped to examine the scar—now a streaky red instead of pink. She couldn't understand it. The ring's magic *acted* warm and friendly toward her, and it was clearly thrilled whenever she returned to the Manor, reunited with so much of Narcissa's Black magic. And yet it punished her with this stinging, irritated slur. She wouldn't admit that to Malfoy either.

She pulled down her sleeve. She needed to find a solution but going to healer after healer for nothing more than pitying looks or brusque dismissal when they told her there was nothing they could do—it was still too raw, years later. Ginny and Molly—they had wanted her to chase down every old wives' tale, every home remedy. Maybe this would be it! Maybe if she did this and this and this every day for months on end, she'd see a tiny, minuscule, easily imagined degree of change.

She couldn't do it. To obsess like that—it would be saying she had to get rid of the scar because she couldn't be acceptable with it. She couldn't give it that much weight. She couldn't let it crowd out the rest of her life and what she wanted to accomplish. She would drown, frantically, in despair or burn up with anger if she did. She had to decide—really decide—that it was permanent. End of.

And right now, after the notices she'd received and the owls she'd sent, she had a different problem. She picked up Crookshanks for moral support and left the dressing room. She would go to the shared sitting room and ask Pip to call Malfoy. Neutral territory.

It occurred to her that she didn't have anywhere else to meet Malfoy because she was avoiding exploring the rest of the Manor. Well. There was one rather obvious reason for that.

Hermione pushed through the doors to the shared sitting room to find Malfoy already there—lounging on his settee in his own jumper (black) and trousers (black), reading a book (a novel that was supposed to be quite good, actually). (Hermione wondered if she could borrow the book without asking him. Maybe if she asked Pip to steal it?) His white-blond hair fell over his forehead, his pointy nose balanced by his sharp jaw and chin. His hands looked distinctly masculine against the page—long-fingered, prominently veined, his knuckles and wrist bones nearly visible beneath translucent skin. The thin cashmere clung to the muscles of his shoulders and arms, his flat stomach. He looked... aesthetically pleasing.

He looked up and made a face. "Is that thing still here?"

"Never mind. He was a prat."

"Yes, Crookshanks continues to live here." She rounded her settee and approached to stand over him. "Why do you have glitter on your face?"

This was not how she had wanted to start this conversation.

"Pansy," he said.

She gave him a look that said, *And?*

"What do you want me to say?" He shrugged theatrically. "Pansy's cunt sprays glitter and she's been sitting on my face. Jealous?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "My cunt drips molten gold."

A surprised guffaw burst out of Malfoy and he sat up straight, throwing the book aside. Hermione had to clamp down hard on her face—pursing her lips into a frown and sighing heavily through her nose—to stop herself from laughing. *I win.*

Draco Malfoy had laughed *at* her before. She'd never *made* him laugh. It was extremely satisfying.

His eyes were sparkling, his focus entirely on her. "So—"

"No." She hefted Crookshanks a little higher against her chest. She needed to get this conversation back on track. And she was not going to wheedle. "I need you to go with me to Gringotts."

"Why?" A question, not a challenge. His face was back under control.

operation. He would have spread it all over school, on a badge, with a song he made the whole Slytherin common room rehearse.

So, yes, he would have been horrid to her.

And she knew it. This was why—it hit him now—this was why she wouldn't let him touch her now. She thought his interest was the set-up to him sneering at her if she let him. He could never prove otherwise if she didn't let him first. And she would never trust him enough to do that.

Draco groaned. He would never stop paying for his past.

"Have you tried crying?" asked Theo. "Girls love it."



Molly and Ron cheerfully slandered Malfoy, lampooning his ferret face, his crybaby cowardice, the ridiculous albino peacocks at the Manor—all greatest hits in the album of *Why Draco Malfoy Is the Worst*.

Hermione laughed along with them, holding her thick mug of tea, relishing the comfort and familiarity of the Burrow. She'd flooded from the Leaky and immediately changed into an old T-shirt and muggle leggings Ginny had left behind. (Thank Godric for spandex, because Ginny and Hermione did not have the same arse.) Ron had shown up not much later, looking for his Harpies scarf.

But the more that Ron and his mother tore apart this strawman Malfoy, the more Hermione had to resist an urge to correct the details they got wrong.

"Posh prat afraid you'll get your hands on his precious gold, is he?" snorted Ron.

"More like offended I don't want it!" Hermione said with a laugh.

Ron wrinkled his nose, his eyes scanning her, the ring on her hand.

"Narcissa fled to France, did she?" Molly scoffed. "Too bigoted to be in the same house as you. Probably thinks you're going to steal her silver. Dirty her silk upholstery."

She'd had the same thought, but Hermione could only huff a laugh. Molly was trying to tell Hermione that she was on her side, but sometimes when she talked like this, Hermione could only hear Molly reminding her how repulsive other people found her.

She thought of Narcissa's carefully worded welcome letter, its hope that she and Malfoy might one day find mutual respect. A sadly low bar for a marriage but Hermione was glad Narcissa hadn't written flowery words about love or pretended that she and Malfoy could even meet this bar now. Hermione felt a twist in her chest at the idea that Narcissa might understand her arranged marriage in some way. In a way—a horrible thought—that Hermione's own mother would not.

Hermione tried to imagine telling her mother that she had been forced to marry her bigoted school bully turned fascist wartime enemy and that she had done it because she could not bear to leave the world where that war had happened. That the magic she couldn't stand to lose was now inextricably bound up in the trauma she could never heal—and she had still chosen that over the muggle world. The world her parents lived in.

She could picture the incredulous expression on her mother's face. ("Honey, what do you *mean* they're forcing you to marry a dark wizard? Just *come home* and go to university!")

Hermione thought of Narcissa's circumspect expressions of regret for what had happened to Hermione during the war, for Hermione's less than felicitous memories of Malfoy at school. Her assurances that Malfoy would be a dutiful husband to Hermione now. Narcissa thought the sun shone out of Draco's arse and yet she wrote as though he would need to win Hermione's favor, without a word about Hermione not being good enough for him. Old fashioned wedding platitudes, Hermione supposed.

"Lucius and Narcissa must be apoplectic at the idea of Draco having a child with you," Molly mused.

"Mum?" groaned Ron, setting down his mug.

"She's a grown woman, Ronald! Living with her husband. Things happen. When I was your age—"

"Yes, yes, Mum! When you were my age, you already had all fourteen of us." Ron rolled his eyes. Then, with a pointed look: "Mione wouldn't let him bully her into anything."

"Probably move to disinherit, second he got you up the duff," sniffed Molly, fussing with a tea towel.

Any and all children conceived during the marriage shall bear the Malfoy surname.

It is my dearest wish that the Manor may someday become a place of security and contentment for you and your children. My mother hopes we'll fuck in every room of the house and twice in the kitchens and be well on our way to producing an heir...

"Probably," said Hermione.

She'd impulsively come to the Burrow because, standing in Flourish & Botts, Hermione had felt the crushing weight in the center of her chest of knowing—again—that she no longer had parents. It was a sudden sensation of unreality—a moment in which she couldn't believe that they were gone and that this fact still felt so raw, so freshly unbelievable, even now.

In her terror and desperation during the war, she had obliterated her parents' memories of her so thoroughly that they could never be recovered. She had been so determined to keep them safe that she had lost them forever, so afraid of them experiencing pain that she had heaped a lifetime's worth upon herself. Hermione had to remember and accept every day that she had been orphaned by her own hand. Like her scar, it was a reality she could not become obsessed with changing. It would only make things worse. But there were moments when she thought the weight in her chest would consume her like a black hole.

Hermione had reminded herself that she didn't have *her* mother, but she had *a* mother. She'd come to see Molly. And Molly had hugged her and hustled about, helping her find clothes to change into, and made her a cup of tea. And now Molly and Ron were busy reassuring Hermione that she was the best and Malfoy was the worst, insulting her just as frequently as they did Malfoy along the way, and Hermione tried hard to feel comforted.



Pansy was straddling Longbottom on a hand-embroidered loveseat in his alarmingly rustic stone cottage, kissing his neck. His hands were at her ribs, firm and steady as he murmured, "Pansy . . . impressive, imposing Pansy. Petrifying . . . terrifying . . . mesmerizing Pansy . . ."

She sighed happily and licked the line of his jaw.

"Gran liked you," he said.

She smiled and kissed his mouth. "I told you I can be polite." But then her smile faltered. "Neville," she said.

"Hmm?"

Longbottom shifted to look her in the eyes and suddenly she was holding her breath. "I don't want my mother at the wedding."

"Then she's not invited."

"But she'll be upset." She could feel her brow furrowing.

"Those are her feelings, not yours," he said evenly. She had her palms flat against his chest. He was warm and solid and still smelled faintly of the greenhouse, even after dinner.

"But what will people say?"

"That's their business."

"Hmmm." She chewed her lip.

"You already know what you want," he said, his face calm and open to her. "We'll do what you want."

She nodded but she could sense her eyebrows drawing together, her jaw tensing. She knew it was that simple but it didn't *feel* that simple, not when it came to her mother.

"Your charm is working." He touched his finger to the dark red lipstick on her bottom lip. "Clever, skillful Pansy . . ."

She opened her lips and licked his finger. He pushed it into her mouth so she could suck on it.

"Pansy," he said gently. "I'm going to take out my cock and fuck your mouth. Would that help you to stop worrying?"

She nodded around his finger.

"Leech." Draco gave him a dead-eyed stare and swept from the room.



Draco should be back at his desk after today's errands but his meeting with Leech had put him in a foul mood and he'd been happy to find a distraction. Now he lounged in bed, idly feeding the orange demon pieces of diced pheasant as he studied a muggle lingerie catalogue. Pansy had owled it over, spelled to release a puff of silver glitter that formed a rude gesture when Draco opened it. He'd spent half an hour scouring it. Pip would either be furious he'd allowed it to happen or thrilled to have a new challenge.

The kneazle hairball butted Draco's wrist. "You are a greedy, ungrateful beast," muttered Draco, handing over another piece of pheasant, allowing the rough tongue to lick his finger.

He turned a page. Garters. Straps. Thongs. Cut-outs. It was obscene. Draco spelled it all Slytherin green in the muggle photos to better consider what he would be buying his wife for every foreseeable gift-giving occasion.

He lingered on a cupless bra. He wanted to sit her on the edge of one of his low sitting room chairs, kneel between her legs, his thumb all the way in her cunt, and lick and suck and bite her nipples while they got harder and harder and she sighed and moaned and squirmed on his hand, her fingers woven into his hair. "Good boy. Good—like that. Good."

He wanted her to straddle him in the chair, bouncing on his cock while he cupped her breasts with his hands, pinching and twisting her nipples, and she viciously pulled his hair. "Be good for me, Draco. Be good."

He wanted to pick her up, her legs wrapped around him, his cock buried in her to the hilt, carry her to his bed, and fuck her hard and fast, his fingers digging into her hips, her head thrown back, her hands gripping his forearms, her breasts and throat fully exposed to him, her panting too rapidly to speak.

The kneazle demon's expression was judgmental in the extreme.

"I'm not going to wank while you watch," sneered Draco.

Draco flipped the page. Why did he have a wife he couldn't fuck? It was like being thirteen again. A little exciting but mostly exhausting. He wanted to be exhausted from fucking her.

His mood soured as he wondered who she was wanking to. Old memories of Weaselbee? (There was his erection gone.) Someone at work? The boy he'd hired was too young and almost certainly gay. But he was pretty. Draco was covered in scars and two tattoos that reminded her on sight that she loathed him. He couldn't imagine the Golden Girl ever looking at the Dark Mark with anything but revulsion.

Unless she found a way to break the bond, he would live the rest of his life with a wife he couldn't fuck. Forever thirteen—angry, randy, wanking in his room when he wasn't acting out.

Draco felt the wards sigh and flush with warmth from the direction of her private floo. He turned to the orange abomination. "Our mistress is home. Go!"

The animal gave him a last disdainful look before leaping from his bed and darting for the door.

Draco sighed and tossed the catalogue aside. He might as well complete his reenactment of a thirteen-year-old with a crush. He picked up a novel and headed for the shared sitting room, in case she might happen to pass by while he pretended to read.



Hermione stalked toward her dressing room, tearing off her light summer robes as she went. She knew she had to find Malfoy but she was dreading it and she could not stand to be in this dress one moment longer. It had been a whipsaw day. She had been frustrated with Ron and Harry, frustrated with Malfoy, frustrated with Shacklebolt—and, no, just because she was the common denominator did not mean she was the problem—and then it had been a wonderful afternoon with Francesco, who was already such a help. (She wouldn't admit that to Malfoy.) And then, *then*—

Hermione yanked open her office door to find that the day's howlers had arrived. Half screamed she was a nasty muggle slag who didn't deserve Malfoy and his millions. The other half yelled she was a sell-out who should have killed herself before agreeing to marry Malfoy. Hermione incendioed them all and the tulips for good measure.



Draco wanted another wank after standing so close to his wife's heat, watching her eyes widen, her breath catch, her unconsciously lick her lips when he talked about his fingers and her cunt. But he'd have to settle for a tense meeting with an unsavory business associate who might, at any point, sell him out for an insultingly low price. Draco walked with purpose over the slick cobblestones of Knockturn Alley, past Mulpepper's entrance to a narrow, unmarked door. A quiet aberto and he slipped inside, moving past dusty shelves cluttered with clustered specimen bottles to the dimly lit office in back.

Leech, Mulpepper's son-in-law, looked up from his invoices and gestured for Draco to sit in the armchair across from his scarred wooden desk. The fire was anemic but smoking, filling the densely packed room with an unpleasant fug.

Draco settled lightly on the threadbare upholstery, waiting until Leech had lowered his quill and tucked his long, greasy hair behind his ears.

"I'll need pearl dust and Jobberknoll feathers, enough to brew in bulk."

Leech pursed his lips, making some internal calculation. "I can do that weight this week. I'll send it to the Manor?"

Draco nodded, reaching for his galleons.

"If you'll be wanting mandrake, better to buy sooner than later," said Leech, making a notation in his ledger. "Prices have been low due to oversupply but I'm hearing there will be a market correction. A, ah, culling."

"Longbottom won't allow that," said Draco sharply.

Leech shrugged. "Longbottom can't be everywhere," he said but it was without feeling. He was merely a messenger passing along a tip. "By the way . . ."

Leech hesitated and Draco felt his face harden as he prepared to be displeased.

"I am approached from time to time . . . And, with recent events, there have been inquiries . . ."

"As to?" Draco's tone was neutral.

Leech took a fortifying breath. "Hermione Granger is a young, powerful witch who has . . . always been a subject of some fascination for . . . certain factions. As you know."

"I *do* know," said Draco.

"Well, as you can imagine, there is interest in anything that might . . . become available." Leech shuffled a petrified rat paperweight from one stack of invoices to another before meeting Draco's gaze. "A finger? Toes? Of course there is always a demand for hair, fingernails, teeth."

"Of course," said Draco. Leech was speaking simple truths about the potions black market.

"And with your new access," said Leech, picking up speed now, "there have, naturally, been inquiries as to whether you'll be making any parts available. Of course, with Ministry scrutiny, I believe it's understood you might want to keep her largely intact. But, with potent ingredients, even the smallest quantity is of value—as you know. Bidding would be, ah, quite high."

"And you would, naturally, be taking a commission," said Draco levelly.

"Only if I brokered the deal," Leech hurried to assure him, moving the petrified rat back to its original pile of parchment. "I understand you may be approached by third parties independent of any agreement we reach. And of course there are other brokers in town, though I would ask you consider me after the other services I've been able to provide." A glance up, hopeful.

"Of course," said Draco, rising to leave. "I appreciate your bringing this to my attention, Leech. But I currently have plans for all my wife's body parts, and I won't be sharing. Let the inquiring parties know this is a monopoly they'll find impossible to break."

Leech nodded quickly as Draco dropped the galleons on the far edge of his desk. "Mr. Malfoy."

"All right." He slowly pulled his finger from her lips and leaned forward and kissed her, open-mouthed and unhurried. Then he held her to him as he stood, her legs wrapping around his waist, her arms around his neck. He carried her to the bedroom.

She kneeled on the bed while he stood beside it, kissing her, undoing the dress's corset front one hook-and-eye closure at a time. He worked the skirt up to her hips and then pulled the dress off over her head, tossing it aside. His calloused hands were on her breasts—she was unbuttoning his shirt—his hand dropped to touch her clit through the thin silk of her knickers while he kissed her.

"On your back," he said quietly. "Head off the bed."

She squirmed out of the knickers, biting her lip, watching him strip out of his shirt, his shoes and socks, his trousers and pants, with sure hands. His cock was hard and glistening.

She tossed her hair, shivery with anticipation, and wriggled into place, on her back across the bed, her knees up, her head hanging off the edge.

The blood rushed to her head, a strange sensation. She licked her lips and reached between her legs to rub her clit.

Then his fingers were on her neck. He stroked her throat, his fingertips light on her skin, his other hand on his cock. She sighed, sinking into herself, his touch playing over her throat, down to her clavicle, and back up. He ran his fingers over her chin, to her lips. She opened her mouth and his fingertips slid in, gently pulled down her lower lip, slick with saliva.

Then his fingers withdrew and his cock was there and her tongue was curling up to lick the pre-come off its head, her own head heavy with blood, her clit buzzing with the fast, steady pressure of her hand. She licked his cock and he slowly pressed it into her mouth and she relaxed her jaw and concentrated on breathing through her nose.

His cock filled her mouth and her tongue moved automatically, instinctively, swirling around him. She didn't have to think. She barely had to move. She just rubbed her clit and breathed through her nose and stretched her jaw, her lips falling open naturally as she hung her head off the bed and he stood and slid his cock into her mouth and down the smooth line of her throat.

He leaned over her, his hands on her breasts, fingertips grazing her hard nipples as he fucked her mouth and she touched her clit, and everything else fell away. She could barely think or breathe at all and it was perfect. Then his scarred hands were moving to her cunt and his fingers were sliding into her as he leaned over her, fucking her mouth faster, pumping his fingers into her. He was fucking her mouth and her cunt and then she was coming, going still, shuddering, and he clamped his hand over her cunt and stopped moving while everything contracted and then spiraled back out in waves. Then he was pulling himself from her carefully, pushing and pulling to spin her around on the bed so he could drop down and eat her out and then she was boneless and he was standing, fucking her hard and fast at the edge of the bed, his hands on her hips, then bracing him as he leaned over her and fucked her until he came.

He was breathing hard, shivering. "Merlin, Pansy," he muttered, hunched over her. Her lips were against his throat, his heartbeat fast under them.

He climbed into the bed then and pulled her up with him to lie with their heads at the pillows, and when he leaned over her to kiss her, his hand on her stomach, she put her fingertip on his chin and said, "Neville, tell me I can't invite my mother to the wedding."

"You can't invite your mother to the wedding, Pansy," he said solemnly.

"All right," she said. "It's been decided."

*

SUNDAY JULY 20, 2003

The Holyhead Harpies box was full of gingers—Susan Bones Weasley, Ron Weasley, George Weasley—and Potter. Draco had been in fistfights with every man here and had stomped Potter's face

before Potter sliced open his torso so badly he'd nearly bled out. Mentally, Draco settled in for a lovely afternoon.

He made his way down the steps to the first row, where his wife's hair was visible front and center, Potter on the far side of her. George was the first to notice him, a wicked grin slowly spreading across his face. The Harpies were playing Falmouth—Draco's club—and he was wearing black trousers, a black button-down, and his Falcons scarf, though it was a bit too warm for it.

Draco paused at the bottom of the steps. "Mrs. Weasley. Weasley. Weasley. Potter. Darling."

His wife's head had whipped around at the first sound of his voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I was invited," he said simply, sliding in beside her.

Her head swiveled back to Potter, who raised his eyebrows in an expression Draco took to mean *who do you think?* So his wife was not merely surprised he had shown up after their latest fight—Potter hadn't mentioned Ginevra's meddling to her at all. Brilliant. Draco enjoyed it any time he caught Saint Potter being a coward.

His wife turned back to him, glaring at the white and gray scarf in a sea of Harpies green and gold. "Malfoy, we're here to support Ginny."

"Who?" he said blankly.

The public announcer's sonorus crackled to life and Draco realized he had arrived just in time.

"The Holyhead Harpies would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to Mrs. Hermione Granger Malfoy for her generous donation of Nimbus 3000 brooms to the entire team. Please show your appreciation for Mrs. Malfoy, who is here with us today!"

His wife smiled weakly and looked around in confusion as every head in the stadium turned to her, the crowd cheering raucously as a smaller contingent of Falcons fans booed.

Draco allowed himself the faintest smirk as he smoothed the lay of his scarf. With a few owls sent yesterday afternoon and a trifling number of galleons, he had just bombarded her moral high ground.

She didn't even realize it yet. His wife was about to learn what it was like having money. People wanted you to spend it and then resented you when you did. They were too far above the general admission stands for Draco to hear the muttered comments, but he could well imagine them: "Ooh la la—fancy." "Must be nice, being made of gold." "So the Harpies just get an unfair advantage, then?"

In the box, George guffawed. "Good one, Hermione! Using the Ferret's funds to support the right team for once!"

"Nimbus 3000! Those aren't even commercially released yet!" A keen observer, that Ron.

Potter's eyes narrowed and he watched Draco as he said, "That's a very Malfoy thing to do, Hermione."

"Well, she is a Malfoy now," said Draco, leaning past her to look at Potter.

His wife narrowed her eyes at him too.

The teams had taken to the pitch for pre-match warm-ups, and Ginevra swept up to the box—she was good on a broom, he could admit it. (To himself—he would never say it out loud.) She leaned over the box's railing to kiss Potter to the crowd's cheers—then, with her back to the pitch, favored Draco with a series of obscene gestures that had her brothers chortling. Draco returned the two-finger salute—boos from the Harpies fans—but he was *not* going to do that with his tongue in public.

Ginevra winked and sped off, her green uniform cloak streaming behind her. Draco felt a moment of visceral pain, radiating from his chest into his throat and choking him, he missed playing quidditch so badly. The camaraderie of the Slytherin team, walking out in his leathers in the chilly morning air, the smell of the pristine pitch wet with dew, the spike of adrenaline when the crowd roared . . . He felt sick with nostalgia. He would never be that young and full of expectation again.

The match started and Draco settled into a campaign of annoying the ever-loving piss out of his wife. His best tactic was to adopt a patient tone and narrate the entire game to her as though explaining it to a slow first year who had never heard of quidditch. Given how little attention she'd paid in the stands at school—yes, he'd glanced over every once in a while—he was confident this was largely useful information.

fabric over her hips and fetched her new secretary—when she saw Shacklebolt approaching in the corridor where she still stood.

She immediately closed her office door behind her, sealing Francesco inside. Shacklebolt was rarely seen on level four. She knew he was coming for her, and she was not yet ready to discuss her office's illegal extension or her private employee.

"Hermione," he said with a noncommittal smile as he approached. "A word?"

"Of course, Minister." Hermione gestured toward her office door—a bluff. "Would you like to sit—"

"No, no, I won't take up your time," said Shacklebolt, nodding in the direction of the lift. "Walk with me."

"Of course, Minister." Hermione fell in beside him. "How can I be of help?"

"Hermione . . ." Shacklebolt frowned as though in thought, but Hermione was sure he knew exactly what he'd planned to say. "I believe I just saw Draco Malfoy—"

"Oh?" said Hermione, as though she hadn't.

"I hope," said the Minister carefully, "that Mr. Malfoy is not interfering with your work at the Ministry."

"Of course he's interfering!" The words were out before Hermione could consider the cost of correcting her superior. "He's a controlling, manipulative bully who doesn't believe I belong here!"

"Is that what you think?" Shacklebolt's hands were clasped casually behind him, but his tone was crisp.

She did think that. Draco Malfoy had made his objections to her general existence well known. He must hate her making policy for the wizarding world. (But, then, why had he hired her a secretary who was afraid to go near him, instead of a Slytherin saboteur?)

Shacklebolt looked ahead. "I know Mr. Malfoy does not agree with what we are attempting to accomplish here. There will be hold-outs—those who cannot see past their own perceived status to find the greater good. I believe reconciliation will succeed despite their attempts to twist it toward their own ends. But, in the meantime, it would be inappropriate for Mr. Malfoy to use his connection to you to influence Ministry business."

"Minister, I completely agree," said Hermione, her frustration growing. "But I'm at a loss as to why you're telling me this. I'm not his parole auror. I'm not responsible for his actions."

Shacklebolt's head had turned sharply toward her, his eyes assessing. Hermione felt there was something he wasn't sharing with her. "Of course not, Hermione. Though part of reconciliation is the hope that intermarriage will encourage our divided factions to find common ground."

"I can assure you, Minister," said Hermione, "my husband and I have no common ground and I am the last person who influences him."

Tell me what to do and I'll do it, Mrs. Malfoy.

"So you say," said Shacklebolt, turning to face her as they came to a halt before the lift. "Hermione, you're the wizarding world's hope for the future. I know you'll continue to do everything in your power to improve our society. I know you would never allow your work to be compromised."

Hermione nodded as the Minister disappeared behind the lift doors, but internally she was fuming. How dare he stick her with Malfoy and then complain that Malfoy was there. He didn't like seeing Malfoy in the halls when she had to *live* with the git? And the transparent manipulation. *I know you'll do everything in your power to improve our society*: an order. *I know you'll never allow your work to be compromised*: a warning. *The wizarding world's hope for the future*. Hermione scoffed as she marched back down the corridor to her office. What about *her* future?

In Hermione's experience, people told her she was smart right before they revealed how much they resented her for it. Shacklebolt wanted to tell her she was important while he treated her like chattel. Merlin, what if Malfoy *had* chained her to his bed? What had Shacklebolt done to prevent it? It was godsdamned *Malfoy* who had insisted on betrothal protections.

"Malfoy, about last night, I want to make clear that you cannot assault me and then just buy me a desk, and flowers, and—" She flapped her hand toward the hall. "A person. My not being in a position to refuse these things doesn't mean I find your behavior acceptable."

Malfoy turned more fully toward her, his eyes bright. "Oh, so it's better your way? You assault me and I don't even get flowers."

Had he made a point? She'd have to revisit it. For now, she was exasperated. "Malfoy, flowers are not an apology."

"What's an apology?" he asked, watching her.

"An apology—"

He stared at her.

"You don't know what an apology is?"

"No, I've never heard one," said Malfoy flatly. He was drifting toward her. "Can you give me an example, so I know what one sounds like?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "For *example*, if I were to say I'm sorry I broke your nose."

"If you were to say that, I'd tell you no need, we're not here for apologies."

"I am very much here for apologies!" Hermione snapped.

"Then, by all means, keep apologizing," he said sweetly, taking a step closer.

"You know what, Malfoy? Maybe I will! Maybe I'll be the bigger person," she said. "Maybe I'll *model* good behavior."

"But I'm not good . . ." he murmured, stepping into her space.

"I'm sorry I broke your nose. And punched you in the chest. And elbowed you. And shoved you. And tried to slap you. And would have hexed you. And thought several times about the best way to murder you. Physical violence is not the answer, and I *am* better than that," said Hermione firmly, looking down, trying to believe it.

"Oh, but I'm *not* better than that," cooed Malfoy as he leaned closer. "And I'm not sorry. I'm not sorry I cut up Marcus for touching you. I'm not sorry I put my mouth on you. And I'm not sorry I said those things." He was watching his own hand as he reached out and slowly twisted one of her curls around his finger. "Because I do want to bury my fingers in your cunt while I suck on your clit." He looked at her then. The ghost of a smile. "I'm just being honest."

Hermione's chest and back were tingling. She knew if, right now, he pushed his fingers into her knickers, into *her*, he'd find her cunt was wet.

"You wouldn't know what to do with me if I let you," she said, looking him in the eye.

"I wouldn't, love, I wouldn't. You'd have to give me . . . very . . . specific . . . instructions." His lips were parted, his mouth open as if in anticipation. "Would you do that?" he murmured. "For me?"

"Why would I bother?" she said. "You never do anything I say."

"I don't? It feels like that's all I do to me." He watched his hand slowly unspool the curl. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Stop calling me that."

"We're not on a first-name basis, love." Citrus. Cloves. He was very close.

"Take this ring off me."

"That wouldn't be safe for you." He tugged on the curl and a shiver ran down her spine at the sudden pull at her scalp, the low heat in his voice.

"Get out," she said, her voice breathier than she liked.

"Immediately, dear." And then he was gone.



Hermione had just ushered Francesco back into her office—Malfoy had closed the door behind him when he left, as though knowing she needed a minute alone to stand with her eyes closed, the heel of her thumb pressed hard against her clit through her skirt, refusing to go further, before she straightened the

"I know that, Malfoy," she said through clenched teeth, but soon Potter—that secret smart arse—was chiming in with a sly smile, and then it was an open pitch for George and Ron, Susan tsking at Ron.

He was at a professional quidditch match, mercilessly teasing a witch he wanted to mercilessly fuck, rubbing elbows with George Weasley—Salazar, he'd admired the twins when he was young, all the Slytherins had—and beginning to have a very good day, when Susan Bones screamed and Draco's face exploded with pain. His head cracked back—

A bludger to the face is what you need to complete this ensemble.

Had the fucking She-Weasel set him up?

His head whipped forward and then he had slipped from his seat to one knee, his hands around his destroyed face—how many times could these fuckers break his godsdamned nose?—swearing violently.

"Malfoy! Merlin, show me—Malfoy, let me see—"

His wife was standing, bending over him, and then her fingers were prying at his and he was screaming at her about her godsdamned troll-fucking halfwit backstabber ginger friends trying to kill him and pushing away her hands—their slapping at each other ridiculously while his eyes blackened and the blood from his nose drained down his throat—and then she grabbed him by the hair and *yanked* his head back.

"Fuck you!" he shouted, his hands falling to clutch at her legs—hard kneecaps under muggle denim—as she stood over him, one hand fisted painfully in his ruined hair. His mouth was open, his chin thrust forward—his head was wrenched back, he couldn't breathe through his broken nose—and he glared up at her.

Her brown eyes were flecked with gold. Her curls cascaded over her shoulders. She looked annoyed, frustrated, scared. Scared for him?

Tell me you love me, he thought stupidly. *Tell me I'm worthless. Tell me you want me anyway. Tell me I'm yours.*

"I hate you," he said.

She snarled and pulled his hair harder—the pain exquisitely sharp over the throbbing of his face—and lowered her face closer, closer, her eyes locked on his, looking down her nose at him, her mouth nearing his, until she said, slowly and clearly, "I . . . hate . . . you . . . too."

He sighed, his shoulders dropping, all his breath ghosting from his open mouth.

The heat and emotion radiating from her in that moment felt so powerful, and it was all—all her attention—focused on him, right where he wanted it. He basked in it, gazing up at her. This was what he wanted. All of it. He was real. She saw him.

"Godsdammit, Malfoy," she hissed. "Stop eyefucking me."

He smiled lazily, and then she was thrusting his head away in disgust, releasing her grip on his hair as he let himself fall back in a heap.

"Is he concussed?" Susan Bones asked. The Weasel King and The Only Good Weasley Left were making a bet on something. Potter, he assumed, was being useless. Draco took a moment to lean his head against the hard wooden steps leading to the back of the box and look up at the sky.

"Someone has to fix Malfoy's face." Weaselbee's voice.

"I'll do it." George, sounding eager.

A chorus of "No!"

Here was his wife's face. "You do it, love," he said. "I don't trust these cretins."

General outrage.

"Trust that I don't care what happens to your face," said his lovely wife. A perfunctory effort, he thought.

"I trust that your ego won't let you do a bad job of it," he said, and her huff in response told him he was right. *I know you.*

"I'll take Malfoy home," she said wearily.

General protest.

"But, dear, you love quidditch," said Draco, earning himself a sour look.

"I'll get him past the pitch's wards and apparate him back to the Manor," she said firmly, bending to retrieve her beaded bag.

"Be careful!" called Susan Bones, happy to see him go.



Malfoy shook her off. She'd got him out of the Harpies box, through the press and stray spectators—everyone gaping at the blood down his face as she jerked him along by his arm, his mood worsening with each step—and side-alonged him to their shared sitting room. Now he stumbled toward his suite.

"Get back here and let me fix your face," she called after him.

"No," he called back, which she took to mean: *Yes, but I'm going to make you chase me.*

Hermione felt just bad enough for Malfoy's nose to do it.

He flung open a door and disappeared inside, stalking past his sitting room and into a bedroom much, much larger than Hermione's own. Green walls so dark they were nearly black, a pile of books on the settee by the fireplace, black wood, gleaming silver . . . all suffused as deeply and subtly with his personal magic as it was by the scents of citrus and cloves and dragonskin leather. The Black magic in her ring warmed. The scar on her left forearm was burning and stinging.

His Falcons scarf was on the floor. Ahead of her, Malfoy reached back to his shoulder blades to grab a fist full of his black shirt and then pulled the whole thing over his head, stripping it off in two motions and making his hair stand on end. His undershirt had rucked up with it, and Hermione eyed the patch of exposed skin at his lower back, so pale and even it looked uncanny. And then he was swearing and stripping off the undershirt, now blood-stained, throwing it to the rug as he went. Hermione watched the muscles in his lean back and shoulders rippling as he moved, her heart rate speeding up.

Malfoy shucked off his shoes—black dragonskin, the toes as pointy as his chin—leaving them in his wake. And then he was nearing his bed, her trailing behind, saying, "Malfoy, wait. Get back here."

"No," he said petulantly. "This day is utter shite. Going back to bed."

"Malfoy—"

And then he was stopped before her, taking off his trousers with rough, impatient hands, Hermione's breath catching as he dropped them, stripped off his socks, and prepared to climb into bed in only his pants.

"Malfoy—"

He turned abruptly, and—Hermione didn't mean to—she made a sound. The left side of his chest, his ribs, trailing down his torso, scattered across his abs—he was covered in slashing scars. The Dark Mark hovered on the edge of her vision but her eyes were locked on the damage that Harry had done to him.

Malfoy saw her eyes tracking the raised, broken lines—white on white—and smirked, his nose broken, his lips bloody, bruises forming around his eyes. "You know, love, I'm also The Boy Who Lived."

Then he turned and ripped back the coverlet—Godric, he was dramatic—and climbed on to snowy white sheets, dripping blood. The bed was big enough for four and he didn't stop until he'd flung himself down in the middle, forcing her to follow if she wanted to heal him.

Did she want to heal him? He was right—her ego wouldn't allow her not to solve a problem when she could. And those sectumsempra scars . . . They weren't her fault. She didn't *do* that. But she was shaken. She hadn't known . . .

Hermione didn't want to feel bad for Malfoy. She wasn't going to spend the rest of her life looking at his poorly healed nose.

She sighed, kicked off her shoes, and climbed into his bed.

He had his head thrown back against a too-soft pillow, breathing through his mouth, his eyes closed, right hand at his chest. A miserable ferret-faced crybaby. Hermione settled next to his right side on her knees, sitting back on her heels. She slung down her bag and extracted a pain draught, draught of dreamless sleep, bruise removal paste, and essence of dittany. Only some of the supplies she habitually

"According to *Wizarding World News*, I'm dueling Potter for the privilege of fucking the She-Weasel," he said, eyeing her new secretary with an air of disinterest. He looked at her then. "As if I want *two* Gryffindor wives when one is quite—"

"Enough, Malfoy. I presume you remember Francesco?" Hermione gestured like a gameshow hostess to the young man who had stilled in Malfoy's presence.

Zabin's distant cousin was young, eager, and shockingly good looking. (Maybe not so shocking, Hermione considered, if he was related to Blaise.) He had appeared at her office door at 9 a.m. sharp, and after a brief but intense internal debate spent looking at the files piled on her desk, Hermione had started calculating how many tasks she could delegate to him before Shacklebolt noticed.

It's worth it to see you break with Shacklebolt.

Hermione was getting tired of everyone assuming she wouldn't break the rules.

"We've not yet met in person," said Malfoy. "Francesco. I see you've made it to Mrs. Malfoy's office."

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy!" Francesco straightened, seemingly reanimated by the chance to make a good impression. "Thank you again for the opportunity. What an honor to work with Hermione Granger. One can't attend Hogwarts without hearing of her exploits, especially at the Battle of Hogwarts!"

Hermione saw Francesco blanche as everyone in the room considered Malfoy's exploits at the Battle of Hogwarts.

"Quite," said Malfoy dryly. "You'll have ample opportunity to flatter Mrs. Malfoy, as you'll be working at her sole directive. In addition to Mrs. Malfoy's office here, you will have access to the Manor's main floo. If you displease Mrs. Malfoy or enter her private rooms, I will castrate you."

Francesco froze, his eyes darting to Hermione.

"Malfoy is joking," she said. Godric, he was such a bully.

"In fact, I am not."

"Malfoy has a terrible sense of humor."

"In fact, I have *no* sense of humor." He pointedly examined his fingernails.

Hermione snorted despite herself as Francesco looked stricken.

In the moment, she could see Malfoy through Francesco's eyes—Death Eater, war criminal, too angry to be predictable, too rich to face consequences. Someone to fear.

There had been moments with Malfoy when Hermione had flinched, it was true. But she had known Malfoy since they were eleven years old. She'd seen him squabbling over candy in the Great Hall. Quietly pleased while brewing a tricky potion. Pretending to be hurt so Pansy would fuss over him. Acting the fool so his friends would laugh. She'd seen him fearful, humiliated, humbled, pathetic. She would never be afraid of Malfoy the way Francesco was, and remembering all these reasons why, Hermione felt a sudden flash of—surely not nostalgia.

It was a confusing sensation she increasingly felt—the disconnect between the war veterans and those too young to have been there. The war was certainly not something she and Malfoy had done *together*—a wave of disgust there. It had not been *good*. But to Francesco, everything she had experienced back then—Godric, just the feeling of being there, that she could never fully explain—it was an idea, like Malfoy was an idea. And to Malfoy, she knew, it was real—as real as it was to her.

Malfoy glanced over with what looked like satisfaction, as though they had just—Godric forbid—shared a private joke. *Acting the fool so his friends would laugh.*

"Francesco, can you give me a moment to speak to my horrible husband alone, please?"

Francesco scrambled out of the room—Hermione rising to shut the door behind him—and Malfoy looked *inordinately* pleased as he stood in her office with his hands in his pockets, taking up space.

"What's the matter with you, then?"

"Admitting I'm your husband now?" He gave her a smug little grin. He was vibrating with pleasure.

For fuck's sake. Did he think she was acknowledging ownership? He couldn't be jealous of the kid he had hired himself. She stayed stood in front of her desk—she wasn't going to sit and let him loom over her—and plowed ahead with the statement she'd intended to make since she'd opened her office door that morning.

"That's ridiculous. This is just a little scuffle between old school chums."

"Exactly. So why make life difficult for yourself by choosing the wrong side?"

"Malfoy's going to cut ties over a mudblood?"

"He's going to cut ties over disrespect. That's the second time you've insulted Mrs. Malfoy, Adrian. I've counted because I'm under orders to report back—I'm just a lackey, you know, Adrian. I don't control what kind of tantrum Draco has next." He smiled with condescending fondness at Pucey's resentful expression.

Theo stood and vanished his untouched cup of tea and honey. "Give Daphne my best, lover." He tucked his hands into his pockets and made his way out of the tea house, whistling.



Draco had come all over his stomach, groaning with relief and then frustration because he didn't have his wand. Dick in hand and a boy was still impotent without his wand to clean himself up with. He bathed again, dressed again (black on black on black—never let the Ministry say they hadn't got the Death Eater they'd ordered), and made his way to Potter's grody office.

Now he was stood here, acting as though Potter was the valet he had paid to park his wand with overnight. He spun it between his fingers—reunited at last—and debated tossing Scarhead a tip, just to see his face.

Potter fixed him with a look that said he was already regretting the words to come and was warning Draco not to push him to something much worse than regret. "I'm meant to tell you . . . You and Hermione are invited to Ginny's summer league match on Sunday."

"Mrs. Malfoy does not enjoy quidditch," said Draco, nonplussed.

"Well—" Potter pulled a face. "Maybe not as much as—"

"She reads during matches, Potter. It's a disgrace."

Potter gave him a sharp look, and Draco affected an expression that said this was common knowledge.

Potter raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. "In any case, Ginny insists, and I quote, 'the Ferret could stand to see what a real seeker looks like.' I want it known this is against my strong and vocal objections."

"So at last, Potter, we can say the same thing."

"What, 'my wife doesn't listen to me?'" Potter rolled his eyes at the cliché.

"No," said Draco, smirking. "Ginevra Weasley *loves* me."

"*Ahh,*" choked Potter, revulsion passing across his face. He waved Draco away. "Leave so I can oblivate the last five seconds of my life in peace."

"Tell the ginger bludger I'd *love* to come for her," said Draco over his shoulder as he made his exit. A jinx just missed, hitting the wall level with his head. "I do not, of course, speak for Mrs. Malfoy."

"If I see you alone, Malfoy, I'm throwing you out of the box!" called Potter as the door slammed shut behind him.

Draco allowed himself a grin as he loped down the drab Ministry corridor toward the lift. The Weaselette liked him. He suddenly wished fifteen-year-old Draco had made it his life's mission to fuck Ginny Weasley, just to hack off Saint Potter and Weaselbee. He had a feeling she would have done it with gusto for the exact same reason.



Malfoy had strolled into her office without so much as knocking, the absolute prat. He was twirling his wand and looking bored, as if he often had to retrieve his wand from the Auror Department after risking a return to Azkaban.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, raising her quill from the draft legislation she was annotating.

carried in her extended bag now. Then she rubbed—brief and furious through the long sleeve of her shirt—at her left forearm, trying to distract from the scar's burning without scratching the irritated skin, before pushing up her sleeves to get to work.

She turned to him, her wand raised to cast a diagnostic, and his eyes blinked open, his head slewing to the right to look at her. She paused as his eyes drifted to her bare forearm and his left hand snaked across his body to land lightly on her wrist. His fingers turned her forearm open to him and she realized she was holding her breath. She didn't want him to see it. She wanted him to see it.

His hand was bloody—blood drying, tacky, from the first gout from his nose, blood in the crevices of the diamond band, fresh blood on his fingers from swiping at his upper lip just now. Hermione watched as he slowly, deliberately dragged his fingertips across the scar carved into her flesh, smearing his fresh, red blood down her forearm. "I hate this," he said quietly, as though to himself, never looking away from it.

Hermione froze. He had no right. The back of her neck was prickling. Her chest and back were tingling, buzzing as if something terrible was bearing down on her and she could not move, could not look away. She should jerk her arm back. She should fling his hand away.

But the scar . . . it seemed to sigh as his bloody, red fingers slid over her broken skin.

Malfoy took his hand back, letting it fall by his side as his eyes closed again. "I hate it," he said sadly.

Hermione stared at him, her face hard. She looked at her arm, the irritated skin cooling, his blood shining wet in the low light.

She looked back at him, his face bruised and bloody, the left side of his torso scarred. She could just glimpse the edge of the Dark Mark, faded but still stark against his pale skin. Hermione had never seen him display it in public, had never seen him in anything other than long sleeves since his trial. Now she could see there were no scars, no burns, no additional ink—no sign that Malfoy had ever tried to remove or obscure it. She looked at the Azkaban prisoner number on the right side of his neck. There would never be any denying what he had done, and not done.

"I had intended to attend muggle university," said Hermione, her words clipped and bitter. "But it turned out I wasn't good at pretending to be an eighteen-year-old who *hadn't* just been through a war."

She wasn't sure why she was telling him this. Maybe because it was easier, sometimes, to confess a failing, an embarrassment, to someone who already despised you. Her friends could think less of her. He couldn't. Her friends would *feel sorry* for her. He wouldn't. Worse, her friends might disappoint her when they didn't understand. He couldn't hurt her that way.

"I don't like it there," he said, and she knew he meant the muggle world. "Feel like a ghost. Nothing matters."

The back of Hermione's neck was prickling. He wouldn't look at her.

At school she would have been outrageously offended. ("Nothing matters in the muggle world? *Excuse me?*") But now she knew exactly what he meant. Was that possible? Was it possible he was saying something close to exactly how she felt? Not that nothing in the muggle world mattered, but that, there, nothing she'd done here mattered—and what she'd done here was too important to her not to matter.

But why would Malfoy want to remember what he'd done here? He hadn't done anything *good*.

She looked at the Dark Mark, faded but unblemished on his arm. He could fuck right off to Muggle London and spend his billions where no one would know. Even if he didn't use his magic illegally—and he would—being as rich as he was was a kind of magic there.

She looked at the Azkaban tattoo that he made very little effort to hide, though she could tell he wasn't proud of it.

"I got a healing mastery instead," she said, as though it didn't matter. "I was already planning to work for the Ministry but I reckoned just in case . . ."

He looked at her and she knew he could hear everything she'd not said: *In case there's another war. In case another dark lord rises or the revivalists are successful and I'm running for my life, hurt, in pain, my comrades dying around me, no portkey, no hospital, no help. In case I'm captured and tortured again by people like you, Malfoy. Maybe by you.*

He didn't look away.

She cast the diagnostic. Not concussed. Just an idiot.

She scourgified the blood off his face and episkeyed the damage, squeezed a drop of essence of dittany onto the broken skin at the bridge of his nose, and then picked up the bruise removal paste. She didn't have to do this. He could conjure a mirror and do it himself. He could live with two black eyes. She unscrewed the lid off the shallow tub of thick yellow paste.

He watched her scoop some onto her fingertip. She hesitated. He didn't sneer at her to stop, or jerk away, or grab her wrist. She shifted her hips. She was facing him, her legs tucked under her on his bed, one thigh now pressed from knee to hip along his naked side, his bare arm grazing her. He was warm, breathing evenly. She leaned forward, over his face, and slowly touched her fingertip to his cheek. His eyes fell closed.

Please put me out of my misery, love. Use your bare hands.

Hermione worked carefully, stroking the delicate skin below his eyes, over his hard cheekbones. He let his arm rest against her leg. She tried not to think about the fact that she was pressed up against a nearly naked Draco Malfoy in his bed, touching his face.

Are you enjoying this as much as I am, love?

I am available to fuck.

You may share my bed.

I'll lick every inch of you.

You're making me so hard, dear.

I want to eat your cunt. I want to slide my tongue into you.

I want to bury my fingers in your cunt while I suck on your clit.

I will keep you in my bed and fuck that golden cunt of yours five times a day.

Tell me what to do and I'll do it.

Please—say the word.

He said none of these things. He just closed his eyes and let her touch him.

Finally, she sat back and screwed the lid back on the tub. He opened his eyes and watched her pick up the first potion bottle. "Pain."

He nodded and took it from her, propping himself up to drink. He handed her the empty bottle and she took it. She held up the next. "Dreamless Sleep?"

He nodded and she passed it to him. It felt strange to be working together for once. Easy.

She began to pack up everything in her bag. She'd have to refill her potions. She wondered who brewed for the Manor. She liked to brew her own.

"Stay," he said, "while I fall asleep."

She looked up, but he had flopped back down. He didn't look at her. The moment stretched.

"Stay," he said. "I'll behave."

But I'm not good . . .

She looked at him. She turned so she was sitting beside him, her back to his headboard. "You'll be good?" she asked, looking down at him, watching him.

A shiver ran through him. "I'll be good," he murmured. "Just for you."



Hermione woke in low light, her body warm and stiff. She was slumped against a headboard, a pillow behind her . . . Malfoy's headboard. She was still in Malfoy's bed. She'd fallen asleep . . . it felt like dinnertime. Her left arm was around . . . Malfoy. He'd rolled into her, his forehead nestled against her hip, the scars along his ribs rising and falling as he breathed, the sheet haphazard at his waist. Her arm was curled loosely around him. His left hand was . . . gripping the top of her thigh. The bloodied diamond

himself. He wanted to punch everyone's face in; he'd make money instead. He refused to court the pureblood girls who would schedule coitus to produce an heir and then merely tolerate him for his wealth. He stopped fucking muggle girls who made him feel like a ghost. And then the Reconciliation Act passed and he just . . . let it happen to him. Because nothing was real now anyway, and it felt familiar to let things be done to him.

And the Ministry—the *Ministry*—had seen fit to give him his wife. She hated him, she hated him, she hated him. (*Hmmm, yes.* Draco tightened his grip. *Yes, she did.*) But she *knew*—she knew who he was and what he had done. He was real to her. Her eyes didn't pass over him, glazed. *Nice tattoo, what's it mean?* They locked on and lit up. Like he must exist because she could see him.

And he wanted to lock onto her. Finally find out what she was like when he got her alone. He wanted his hands on her hips, his tongue in her cunt, her bucking into his face.



Theo slipped into the dark, smoky tea house in Knockturn Alley, ducking his head to pass under the low lintel of the narrow entrance. He nodded to the proprietress and nimbly wended his way through the other patrons to a small table tucked into a shadowy corner in the back. Theo could be very loud and difficult to miss, or he could be very quiet and hard to notice. Now he folded himself onto a rickety wooden chair next to another Slytherin.

"Nott."

"Adrian." Theo lifted the lid on the teapot. "Darjeeling? Cheers." He conjured his own teacup—bone china from Nott Manor—and poured, his elbows close in the tight space.

"Acting as Draco's lackey nowadays, Nott?"

"Oh, I have my fingers in a lot of potions," said Theo, slowly drizzling too much honey into his cup. He vanished the dipper and looked at Pucey. He sucked honey off two long fingers. "How's Daphne, by the way? She was always so sweet."

"Nott." A note of warning. Pucey was good-looking—slim and dark-haired—but not, to Theo's mind, very imaginative.

"Speaking of fingers . . ." Theo cocked an eyebrow. "Flint have his back yet? Or are you still wanking him off?"

"Clever, Nott—"

"Relax, Adrian. I don't judge." Theo pushed away the tea, untasted.

"I can promise you Marcus isn't feeling relaxed about Draco's little tantrum," said Pucey, leaning in though they were already knee-to-knee. "Which is why I owled Draco this morning. Now he wants to send you to smooth things over, but he cut up a pureblood over a *mudblood*."

"Please, Adrian. I've cut myself worse in potions class." Theo looked bored. "And this is Draco we're talking about. We both know he's a prissy little bitch. He'll share your things, he won't share his. You can't touch his things."

"Marcus—"

"Marcus overstepped." Theo's voice was firm. "So if you want to keep sucking his dick, do it now—because who knows what Draco will cut off next time." Theo smirked. "Or maybe he'll just cut you off."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pucey's hand moved around his cup but he didn't drink.

"I hear Daphne's father has you managing the emerald mines," said Theo lightly.

"So what?"

"So isn't Malfoy shipping most of your stones? Cozy little arrangement between Lucius and the Greengrasses from the days when Astoria was promised to Draco? It's a shame the Greengrasses broke the betrothal. Maybe Draco would keep extending the family discount to his would-be brother-in-law if your loyalty was to him instead of a wizard getting a bad reputation for losing fights. You side with Flint and how many of your shipments get lost at sea before you have to explain to Lord Greengrass why your margins just shrank?"



Draco was back in his bedroom, fisting his cock while he watched his wife's eyes. In the photo, he licked her blood off her arm in a loop, and her face was all disgust and outrage but her eyes . . . They never left his face. He flattened his tongue against the tender skin of her inner arm, dragging it up, up, up, over the rough edges of the scar he hated, and her eyes followed, followed, followed, *there*. Looking up at him, her pupils blown out. She couldn't look away and her eyes were molten.

He wanted to know how wet her cunt had been then. He wanted to drop to his knees, bury the sharp point of his nose in her, smelling her, dragging his nose up until his tongue was flat against her, delving into her. He wanted to taste her while her fingers slid into his hair, gripped tight, tugged, held his face against her slick cunt, not letting him up for air. "Good boy."

Pansy used to be rough with him, bucking against his mouth when she came and then cuffing the back of his head if he tried to touch her clit again. "Too much, too much—get off." But he didn't want to think about Pansy right now.

He wanted to lie between his wife's thighs and lick and suck as long as he wanted, mindless.

Draco had fucked a lot of girls in school but a lot of the sex had been fast. At first because he was excited to be having it and sometimes because he was having it in dark hallways and empty classrooms and behind the quidditch pitch, but also because the girls rushed it—excited to be having it too or eager to get it over, afraid of being caught, embarrassed to take their time. There had been a few long, drunken nights but a lot more of do this, do this, do this, pushing and pulling without time to linger. And then he was trying not to get fed to a snake. And then he was in chains, on trial in a cage, in prison . . .

When Draco was released to house arrest, he had not had sex in three years. He came back to a wrecked home full of memories of Voldemort. Pansy had been too-thin and brittle—so, so brittle. And Theo was drunk all the time. Draco had been insane, broken. They had huddled together and screamed at each other and thrown things. They hadn't had sex. (Pansy and Theo, maybe. They had all been drunk a lot that first year.)

When his house arrest was done, Pansy had dragged him along behind her to meet up with the pureblood scions who'd been too smart or too callow to get too involved, who definitely wanted to party but weren't sure yet whether they wanted to party with Draco. Pansy could still get invited (and Theo just showed up places and no one knew why he was there). They went to Muggle London—the supremacist kids always wanted to slum it there—and tried to pretend it was before the war, when they would go clubbing with conjured muggle IDs and muggle play money and laugh at each other for having sex with muggle girls.

The muggles didn't know who Draco was. *Coward. War criminal. Traitor. Scum.* But it was like he was lit up like a flame—all bright white skin and very sharp bones and a disheveled shock of platinum blond hair—that drew them like moths. Draco was drunk and drugged and the girls fucked him in bathrooms and alleys and cars. Pushed and pulled—*here, yes, do that.* It was meant to be a relief—getting away, getting off—but it felt instead like maybe he had already died, like maybe he didn't really exist. The muggle world felt fake and distorted—like he was viewing it through glass, like no one could hear what he was saying—because nothing meant anything there. The Dark Mark—his whole life ruined—it meant nothing there.

His face was numb from vodka, his shirt was unbuttoned, he was sliding onto a leather banquet in a club with bottle service, and a girl was running her hand down his chest, asking how he got his scars. "Cursed," he told her.

The purebloods couldn't decide if they wanted to suck up to him or take the piss out of him, but they knew he wasn't fun. He and Theo both—they fought too much and too sloppy; they didn't care how much they got hurt and they didn't care whether they won. Draco was a novelty act now and the novelty wore off fast.

Draco went home to the Manor, to silent breakfasts with his mother, and started concentrating on getting the Malfoy affairs back in order as a more effective way to spite everyone, including maybe

band glinted in the slanted light. His hand spanned her thigh muscle, his thumb along one side, his fingers fanned, heat seeping through the thin denim of her jeans. It did not feel casual. At all.

Possessive.

It occurred to her that she could have asked Pip to fix his face.



Theo was chained to the bed by his neck, wearing only a cock ring. Each step that had got him here had seemed quite reasonable at the time, but, then, Theo had been told he was bad with boundaries.

He was presented with a nipple and dutifully began sucking, his hands playing over her thighs and arse as she straddled him on her knees. He hadn't caught her name—not his best work. Usually he paid attention, even if people didn't think he did.

"I'm taking away these hands," she murmured.

He looked up, licking her nipple, and nodded eagerly. Her loss, but more attention for him. She accioed muggle handcuffs. Should he wonder why she had so much equipment in her bag? But not everyone traveled as light as Theo did.

He licked the center of her chest as she leaned into him, fixing his wrists to the bedframe—a wrought-iron number that would not be found in a muggle hotel. She'd chosen this inn with intention. He was about to be robbed, wasn't he? Exciting!

Or it would be if she'd have more fun with it. She was being bloody grim.

She moved back and then leaned down to kiss him, her hand reaching back to toy with his cock. It felt good but he wanted more. She kept pulling back and Theo strained forward to keep the kiss going, letting the chain on his neck dig in.

"My husband's downstairs in the pub. I'm going to make you suck his dick," she said, low.

Theo smiled. "Sounds grand, love." He strained forward for another kiss, but she pulled back, her eyes narrowed. He raised his eyebrows in an encouraging manner.

She tried again. "I'm going to peg your arse."

"Love it," he said. What all did she have in that bag? "Is this angle good for you? I can adjust." He was focused on her mouth, trying to reach her—he let out a breathy noise as the chain choked him.

She reached back to squeeze his bollocks, hard, and slapped him. He smiled genially up at her. He was off his game—he should be letting her scare him like she wanted. He just . . . didn't feel very scared. He usually didn't, now that Father was dead.

"I'm going to gag you," she said.

"Suit yourself, love. But then I can't lick anything."

That got him ball-gagged for backtalk. Theo tongued the ball. He could be tonguing her clit—she was making life hard on herself. But a lot of witches felt safer in control. Theo knew you weren't ever actually safe—or even in control—but he could understand wanting the illusion.

Theo blinked up at her as she dripped hot candle wax onto his chest. Theo didn't understand the fuss with wax—it cooled immediately. But you were meant to pretend it hurt. He closed his eyes and sighed out his nose as she dribbled it down his torso, toward his cock. It was relaxing, not doing any of the work. She slapped him again and he opened his eyes. Was he meant to be making noise? He was rubbish tonight.

Maybe he should admit to himself that he was thinking about Charlie.

Luna was sweet and gave *very* clear instructions backed by positive reinforcement and intermittent rewards. If she'd chained Theo to *her* bed, he would probably still be there, gratefully eating out of her hand while she trained him on new tricks to please her. Lucky for him, Luna did not seem to be any more interested in commitment than Theo was—she'd come four times, quite enthusiastically, and then politely kicked him and Charlie out of her hotel room.

Theo had been stood with Charlie outside her door when he'd turned to Charlie and asked, "Another round?"

Theo had been thinking they might get their own room and take their time—Charlie was all rangy outdoor muscle and freckles and loose ginger curls, and Theo wanted a better look at his burn scars and the hard line of his jaw—but Charlie said, "I've to be up early for the morning feeding."

"Right," said Theo, feeling oddly disappointed.

Charlie had pushed him up against the wall then and kissed him slowly, his hand on Theo's neck, Theo clutching at his ribs. Theo really wanted that hotel room. Charlie tasted like Luna and firewhisky and was casually confident in the way he touched Theo, and Theo wanted the kiss to last forever. Charlie pulled back, grinning, and then pecked him on the lips. "See ya," he said, and walked away.

Theo had stood watching him go, his lips swollen, his cock painfully hard.

She slapped him again and Theo came back to the present. He needed to do a better job. He gave her the noise she was looking for. She climbed on top of him, her hand at her cunt as she lowered herself onto him. She was touching her clit—good, because Theo couldn't do anything here. She was going to think he was a shite shag. She rocked forward, grinding on him, and Theo made appreciative sounds and settled into life as a dildo.

Did Charlie think he was a shite shag? Was that why he hadn't stayed? They'd been focused on Luna—which was only polite when a witch was present. (Theo wasn't selfish in bed, *Drauo* was selfish in bed.) Charlie shouldn't judge his performance by how well he took cock when he was trying not to fall chin-first into Luna's cunt.

Maybe Charlie was one of those wizards who would only shag men when a witch was there as cover? But Theo didn't think so. His eyes had lit up the second he saw Theo's stare, even before Luna announced that Theo wanted a threesome and she had agreed. He'd had no problem putting his hand on Theo's hip before they'd left the ballroom, kissing Theo in that hallway where anyone might walk by. Charlie seemed to think it was all in good fun—he seemed to think everything was fun and Theo was in on the joke. That's why Theo was missing him now.

The witch grimly got herself off—and it felt good, even if it didn't feel fun. She gasped and her cunt clenched on him, and Theo wanted to smile and kiss her but he still had the gag in. She hopped up and quickly wanked him off, his cock slick with her, her grip tight and sure. He came, throwing his head back, breathing hard around the gag, and she held on, squeezing him. Then she finally took the gag out so he could lick her hand clean.

He did—dutifully licking the back of her hand, her palm as she presented them to him. She ran her finger up his stomach, collecting his spunk, and fed it to him. He licked and sucked her fingers until she was satisfied, his eyes on hers, looking for approval.

"Kiss?" he asked. But she only slapped him.

He'd assumed, once the gag came out, he'd get a second chance to use his mouth. But she tossed his clothes at him and pushed him out the door without so much as a cuddle. It turned out her husband really was in the pub downstairs.

Outside her door, Theo got himself together and ran his hand through his hair. Well, he hadn't been robbed. He wished Charlie were there to push him up against the wall and kiss him.

His hand landed lightly on the back of her neck, his long fingers grazing the tender skin at her nape—a shiver down her spine—and then the necklace slid, warm and heavy, down her chest and between her breasts. He had unclasped it.

Then a twist of his heel and he was gone in a wisp of black smoke.

Hermione stood breathing for a moment. Then she apparated upstairs, into her dressing room. She took off the dress and shoes as fast as she could, stripped out of her strapless bra and knickers, trying to shed the evening with them. She stood, naked, examining her own arm. The scar looked angry, disturbed, the skin around it itchy. Her wrist was cut and bruised.

She healed the cut on her wrist and slathered her entire forearm in dittany cream, a shameful indulgence given the cost of dittany and her hard-won knowledge that it would do nothing to lessen the scarring on her arm.

Hermione wrapped herself in a robe—silk, a reminder that Draco Malfoy dressed her now—and considered the necklace she had plucked out of the bodice of her dress, using the tip of a hair stick as though it were a venomous snake.

She had refused to beg him to take it off her and he hadn't forced her to. He'd released it unbidden.

It felt like an apology. It felt like a reminder that he was in control. He thought he owned every part of her, and he'd made clear that night that he'd do anything to prove it.

Hermione had dumped the necklace into its box without ceremony, refusing to straighten it in its velvet crib. She had taken a hot, fast, angry bath and carried a complaining Crookshanks to bed.

This morning, she had stood in the dressing room in her bra and knickers, Crookshanks wending around her ankles, and studied the necklaces. She would never touch them again.

But she was curious . . .

An experiment. She put one on—the rubies—and immediately tried taking it off, fumbling at the clasp. But it opened easily. The necklace came off.

Now she knew. She wouldn't touch it again. If she did, Malfoy would think that he'd conditioned her to wear his necklaces—like a collar. That his behavior was acceptable to her. That she was swayed by ostentatious wealth.

She put on a gray dress that was like a dress she had bought herself but was somehow more flattering, better fitted, higher quality. Slipped on heels that refused to scuff. Gathered robes charmed to hang as though they were weighted. The Malfoy version of an office staple. She didn't have an eye for fashion, she never had. Some people did naturally; some people were trained to.

She flipped up the lid of the jewelry box and looked again at the ruby necklace cradled inside.

There was another experiment she had been unwillingly conducting on her colleagues at the Ministry since being married to Malfoy. Her hypothesis had been that her work spoke for itself; what she wore to the office didn't matter, so long as she was clothed.

Perhaps you think dressing like a shipwreck victim whose spouse cannot stand her garners respect at the Ministry?

She had been proved wrong.

It was subtle but unmistakable. People treated her better when she wore the clothing Malfoy bought her. When she wore his jewelry, the older wizards—and there were a lot of them at the Ministry—didn't talk to her like she was a Hogwarts student who had overstayed her summer internship.

She smacked the lid down, closing the necklace inside, and left the room.

Now she marched down the hall to her office, her thumb folding across her palm to rub the band of the Black ring. She hadn't told Harry and Ron because it was embarrassing—admitting Malfoy played these weird little mind games with her and they got to her.

She grimaced at the HERMIONE MALFOY on her door and slipped inside . . . to find her office had been illegally extended. A secretary's writing table had appeared overnight. Her desk had doubled in size. On one corner sat an overlarge vase filled with white tulips.

Fucking Malfoy.

Had he sent the elves past the Ministry's anti-apparition wards? Did they think this office was *Malfoy property*?

Ron watched her.

Harry said, "Hermione—"

"I'm thinking!"

"Accidents happen." Ron shrugged. He spun his wand between his fingers. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and Hermione could see the muscles in his forearm flexing repetitively as he did.

"I . . . I don't think so," said Hermione finally.

"All right. Why not?" asked Harry.

"I'm . . . not entirely sure," said Hermione. She reached for her wand and twisted it between her fingers as she thought. "The wizarding world is a small one, and we've lost so many people already. Malfoy is smart. He's skilled. It's a waste. He hasn't really had a chance yet to see what he can contribute—"

"Hermione, are you saying you think you can *redeem* Draco Malfoy?" demanded Ron.

"No! No." Hermione sighed. "But I can handle him."

"You're not handling him now!" shouted Ron. "He's the one manhandling you!"

"I'm not the one regrowing fingers right now, Ronald," snapped Hermione.

She stood, her wand in-hand, reflexively smoothing her skirt. "Thanks for losing the incident report, Harry."

Ron snorted. "Yes, that we can do."

Harry looked at his chaotic desk, riffling his hand through his hair with a sigh. "Yes. That we can do."

Hermione walked out the door without looking back. She made her way to level four, glaring at the whispers in the lift.

She hadn't known what to tell Ron and Harry about what had happened the night before. She wasn't sure what to think of it herself.

Harry had taken charge of the scene, offering Malfoy the chance to surrender his wand voluntarily while Ron smirked and held out his hand, and then Ginny was imploring her to come stay at Grimmauld Place, and suddenly she couldn't do it—go stay with Harry after he'd taken her wand. He'd had to—he'd disarmed her in a public incident, it was by the book—but it still stung.

And the idea of running away from Malfoy like he'd scared her rubbed her the wrong way.

Then she and Malfoy were marching to the Ministry floors, both of them wandless, glowering at the press. They hated everything, including themselves, and they weren't trying to hide it. (Because she did hate herself—why was her cunt throbbing at the memory of his tongue on her arm, her blood swept into his vulgar mouth?—and he had to be disgusted by what his ego had made him do.)

She'd meant to jerk her elbow out of his grip and take a different floor, straight to her sitting room, but she hadn't done it fast enough, and the next thing she knew, he was saying, "Malfoy Manor" and pulling her through with him.

They stepped out of the Manor's main floor, the stone floor and dark wood and flocked wallpaper and portraits the wrong kind of familiar now. He dropped her elbow abruptly and turned to her. "We're home, love, here's your chance."

Hit me again, love.

"Hit me again." His voice was low as he leaned in.

I'll lick every inch of you.

"There's no one to stop you here."

There was no one to stop *him*. Just the ring he had shoved onto her finger that thought she wasn't worthy.

I want to eat your cunt. I want to slide my tongue into you and—

Citrus. Cloves. The heat from his body crowding hers.

Hermione shook her head. She wasn't going to hit him. (She didn't just *hit people*.)

Malfoy's hand shot up and—she couldn't help it—she flinched. Godsdammit, he had seen her flinch.



MONDAY JULY 21, 2003

GRANGER VS MALFOY: Off-Pitch Rivalry Brings Draco to His Knees

HERMIONE HITS BACK WITH HOLYHEAD HARPIES BROOM BUY

GOLDEN GIRL NOT TOO GOOD FOR DEATH EATER GOLD

INSIDE HERMIONE MALFOY'S LOVE OF QUIDDITCH!

Hermione sat behind her Ministry desk, piecing together the press's account of her weekend. Apparently, Malfoy had tried to cut her off from the vaults. In retaliation, she'd used his gold to buy expensive brooms for his club's league rival—a move alternately lauded as brilliant trolling or condemned as a petty, tone-deaf extravagance.

Hermione's office was full of howlers, screaming at her that she was a dirty muggle bitch who didn't deserve Malfoy's gold and also that she was a terrible moral failure for not having already donated all his gold to worthy causes and also that she should have snapped her wand before touching a single sickle of Death Eater gold. They screamed that she finally looked fuckable after spending his galleons on clothes and also that she should be raped for spending his gold on something as superficial as clothing. A stream of envelopes screamed at her to give to their individual pet charities while another fleet, decorated in gray and white, just screamed *Harpies suck!*

Mudblood gold digger. Death Eater whore. Sell out. No one would ever believe she'd refused his gold now.

Dirty tricks after she'd fixed his pretty face. How very Malfoy. Well, technically, he'd set it up before. She sighed.

Hermione felt a buzzing detachment seep through her. A month ago, she would have been seething, working herself up to a righteous rant right in Malfoy's pointy face. Now she felt like the frog who had given a scorpion a ride.

I'll be good. Just for you.

Malfoy was a scorpion. He would always be a scorpion. The venomous little wanker just couldn't help himself.

Hermione set Francesco to the task of incendioing her mail, and watched as more howlers came in. She sat back and thought about how viscerally people hated the idea of her getting her hands on Malfoy's gold. Her forced marriage to him, his boasts of keeping her chained to his bed, the implication that she would bear his child against her will—none of that had prompted a fraction of the outrage that her supposedly spending his galleons on some brooms had. People would watch Malfoy rape her in public and cluck their tongues, have a wank. (She knew—she'd read the letters people sent her.) But see her spend his money? Oh, they hated that.

Hermione supposed it was because they couldn't work out how this was him getting the better of her, how this was her suffering. And she was meant to suffer—a witch suffering was normal, expected, a little

frisson of pity or outrage or titillation amid the comfort of familiarity for those watching. A witch with power—no, that was disturbing. People hated and feared a witch with power. And that she might come in—a muggleborn—and take what was *theirs* (*their* pureblood prince, *their* galleons)? No. Unacceptable. Impossible. They were meant to be the ones using *her*.

Posh prat afraid you'll get your hands on his precious gold, is he?

Probably move to disinherit, second he got you up the duff.

People liked the idea of her being cut off. She could remain a good girl. A victim. A martyr. A woman dependent on their help. A witch who couldn't hurt them. Who couldn't control them. Who couldn't do as she pleased.

Beautiful, powerful, a real wife to me.

Hermione felt a hard knot of fury threatening to explode from her chest. Had *anyone* but Malfoy suggested she be powerful? Suggested *that* was what they wanted to see? (Did he mean it? Or was it another dirty trick?)

"You win, Malfoy," she muttered. She wrote a quick note and sent it to the Ministry owlery to be delivered to Bill Weasley.

Then she stood and pulled on her robes. "Francesco, I'll be at Gringotts."

She'd made a mental list of every charity that had been suggested via howler. They'd never see a sickle from her. Some other organizations—of *her choosing*—were about to get some very large cheques.



"Brilliant—I get to see your technique after all." Theo lounged on the settee, twirling his wand, studying the photo looping on the cover of *The Daily Prophet*. "On your knees—good. Looking up at her like she has total control over your pathetic, slutty little life—well done. I'm more of a 'please, please, I'll do anything' man myself—but 'fuck you' works."

He looked over at Draco with raised eyebrows. "Did it work?"

"She episkeyed my nose and put me to bed," Draco said wryly.

Theo shrugged. "So she liked it."

A barn owl swooped in the open window, and they both watched it drop a calling card onto Draco's desk and fly out without waiting for a response.

"Was that—"

Draco picked it up and sourly flashed the family crest on the card, the upper right corner folded down. "I'm being summoned."

"Right." Theo stood, tossing the *Prophet* aside, and plucked his suit jacket from the nearby armchair. "I'm your man."

Draco reached into his desk drawer for the unregistered wand.



Hermione had just completed her banking when she turned to see Bill Weasley loping toward her from across the Gringotts lobby, in leather pants and dragonhide boots, his long ginger hair blowing back to reveal his earrings and the full extent of the scars slashed across his face.

Hermione smiled. It was hard not to have a schoolgirl crush on him even now.

"Hiya, Hermione," he said as he neared, as quietly intense as ever. "I was delivering an item to the Department of Mysteries. Let's go to my office."

"Oh, well, then—yes! Apparently, it's true!"

"Theo!" But Pansy was laughing, settling onto the cushion next to him.

"I had to, Pans! Draco keeps telling people I'm selfish in bed. I had to correct public opinion!"

"I said it one time, Theo. *One* time. I *will* obfuscate you," said Draco.

"Please don't, it's my favorite wank material."

Draco sighed heavily. "I thought you were looking for a wife."

"I'm *trying*, Draco! But your mother is already married. So is Luna. And, apparently, you'll cut off my hand if I look at—*Owl* Wand check! Wand check! I'm reporting that jinx to the Ministry."

"Go ahead," said Draco pleasantly, twirling the wand between his fingers. "This one's unregistered. Next time it'll be a cruciatus."

"Salazar's balls, you need to get—No! Don't Forget I said anything! Just for that, I'm replacing you in the wank bank. It's all Charlie now, all the way. He was much better. By orders of magnitude!"

"Yes, well, Charlie actually wanted to be there," said Draco, returning the wand to his desk drawer.

"True, true. Do you think he's husband material? Would I like living in Romania?"

"Theo, you would hate living in Romania," said Pansy, flipping through *Witch Weekly*. "Isn't that the whole reason he's unmatched? The Ministry can't force anyone to move abroad?"

"And there are rumors I trafficked dragon eggs. He'd never forgive me. Unless maybe I cut him in on—? No, no, you're right." He slumped back onto the settee. "So did you see it, Pans? What did Flint's face look like?"

"Oh, you know—" Pansy waved her hand, not looking up from a spread on muggle skin creams. "Just—"

"Pans, you lying bint! You missed it too! You were off shagging Longbottom, weren't you? Weren't you!"

Pansy looked up with a sharp little grin. "Maybe just a lot."

"I knew it, Pans. You dirty minx." Theo jostled her as she happily smacked him with the *Witch Weekly*.

"Sweet Salazar's bloody bits, leave if you two aren't going to let me work," said Draco.

"You really do need to get laid, Draco," said Pansy, shoving Theo's shoulder a final time.

"Wait, wait! Pansy, I think I've just identified the problem," Theo brandished a *Wizarding World News* pictorial as though it were damning evidence. (It was.) "Mate, it's not girls' arms you're meant to lick. You have to—Though, hold on . . . it looks like Granger might be getting off here—"

"Let me see that!" Pansy sniggered, leaning in to watch her fight him in a loop. "Draco, you're really going to have to work harder than this to get into Granger's pants."

"Well, if you two want to *help with that*, I have some work for you too," said Draco.

"Yes! Put me to work, daddy." Theo grinned and began spinning his wand.

"Draco, is that Granger's cat?"



"Hiya, Hermione. It's right there." Harry nodded toward her wand, waiting on the corner of his desk. Hermione had come directly to his office in the Auror Department this morning after stepping out of the Ministry floo.

Harry remained seated behind his stacks of paperwork. Ron was planted on the credenza behind his desk, his legs stretched casually in front of him, his arms crossed, so that Hermione was forced to face them both.

She sat down in Harry's guest chair.

"So. Should we kill him?" asked Ron.

Harry gazed at her levelly, Ron looking at her over his shoulder. He wasn't surprised by the question. He and Ron had already discussed it.

"I . . ." Hermione looked between them.

Harry watched her.

in his business interests to stand down. Before he did so, Pucey insulted you twice. Nott marked the count. Now Pucey does as well, lest I inform him his apology is incomplete."

"And do you accept this apology?" asked Hermione coldly. *These fucking Slytherins...*

Malfoy pushed up from his chair and was around his desk in a flash. She held her ground and he crowded her, his head bent toward hers. "Tell me not to, love. Tell me his efforts to please you aren't good enough. Tell me jewels aren't an apology." His voice was low and rough as he caught one of her curls between his fingers. "Tell me to make him suffer, love. Let me hurt him."

"Malfoy—" Hermione could feel her chest rising and falling with her breath as the heat and yearning rolled off him, his body an inch from hers. He smelled like citrus and cloves and ink but all she could think of was the scent of fresh blood filling her nostrils. Her eyes flicked toward his parted lips, his lowered eyes. His long fingers on her hair, the knuckles and veins of his hand.

"I'll make him suffer, love, if you tell me to." His eyes met hers. "Tell me to."

"Malfoy..." She shook her head. "Don't do that. Don't use me as an excuse—"

"It's not an excuse. It's a reason." He watched his hand as he twisted the curl around his finger. His lips were parted, a furrow between his brows.

"No," she said.

A small nod, his shoulders tense. "I'll stand down." He gave her hair a tug. "But I'll not let another man see you in his jewelry after he's insulted you."

"Just you?" sneered Hermione, suddenly angry. Did he even hear himself?

"Just me, love," Malfoy said sadly. He ducked his head lower. "Do you want to cut out my tongue?"

"Yes," said Hermione, to see what he'd say.

He toyed with her curl, not meeting her eyes. "Nott will hold me down so you get a clean cut."

"You're pathetic," she said, wanting it to hurt. "Feeling sorry for yourself."

He looked up, meeting her eyes, but made no move to answer.

She brushed her hair back, away from his hand, and he didn't try to stop her when she left the room.



THURSDAY JULY 24, 2003

Hermione avoided Malfoy, stewing about the impasse she found herself locked in with him. He sulked and bullied, but she couldn't forgive his past. He wanted to be punished, but that didn't do anything for her.

(Would she cut out his tongue if she could? Carve a slur into his arm? Break his nose one more time? She tried to imagine a feeling of satisfaction in the moment—him pinned down and bloody, her hurting him as much as she wanted. She felt an angry, manic energy rise up in her that said, yes, yes, it would feel so good to beat on him. To hit him with her fists. To throw herself into him. But that same part of her imagined someone—she didn't know who—catching her up in their arms and hugging her, hard—*Malfoy pressing her to him in the Ministry ballroom*—and she thought maybe she wanted that more. Or both. She didn't want to cut him. Maybe she wanted to fuck him as hard as she could while she ground her hand into his face. Godric, what was wrong with her?)

"How's the Ferret's face?" asked Ginny, sliding into her seat at the Leaky with a butterbeer in each hand. She pushed Hermione's pint across the table to her. It was early, before the pub got too raucous. After-work groups were drifting in, and Hermione was still in her own dress and heels, feeling overdressed next to Ginny's jeans and sleeveless blouse.

"As pointy and perfect as ever." She sighed and took a sip.

"Perfect?" Ginny tilted her head, a sly smile creeping across her face. "He's fit, I'll grant you. It's only his entire personality, everything he's ever done, and everything he stands for that's the problem."

"Yes, only that," Hermione said solemnly.

Ginny nodded, contemplative, as she ran her finger along the top of her glass. She looked at Hermione out of the corner of her eye. "I'd shag him if he couldn't talk during."

"Ginny!"

"Just a little silencio and take a ride? What! He'd consent. C'mon, he wouldn't turn that down."

"He probably couldn't come if he couldn't insult me," said Hermione wryly.

"So? He doesn't need to come—"

"Imagine him sneering at you the whole time—"

"Right—he can't speak or look at you." Ginny raised her eyebrows, encouraging Hermione to consider the possibilities.

Hermione hummed noncommittally. She didn't want to tell Ginny that she'd been in Malfoy's bed, Malfoy nearly naked and pressed against her, and what she'd done was talk about muggle university. It felt too personal and vulnerable and sad when Ginny was trying to make this funny and empowering. (She'd tried to make Hermione leaving uni funny and empowering too. "Good riddance! You don't need *more* schooling. You already know everything!") It felt like a moment—Malfoy not looking away when she told him about the healing mastery—that she wanted to keep to herself, curled with her inside her hard protective shell. She didn't know what to think of it, and she felt herself locking it away, going back to the safety of what she did know. Ginny was a romantic (a randy one, but a romantic) and Malfoy was a scorpion who hurt people.

"I'm meant to pass along all manner of threats about that rogue bludger, by the way," she said.

Ginny cackled. "I didn't plan it, but I wish I had! It was too good. And he's welcome to try me." She was still giggling. "I'll make him wish he was back in Azkaban."

Hermione smiled but her stomach was tight. "The other night—" She lowered her voice and glanced around, as theatrical as it felt to do it.

"What?" Ginny's face fell and she leaned in. "What happened?"

"I was there and—Malfoy came back to the Manor—he had Nott with him—and . . ." Hermione ducked her head closer to Ginny's. "He'd cut out Crabbe's father's tongue."

"What?" Ginny's face was a mask of confusion and intense interest.

"I think he had it with him—"

"Why—"

"They were covered in blood—"

"What—did they threaten you?" asked Ginny, her face creased with concern.

"No, they were laughing—"

A shudder moved through Ginny. "Hermione, what the fuck is going on over there?"

Hermione looked Ginny in the eye. "He said Crabbe had insulted members of his house. Called Malfoy a blood traitor."

Ginny looked at Hermione, her eyes searching. "Malfoy cut out Crabbe's father's tongue because he insulted you?"

"I . . . I think it was more to do with the insult to Malfoy." Hermione sat back, rolling her eyes, though now she thought of the tributes—all addressed to her. "You know how they are . . . the whole Malfoy thing."

"And now you're a Malfoy," said Ginny, her eyes flicking to the sapphire necklace.

Hermione had gone back to wearing it. It felt like a strange little revenge against the older wizards, watching them notice it and think twice about treating her like a trolly dolly. Hermione had thought because it made her look wealthy and established. Now she wondered.

She wrinkled her nose. "No, he's just stuck with me."

"Maybe he likes being stuck with you," said Ginny. "Maybe he likes you—that's why he attacks anyone who insults you. Like Flint?" She gave Hermione a significant look.

"C'mon, Ginny. He doesn't *like* being married to me. You were there—he called it a public humiliation. After Flint, he said he'd been cursed with me." Hermione shook her head. "No, he's embarrassed. He's stuck with me and his blood purist cronies think it's gross and he's lashing out—"

"At them, though. Not at you—"

"No, with me it's constant mind games. Always telling me he wants to shag me—"

"Maybe he does want to shag you," said Ginny, her eyebrows raised again.

"I'm sure he does!" said Hermione. "He insisted on these rings and now he's randy as hell. I'm sure he'd love to get me in a compromising position and then he really would spend the whole time insulting me. Probably tell me afterward how disgusting it was to fuck a mudblood."

"Does he call you that?" Ginny had jerked forward, her eyes wide, jaw set.

"No! No. He calls me *Mrs. Malfoy*?" Hermione snorted. "And *love* and *dearest* and *darling*?"

Ginny sat back. "He calls you love and dearest and darling and tells you he wants to shag you and maims wizards who insult you," she said flatly. "And how would he act if he liked you?"

"He's being *sarcastic*—"

"He's *sarcastically* maiming—"

"Yes," said Hermione, feeling less sure than she sounded. "It's just a power play. He's obsessed with his status as head of house—probably insane from Azkaban. They're all mental. Nott saw me that night and pledged to be my *faithful servant*."

Ginny snickered. "Maybe Nott just likes to serve. Parvati said he was on his knees before she could even ask. He let Cho tie him up—"

"What?"

"Hermione, half the girls at school shagged him! You didn't hear the rumors?"

"No! I—"

"Maybe you were in the library." Ginny grinned. "Unless—you weren't shagging him in the restricted section, were you?"

"No! Godric."

Hermione laughed along with Ginny, but she could feel her teenage insecurities flare. Of course Ginny thought Hermione could just pull Theo Nott in the library one night and shag him in the restricted section. Hermione remembered Nott nodding to her whenever he sat down at a nearby table—that was it. She wouldn't have known where to begin.

When Hermione was younger, she'd imagined each summer that this was the year she'd go back to Hogwarts and find the perfect boyfriend waiting—someone nice and sweet and her intellectual equal. They'd read old books and drink coffee and do complicated spells together and he'd hold her hand and kiss her and they'd debate important topics but agree on everything that mattered.

But the smart boys didn't want to date her. They didn't even look her way. Hermione thought at first it was because she was ugly. But as she got older and—even she knew it—not *hideous*, the boys in her classes dated younger, less clever witches and did their school projects with her. Hermione realized in retrospect that they didn't want the competition. (And, all right, she *was* competitive.) But, still, it felt like something was wrong with her.

It wasn't until Viktor that Hermione found the kind of wizard who wasn't intimidated by her—a wizard who didn't think it was a competition because he had already ceded the field. He was a physical guy with a smart girlfriend. He was proud of her. But that was her thing, and he had his own thing. After the war, Hermione dated a few of these wizards—they were cute and funny or fit and playful, always slightly older, often aurors. They hadn't been at the Battle of Hogwarts. They were good kissers and never complained about giving oral. Smart enough but never her equal. She was busy with work. She wasn't interested in having children yet. She didn't cook. They stood her up for their friends. They cheated on her with witches who flattered them. The novelty of a smarter, more accomplished girlfriend wore off; they resented not being her priority and let her know she wasn't theirs.

And dating in the muggle world . . . Hermione felt stifled by fame and prejudice and social convention in the wizarding world, but when she went back to the muggle world after the war, she found the gap between its reality and her own had become too great. She had always been a witch who wanted to be seen and heard when she had the answer, and in the muggle world she couldn't raise her hand, even to tell the truth about her own life. She had to censor herself constantly, make herself smaller, lesser, too

"Father, she loathes me."

"Is that so, Draco? Has she hexed you? Poisoned you? Stabbed you? Do you wake up every morning in a full body bind? Are you covered in boils? Are you bleeding out your eyes?" He peered down his nose at his son. "It looks to me like you have all *your* fingers."

Draco regarded him with baleful uncertainty.

Lucius snorted. "You have married a pussycat, Draco. Stop whingeing. Have you made an *effort*? Or do you merely annoy her and then mope about?"

"I annoy her and mope about," said Draco, moping even now.

Lucius sighed. "This is your *wife*, Draco, not a girl you are trying to shag in the broom shed. Make an effort. Do something . . . *nice* for her."

"If I do something nice, she will suspect a trap," said Draco.

Lucius chuckled. "I am more and more reassured that my grandchild will be Slytherin."



For the second time that week, Hermione sought out Malfoy in his study after she'd returned from the Ministry. She found him lurking in the corner of the book-lined room, his desk near the window for easier owl access. The gloom settled around him even as the summer evening sun filtered in through the leaded panes, making the edges of his platinum hair glow as he looked through paperwork. The fire was too high for the time of year.

"Why have I received two emerald brooches from Adrian Pucey, a hideous vase from Terence Higgs, and a case of Italian wine from Blaise Zabini?" Hermione stood just inside the door, her eyebrows raised, holding up a fussy jewelry box.

"Clearly, Vance Crabbe lived and found a quill," said Malfoy dryly.

"Are these *tributes*?" asked Hermione. Was she married to a crime boss? *Godsdammit*.

"Wedding gifts, dear. Let me see Pucey's." Malfoy looked up and extended his hand.

Hermione hesitated—remembering that hand covered in blood in this room. She had expected a visit from the Auror Department, retaliation from Crabbe's relatives—repercussions. There had been only rewards. As though he had a right to act this way. As though Malfoy were feared.

"If it pleases you, love," said Malfoy, and Hermione jolted to life—as though she had only kept the violent, controlling lord of her house waiting to teach him to be polite to her. She reminded herself that she wasn't afraid of him—and she *had* come to him for information.

She wended her way past the bar cart and settees to approach his desk, Malfoy's fingers just grazing hers as he took the jewelry box from her.

He flipped it open and appraised the brooches with a professional eye. Then he nodded, closed the box with a snap, and deftly shut it into his desk drawer.

"What are you doing?" asked Hermione, vaguely amused by his officious manner. "I believe those were for me?"

Malfoy looked up at her. "I would have you naked and *dripping* in emeralds if I could, love. But you'll not wear another man's jewelry."

Hermione huffed a laugh, her cheeks heating, though she'd had no intention of wearing Slytherin emeralds. "Of all the toxic—"

"Do you want to know," said Malfoy sharply, "why there are two brooches?"

Hermione stared at him, the back of her neck prickling. If there was something to be known, she would always want to know it. She looked into his gray eyes, hard on hers. Finally, she said, her voice clear and even, "I demand to know what my husband does."

Malfoy swallowed, his eyes burning with cold fire. He lifted his chin. "Adrian Pucey is Marcus Flint's ally. When he protested my treatment of Flint, I dispatched Nott, who made it clear to Adrian that it was

their *advice* and *instruction* about how he was to handle her when they couldn't handle their own business. They thought he should get rid of her to please them—yes, they'd like to strip him of her attention so he was left with only them, wouldn't they? They had no idea how little appeal their shoddy interest held for him now that he'd felt her gaze light him up.

But it was her sycophant groupies—so repulsed by the idea of him defiling her—who made him want to curl around her and dig his claws right in. They didn't want him to have her? Then he was *never* letting go. He would cover her in jewels just to see their faces. He would let her drag him, bloody, through a quidditch stadium. They couldn't pretend it was against her will when *she* was leading *him*.

They didn't even see how they were the real problem—her ridiculous friends who didn't respect themselves or her. Now that they were no longer letting her risk her life for them, all they did was stifle her self-regard. Weasley was an insecure twit, the Weaslette was a sex-obsessed jock, and Potter was a walking martyr complex—Draco knew, he'd spent time as all three of these things himself—all of them content to hold her back.

And she was holding back too. *She* didn't think she was meant to be with him, did she? He'd woken alone after she'd stroked his face so gently. (He shouldn't have touched her arm. Shouldn't have got his blood on her.) She'd seen the Mark—of course she had, he'd made sure of it, hadn't he?—and she'd touched him anyway. She'd told him, in not so many words, how he'd helped to ruin her plans for herself, how he'd helped to fuck her up. (*He* was the problem, not her friends.) While she touched him anyway. Draco didn't want to think about it—he upset himself when he did.

Then she'd run from his study when he'd thought he had her. He'd shown her who he was, and she couldn't stand to be in the same room as him. Back to her senses.

Keep begging, Malfoy—you will never have me.

He did want to keep begging. *Just let me, just let me.*

He wanted to be on top of her, inside of her, fucking himself into her until there was no getting him out. *Let me in. Let me.*

It felt good to claim his wife. It felt good to decide on his own rules and hurt the people who broke them.

If only she would claim him too.

He fed the beast another piece of Crabbe's tongue.



WEDNESDAY JULY 23, 2003

"You intend to rule by fear, then?" Lucius raised an eyebrow, but his voice betrayed his amusement. "Draco, I'm hearing they won't be able to regrow Vance's tongue. The man will never cast verbally again."

"Respectability is already lost to me," said Draco with an edge but no heat. "Crabbe insulted a Malfoy witch."

Lucius smiled faintly. "Some would say your response was disproportionate."

"She's my witch," said Draco sullenly. "He deserved worse."

"Good," said Lucius, studying his son sat across the small table from him, shoulders hunched against the chill. "Good."

Lucius took a breath, his eyes moving over the walls around them, the tattoo on his son's neck, Draco's fidgeting hand—missing his wand. Back to the tension on Draco's face. "Is she pregnant yet?" His tone was clinical.

"Father, she won't let me touch her," spat Draco.

Lucius laughed. "I've seen the pictures, boy. You two can't keep your hands off each other."

"To fight?" said Draco. "She only touches me to beat me."

"Ah," Lucius smiled fondly, "young love."

boring for anyone to attempt to pry open. "Oh, me? My work's too dull to discuss. My parents? Let's say they're dead. No, I definitely did not found a resistance movement and fight a running guerilla battle to save you from mass murder."

Hermione couldn't talk about her job, regulating creatures muggles didn't think were real. She couldn't tell dates she had PTSD because she was, famously, a soldier in a war they didn't know had happened. She couldn't explain that she missed her parents, who were alive and well, because she had rewired their brains. She couldn't hide forever that she had a word even muggles recognized as a racist slur carved into her arm.

Hermione didn't want to talk about the war, but she needed to be around people who agreed it had *happened*. The idea of trying to tell someone about it and him laughing it off, assuring her it couldn't have been that bad . . . Godric, she couldn't take that. In this way, the muggle world was one more thing the war had taken from her. And maybe this was when she had started to feel that it was safer not to share, safer not to risk being dismissed, being misunderstood.

Now Ginny was trying to tell her that Malfoy couldn't be that bad as the scar Hermione had got in his drawing room while he watched itched and burned on her arm. The scar that spelled out the word he had taught her.

I hate it.

Hermione thought of how he sidled up to her and begged her to let him hurt people, his body tense and yearning like he was talking about himself. Maybe he wasn't the thirteen-year-old who had called her a mudblood. But she wasn't sure who he was, and she wasn't sure that what he wanted had to do with her at all. She only knew she was stuck with him, and she didn't want to give him the chance to make her feel like she was thirteen again forever.

The scar on her arm itched and burned, and she didn't tell Ginny because she didn't want to feel her pity or be lectured about obscure folk remedies she really ought to try. She knew what she needed to do—and no matter what pep talk Ginny gave her, it wouldn't be that easy. Things were never as easy as Ginny made them out to be; it was never as easy when you were sat across from a real-life flesh-and-blood person instead of talking tough in a pub.

She avoided Malfoy for another week. The scar itched and burned and rubbing at it only made it worse. She wanted to rip the skin off her arm. She tried cooling charms. She tried submerging it in icy water. It didn't work. She needed to smear Malfoy's blood all over it. She squirmed, a chill running down her neck, when she thought about it.



FRIDAY JULY 25, 2003

HERMIONE MONEYBAGS: Mrs. Malfoy Makes A Splash

DEATH EATER BRIDE BECOMES MAJOR DONOR

GRANGER'S GOLD: Has Hermione Sold Out?

THE GALLEONS GIRL: Inside Hermione Malfoy's Charity Work

The news of her charitable donations had started to leak. The howlers came in: Hermione had given too little money. She'd given too much money. She'd given to the wrong organizations. She'd snubbed worthy organizations, proving her politics were wrong. She was a Death Eater whore who was using Draco Malfoy for his gold and she ought to be raped and killed for it.

Hermione incendioed them all, rubbing at the scar on her arm.

Finally, after a miserable day at the Ministry, Hermione came back to the Manor, shed her robes, and cast a homonculous, picturing the mate to her ring. A map materialized. Malfoy was in the dungeons.

Brilliant.

Hermione changed into jeans, the camel-colored jumper, and sturdier shoes, feeling in her core that she would soon be running for her life.

She made her way through the dimly lit Manor, passing doors and alcoves she had not explored, avoiding eye contact with the portraits, refusing to look in the direction of the drawing room.

The summer evening sun shone through the windows, her moving through shadow and slanted light until finally she cast a *lumos* at the top of the dungeon stairwell. She was brave; she would keep going. She started down gritty stone steps.

The steep steps curved to the left, and she found the light around her growing. She finited the *lumos* and cautiously continued, her footsteps slowing, her wand still raised, her other hand up in case she fell and had to catch herself.

The light grew and grew, until she found herself at the bottom of the steps, walking into a brightly lit potions lab. She walked past pallets of recent deliveries, cabinets full of neatly labeled ingredients, a collection of cutting tools and pestles . . . Finally, she found him in the back, several large cauldrons going at once.

He was peering into one as though checking the potion's color. His white-blond hair had fallen over his forehead and his sleeves were rolled to his elbows, his forearms finely muscled, his veins prominent, his skin so pale it was nearly translucent, the Dark Mark clearly visible when he moved his left arm.

She drifted closer.

Old books. Parchment. Coffee. Cloves.

"Jesus Christ," gasped Hermione, the muggle swear startled out of her. "You're brewing—"

"Stop right there," said Malfoy, his head jerking up, his face hard.

"You miserable, despicable, conniving rapist—"

"This is not for you!" thundered Malfoy, rounding the table and charging toward her.

She whipped up her wand—

"Don't you dare hex me!" he shouted, diving for her arm, catching her wrist and closing the space between them so that he was too close to cast on.

She fought him and he caught her up, wrapping his arm around her and pressing her close, neutralizing her energy. "I assure you," he said into her ear, surrounded by her favorite scents, "if you're ever begging for me, you will be completely sober."

She could feel his body, lean and muscular and hard, against her. She spoke into his shoulder, her head turned away from him. "Then why are you *bulk brewing*—"

"Not to drug you into a blissfully happy marriage," muttered Malfoy. "I'll release you and you'll tell me to explain and I will."

"Then do it."

He let go and stepped back, and her body was cold where his arms and chest had been.

"Explain," she said. "I demand to know."

"I do tell you the truth, you know." She didn't know why he said it, but something passed across his face that said he was lying.

"You're lying now," she said.

His mouth twisted and he looked away. "Only about things that don't matter."

"*This* matters. Explain."

He sighed and crossed his arms, his shoulders tense. "I sell it to a madame in Knockturn Alley—"

"So she can compel trafficked witches—"

"No!" snapped Malfoy. "She slips it to the clients. It makes them more tractable. More likely to spend money, less likely to abuse the prostitutes they think they're in love with. More likely to spill secrets, to pose for pictures."

"And then she shares the blackmail material with you," concluded Hermione. She had been braced for something personal and terrible. This was impersonal and terrible and felt like nothing to do with her. She had thought it had to do with her.

"Yes," said Malfoy simply, his pointy face hard.

A pureblood wife would have been coolly angry at his lack of involvement or thrilled by the freedom, depending on how much she disliked him already.

And he would *never* have given Astoria full access to the vaults. Sweet Salazar's motherfucking bollocks, she would have signed over the entire Malfoy estate to her father by now. If his wife ruined him, she would have to be more creative.

I take an interest in my house.

My house. Draco hummed with pleasure at the idea. He had never considered before how satisfying it was to have a witch without her own house.

Draco had known since childhood that he'd marry a witch with her own centuries-old bloodline. She'd take his name, but a competing loyalty would linger. Narcissa would always be a Black. Astoria would always be a Greengrass. It was only natural. And as his wife ran his household, her own traditions and preferences would infiltrate—whole holidays taken over, visits to her tedious family in their lesser country estates, horrible naming conventions to quash, blood claims to his heir. A constant, ongoing negotiation.

But now, *now*—his wife came to him naked. There was no House of Granger. His wife's parents were muggle healers of some sort—it didn't matter. They had disappeared during the war. Rumor held that she had permanently obliterated them—a truly terrifying possibility Draco did not care to contemplate too closely. When he did, he had no doubt she *would* have killed Dumbledore if given his task. Something else he was not sure he wanted to think about.

(Draco considered whether his marriage was *in fact* a murder plot. How intentionally had the Ministry counted on him antagonizing her?)

(But why had a witch capable of these things only broken his nose? Could she . . . secretly enjoy him? Or was he merely beneath her contempt?)

Draco thought about a witch this powerful, this ruthless coming to him with no family. If he made her a Malfoy, it would be her only house. No competing claim, no other influence. His instinct to control, to bully, was a passing thought compared to the deep desire to possess that now sparked to life. He could have her to himself. A real Malfoy witch. A wife that was entirely his.

Back in school, marrying her wouldn't have been possible—it would never have crossed his mind. Catching her in an empty classroom and shagging her until she hexed him—that *had* crossed his mind. But even if that had happened—even if they'd made a regular thing of it—he'd have done it knowing he'd marry Astoria.

That was what he was meant to want—a proper pureblood marriage. But he'd done what he was meant to do, and it had all ended up fucked. *His family had failed him. Always, always he was failing his family.* And now he felt monstrously angry and self-indulgent. He horribly, selfishly wanted what he had with his wife instead—the sick thrill of being alive again when she saw him, when she fought him. The sick thrill of being punished by her, of imagining each time that she might reward him instead. *Pay attention to me.* (It was starting to feel, sometimes, like he only existed when she saw him.) This was all for him and he didn't want to give it up, even if it made him feel like shit sometimes, too.

He saw now—he'd been distracted then, by the purity rubbish, his rivalry with Potter—that she was meant to be with him. It seemed simple now. Malfoys got the best, and she was the best. The smartest, most powerful, most accomplished, most capable. Singular—there was a reason she was always in the papers. She was even the best looking. Still a bit wild—and, Merlin, she couldn't dress herself—but the face? The tits? The arse? All animated by that furious, driving will.

If the Ministry had wanted to be rid of him, they'd only have had to give him a wife he had to hide—a distant backwater cousin who couldn't carry a conversation or a muggleborn nobody. But as much as they'd wanted to bugger him on this, in the end, they couldn't do it. They'd wanted the publicity, they'd wanted to punish her, and, when it came down to it, who else could they possibly match him with? The Ministry knew—the magic knew—Malfoys got the best. And he had done.

And people *hated* it. The thought made Draco's chest heat with a smug, nervy anger that wanted to burst out of him as laughter. The purists who already wanted to shame him, to boss him around, to tell him how he had failed them and could *redeem* himself with them now—they could sod right off with all



TUESDAY JULY 22, 2003

"You're Malfoy's man." The potioner looked startled to find Theo in his cramped office, Theo's long legs crossed as he lounged in the chair behind the man's desk.

"Oh, are there rumors?" Theo raised his eyebrows. "I'd like to think I'm my own man. Maybe I'm here to visit you on my own." He shrugged, bouncing his foot. "Or maybe Malfoy sent me. He is controlling—I'll grant you that. His wife, for instance. You've heard of her?"

The man nodded, licking chapped lips as he sank into the chair across from his own desk.

Theo lifted an invoice from a pile of paperwork and casually lit it on fire, watching the flames flare from his wand tip before dropping the parchment to burn on the blotter.

"Well, there's your problem. You've heard of her. And *I've* heard you've asked after her. And Draco, being controlling—" A significant look to the man. "He doesn't share. He doesn't want anyone else talking about her, thinking about her, cutting her into small pieces . . . You get the idea."

The man nodded, his eyes flicking between Theo and the burning parchment.

"He's a bit insane, if you ask me." Theo gave the man a commiserating look and lit another invoice on fire. "Wait, no—that's me." He smiled. "Now I remember. *Draco* can be reasonable. He told me just to talk to you, after all."

The man sat up straighter and lifted a hand. "Of course—"

"*Of course,*" said Theo, "I'm my own man, so . . . I might not listen to Draco."



Draco lounged in bed, feeding the greedy orange demon small pieces of Crabbe's tongue. The kitchen elves had accommodated his request that it be diced.

"Thank you, Draco," he prompted the half-kneazle beast, watching its flat face.

Its rough tongue licked his finger, and then it bit him.

"Just like our mistress," said Draco.

No pureblood wife would ever accuse Draco of being controlling. His wife was never at home, she did whatever she liked, she had no responsibilities at the Manor. She did not, in fact, have a household budget or clothing allowance that he reviewed. She had not planned a single ball, luncheon, or fundraiser. She had not sat through even one dinner while his mother and father viciously criticized her. They had not already made detailed plans, with a timetable, for their child's education and training. He'd simply provided her with some decent clothing—not even what he would like her to wear!—and wanted to know where she was.

"That's—"

"Unethical? These men assumed that risk when they decided to cheat on their wives with professionals who feel no loyalty to them. I don't feel sorry for them."

"It's criminal."

"Yes, darling, I am a criminal. Convicted."

"Malfoy, you're an *aristocrat*. You don't need the gold. What do you do this for?"

"I don't need gold, I need leverage," said Malfoy. "As someone serving a life sentence in Azkaban recently reminded me, power is power. It's better to have it than not." He looked away. "And I'm good at potions. I get bored."

Hermione considered the likely truth of this as well as her husband's utter amorality. The Malfoys weren't reformed after the war; they were merely shifting tack in their relentless pursuit of power. Malfoy saw her as nothing more than a tool, a political pawn. He only flirted with her because he was randy and bored enough to try to fuck her. He wasn't trying to drug her into thinking she loved him.

"What else are you brewing down here?" she asked.

"Veritaserum."

"Malfoy?" Hermione was sincerely shocked. "That's highly regulated! That's—are you also selling that to brothels?"

Malfoy gave her a wry look. "No need. I sell that to companies conducting internal investigations into who's leaking their proprietary intellectual property." He shrugged. "That or the mob."

"Malfoy?"

"Well," he raised an eyebrow, "what's the difference?"

"None, the way you do business," Hermione said darkly.

"That's right. Why are you down here?" Malfoy sounded sulky. He studied the stone floor. "Were you looking for me this time, or is that kneazle still missing in the Manor?"

Hermione hadn't settled on a tactic but she was too rattled to care. She blurted it out. "I want your blood."

"I want your blood too," said Malfoy, quick and aggressive, looking up at her.

"What? Why?" Why did he always have to fuck with her?

"I want to add your menstrual blood to the Manor's blood wards," said Malfoy, his expression challenging her to find fault with this. "You live here now and it's much more powerful than simple arterial blood."

"Oh." This was . . . true. So long as you didn't believe muggleborn blood was inferior to all other blood. He shouldn't want it at all.

His tongue on her arm, traveling over the scar, as he licks her blood into his mouth.

He stares at her over her hand, his lips clamped over her pulse as he sucks her blood into his mouth. He doesn't spit it out. He swallows it, his tongue moving over the wound as if he wants more.

Did Malfoy really not care what kind of blood she had?

"I usually suppress menses—"

"That's a waste—" He looked genuinely offended.

"I can collect some," she snapped, but her heart was racing. A *waste* of muggleborn blood? "I want to be part of the casting," she said, waiting to catch him in a bluff.

But Malfoy only nodded, looking wary. "All right."

Hermione shifted her weight as they shot each other tight-lipped glances. He wasn't backing down. He wasn't laughing at her for thinking he'd use her blood to ward the Manor.

"Why do you want my blood?" asked Malfoy.

"I won't tell you."

"No."

Hermione sighed, her chest tight. Malfoy was correct not to give her his blood without knowing its use.

"The scar from Bellatrix is irritated," she said, trying not to make eye contact, "and Black blood soothes it."

"Ingested or topical?" asked Malfoy sharply, his eyes on her.

"Topical," admitted Hermione, looking anywhere but him. "The other night, the blood from your nose . . ." She didn't finish. She knew they were both remembering his hand on her arm, his fingers dragging his blood down her skin while they both watched. Now he knew she'd been thinking of it all this time.

"I want something in return."

A sharp intake of breath—Hermione couldn't help it. *He was using a disfiguring war crime as leverage against her?* Why had she started to think—She didn't know what she had started to think.

"Can't you just do this out of the goodness of your heart," she ground out, letting her eyes go dead.

"The only relationships I understand are transactional," Malfoy said snidely, and it took her a moment to realize these words were her own, parroted back to her.

"You're getting my blood."

"In return for your being part of the casting. We already agreed to that. This is a new deal."

"What do you want?" she said, her expression hard and flat.

"I want to be the one to apply it—"

She opened her mouth—

"And! And you spend the night in my bed afterward."

She had fled last time, when she'd woken up. She'd eaten alone in her rooms—she couldn't find Crookshanks—and tried not to think about his forehead against her hip, his hand gripping her thigh.

"The whole night," he added, watching her.

He had some nerve. She felt her jaw flex, her molars clenched tight. She would have a headache after this. But part of Hermione was relieved. She didn't know how to forgive him or punish him. (Why was either *her* job, anyway?) Then he used the slur on her arm to extort her and she didn't have to do either. What was the point, when a scorpion never changed? They were in open negotiation, and she wanted his blood—she could concentrate on that.

"Until midnight," she said.

"Seven a.m."

"Five a.m."

"Six a.m."

"You don't touch me," she said.

"You don't wear clothes," he shot back, expressionless.

"I wear pyjamas."

"You wear a nightdress."

"You wear pyjamas."

"You don't wear underthings."

She huffed a breath through her nose, her lips pressed together. A deal with a scorpion would always end badly. It felt more honest, like she had some control—that was the trap.

"Fine," she said, her face mulish.

"Fine." He straightened, looking pleased.

Fuck.

"Let's get this over with," she snarled.

He smiled. "Yes, let's, darling."



SATURDAY JULY 26, 2003

"Try me," said Theo. Theo generally expected to be beat on a bit with men, especially with the Durmstrang boys who had to play hard man, the dark wizards who liked pain, the married men who were afraid Theo would turn up on their doorsteps after they'd chased and cajoled—but that didn't mean Theo didn't hit back.

The blond jerked back and swung on him, telegraphing everything. (Maybe he *hadn't* gone to Durmstrang.)

Theo dodged the blow and punched him in the gut—and then the blond *was* vomiting gin and semen all over the rug. Theo grabbed his collar and slung him down. He fell to his knees, retching.

Theo raised his foot to the blond's shoulder and pushed him over, rolled him onto his back. He knelt down and went through his pockets until he found the blade. A butterfly. He would have needed something sturdier.

"I'm not opposed to a little knife-play," said Theo, "but I want to be the one having fun."

Theo climbed on top of the boy, pinned him down, shoved his head to one side, Theo's forearm holding it in place, the heel of his palm in the blond's cheek as he took hold of his ear. "Look, lover, maybe you don't know who I am. I'm Theo Nott—"

The boy's eye rolled toward him, wide.

"—and you don't want to fuck with me. I'll have forgotten you by tomorrow, so—" He flipped the butterfly open with his other hand. "As a reminder to myself—"

The blond was panting, stunned. He should be fighting like hell. He'd learn. Theo cut a wide notch out of his ear—in the cartilage, where it wouldn't easily grow back—the boy finally starting to struggle when the pain hit.

Theo flicked the piece of ear away and flipped the knife closed. "There. If I see you again, I'll remember you don't like men. And if you see me again, you'll know to turn and walk the other way."

Theo dropped the knife into his pocket as he rose to stand over the boy. "See ya."

Then he walked to the door.

Go home or look for more trouble? He didn't want to go home. Maybe he'd go sleep in one of Pansy's spare rooms.

Theo walked away, his hands in his pockets, his fingers on the knife.

He wished Charlie had been waiting in the hallway to tell him it wasn't his fault, to grin and push him up against the wall and kiss him like it was all a joke and they were both in on it. But Charlie wouldn't have come to a place like this.

that weren't fun at all—and Theo had to trick himself into thinking everything was more interesting than it was by being drunk. Turning down the wattage on his brain forced him to try just a little bit harder, which made the world just a little less boring. And then Theo cared just a little less about being alone in his head.

Charlie seemed to think life was interesting—he nodded, engaged, while Luna talked about her research; his words sped up when he described his dragons' idiosyncrasies—and this made *him* interesting. When Charlie looked at Theo, his eyes were alive with mischievous delight, none of the desperation or calculation Theo was so used to seeing. Theo wondered what it was like, having so many brothers, knowing you could do what you liked because it wasn't all down to you. (Theo could do what he liked because anyone who might punish him was dead now.) Right now, Theo would like to be sucking Charlie's cock or watching Charlie suck his cock, his hands in Charlie's wild ginger curls, his eyes traveling over all those freckles to the areas where the freckles disappeared. But not in this room that Charlie wouldn't like—

Theo came back to the present, in which someone *was* sucking his cock in this room and he was about to come, thinking about the man who had walked away instead of the one who was here.

"All right," said Theo, breathing shallowly, tapping the Rosier cousin before his hands flew wide. He wouldn't grab his head and force—but, no, the blond gripped Theo's leg and his mouth clamped on. His eye contact was steady—he wanted this.

Theo bit his lip and shuddered, his mind a spinning kaleidoscope, and then he was pumping come into the blond's warm, hungry mouth and the blond was swallowing and swallowing, fisting himself faster, with frantic intensity, coming too now, all over the rug, his eyes squeezing shut, his tongue going still on Theo's cock, and then him sucking hard, Theo holding his breath. The boy's shoulders dropped. His breath was ragged through his nose, his hand moving slower and slower on his own cock, and then he gradually came back to himself.

Theo watched him, his own mouth open, his chest heaving. He liked these little moments when the other person was in their own world and he was on the outside, watching, even as their bodies were connected. He liked imagining what the other person was feeling. Theo didn't always feel connected to his own body, though sex helped. Violence wasn't as reliable—sometimes he felt viscerally alive and sometimes he just felt numb.

The boy's tongue laved Theo's cock until eventually he sat back, looking dazed, and Theo pulled him up and kissed him. He always liked to be kissed after, when it was him on his knees.

The boy broke the kiss and Theo thought maybe they'd talk, but he turned his back and dressed quickly—too quickly. Theo dressed too, scourgified the rug, watching him out of the corner of his eye. He'd made eyes at Theo in the pub—that's why Theo had sat down beside him—but now he avoided Theo's gaze, didn't speak.

Theo caught his shoulder, turned him, lowered his head to kiss him before they parted ways. No one needed to feel used here. They'd both got what they wanted.

"I'm not—"

"I know, lover," said Theo.

"Don't call me that," said the blond.

"Sure thing, *mate*." Theo's mood had officially soured.

"Get off me."

Theo held up his hands and backed up a step, his eyes going flat as he stared down the blond. He knew what was coming. Pointing out that the boy had picked the room and enjoyed himself would only make this worse. "You can have second thoughts, mate. Just don't bring me into it."

The boy sneered. "You're a degenerate."

"Sure," said Theo.

"I'm going to fuck you up."

"All right," said Theo.

"I'm going to cut off your dick and shove it down your throat."

Malfoy had refused to leave his brewing potions the night before—and if he'd thought that would make her beg, he was *wrong*—so she'd had to spend all day anticipating their horrible date tonight. She was determined to give him as little time as possible. She'd offered midnight as a starting time and had held firm when he countered with a ludicrously early seven p.m., finally settling on eleven after a fast-paced negotiation.

"Fine," Hermione had said. "We'll apply the blood earlier in the day and I'll meet you . . . *there* at eleven."

"We'll apply my blood," said Malfoy, "when you come to my bed."

"What? No, that's ridiculous—"

"Those are my terms. You agreed I'm in charge of application."

"I agreed you could apply it. I didn't say you were *in charge*—"

"Those are my terms," said Malfoy, his voice hardening. "If you want relief earlier, come to me earlier. You know you're always welcome in my bed, love."

Hermione had narrowed her eyes, but reminded herself that she wanted his blood. The burning pain in her arm had become . . . intense.

Now it was nearly time and she was stood in her dressing room, considering the fact that she suddenly owned multiple silk nightdresses in Slytherin green.

Hermione snorted. Malfoy was mistaken if he imagined she was still a virginal sixth year who would be intimidated by anything sexier than flannel.

Hermione took off her bra and stepped out of her knickers. She hadn't effectively countered this term during negotiations, and she wasn't going to give him the opportunity to demand she take them off in front of him or, Merlin forbid, the chance to keep them. Then she pulled the silk slip on over her head. It rippled around her, the fabric whispering across her skin and falling perfectly into place, a plunging neckline between delicate straps, a skirt to her calves.

It was as though Malfoy had anticipated exactly the line at which she would transfigure it into her old plaid nightgown.

Hermione studied the diamond flanked by sapphires on her left hand and considered one more time whether she was sure Draco Malfoy would not rape her. He had never been charged with rape as a Death Eater. She had been alone with him in the Manor for weeks and he had never so much as entered her bedroom. He had behaved in his bedroom—when he was hurt and drugged. The Black betrothal magic was supposed to prevent him from abusing her.

Malfoy laughing after she punched him in the chest.

Are you enjoying this as much as I am, love?

Malfoy laughing in her face, his perfect nose crooked, blood gushing over his lips, blood smeared across his teeth.

You're making me so hard, dear.

Hermione pictured it clearly: Malfoy choking her, his knee wedged between her legs, her hand smashed against his face, pushing his head back, him shuddering from the pain of the Black magic, sneering over clenched teeth.

Please put me out of my misery.

Maybe Malfoy wanted the pain. Maybe Malfoy wanted them both to be in pain. Maybe that was exactly what Malfoy wanted.

Nausea roiled through her.

Well, she had fought a war. She would kill Draco Malfoy if she had to.

Hermione picked up her wand and left the dressing room.

Hermione passed through the dark sitting room and slipped inside the doors—the wards welcoming—to his suite of rooms. She walked barefoot down the dark hall, her nipples hardening under the thin silk in the sudden chill. Why hadn't she worn a wrapper? Because she hadn't wanted to stand

there while he told her to take it off, to see the look in his eyes when he watched her disrobe. She'd worn skimpier clothing to muggle clubs—she wasn't going to be timid now.

His bedroom was awash in candlelight, gleaming off ebony wood and silver, and he was lounging against the ornate black headboard of the enormous bed, one knee up, conjuring white roses. The light shone off his hair, glittered along the diamond band, highlighted the planes of his face under his sharp cheekbones, above his hard jaw. He looked breathtakingly beautiful. Then he turned his gray eyes on her and opened his delicate mouth.

"You're late," he said, tossing the rose in his hand onto the dark green coverlet.

"Gracious as always, Malfoy." Hermione came to a halt several yards away and crossed her arms against her chest, her wand in hand. He was naked to the waist—of course he was. She wasn't going to tell him to put on a shirt and hear him sneer about her being afraid to see his scars.

Malfoy slid his wand under a pillow. "Come here."

"What?" Hermione startled. "No. We can do it on the settee—"

"I'm in charge of application," ground out Malfoy, "and I'm staying here. So *come here*."

Hermione exhaled heavily and approached the impossible bed. It wasn't curtained, and it felt like there was a huge expanse of open territory to cross once she scaled the side. There was no way to do this without—Godric, she was on her knees, crawling to him. It felt like an eternity before she was kneeling before him, his eyes raking over her. Why had she agreed to this?

"Show me."

Hermione realized she was holding her arm down, her wrist turned to keep her inner arm away from him. He would see it when he applied the blood—his blood. She didn't want him to see it.

She watched him as she lifted her arm. His eyes were lowered, intent on her forearm.

She raised it—the skin red and inflamed, the scar cracked open, black veins beginning to streak toward the tender inner skin of her elbow.

He sat forward and snatched her arm up with both hands, his fingers cradling her elbow, her wrist.

"Why didn't you come to me sooner?" He was furious, his jaw pushed forward. He looked up at her, his eyes burning. A nod to her arm. "You hate me this much."

How dare he ask her that. "I wouldn't expect *you* to do anything."

He blinked at her, breathing hard through his nose. His head fell back, his eyes closed, teeth on edge—a posture of pure frustrated rage, as though he was screaming at her in his mind. She eyed his throat, fully exposed to her, the Azkaban tattoo stretching with his pale skin. He heaved a sigh with his whole chest, his head falling forward, the muscles flexing above his jaw. A shock of white-blond hair fell over his forehead.

Rage and shame, Hermione thought. *Good.* But her back and chest were tingling, buzzing, prickling while her arm burned. Something bad was coming, something bad was inevitable.

Malfoy yanked her arm across her body and she fell into him, a yelp surprised out of her as her bare shoulder hit him hard in the chest, her head knocking against his jaw—jarring skin-on-skin contact, warmth, his other hand gripping her at the waist through thin silk, him clumsily turning her. An irritated noise from the back of his throat as she scrabbled to right herself while he positioned her.

Then she was sitting between his legs, her mostly naked back to his bare chest, his arms and knees hemming her in as he sat forward against her.

"Malfoy—"

"Shh," he whispered, low. His left hand was cradling her wrist, his forearm under hers. The Dark Mark was touching her bare skin—she couldn't feel it. His right hand swept up and she felt him smooth her hair back from his face before he leaned closer to her ear. "I'm in charge of application."

A wandless accio and he was slipping an ornate bloodletting ring onto his right thumb. Hermione's breath caught and she tensed—of course he had one. Dark wizards who did too much bloodwork owned them. They weren't illegal, just rare and distasteful to a Gryffindor like her.

Holding her breath, she watched her disreputable Slytherin husband's hands as they met in front of her, his arms and knees caging her in. His chin was over her left shoulder, his thighs around her; he was

"Slow down, lover," said Theo, reaching across himself for the boy's glass, his other arm on the back of his chair. "Or in an hour you'll be vomiting gin and semen all over the rug."

The boy's face jerked toward Theo. He wasn't a boy, really—he was Theo's age—but his nervousness made him seem younger. (And, well, maybe Theo still thought of himself as a boy a lot of the time—a boy left home alone now.) He was shorter than Theo, solidly built, with dirty blond hair. A Rosier cousin, Theo suspected. They'd all gone to Durmstrang.

"I'm not—"

"Right," said Theo, smiling. Purebloods were never gay. They were meant to be making pureblood babies, after all. "Neither am I."

"Right," said the blond, his eyes falling to Theo's crotch.

Theo tilted his head toward him and smiled, his eyes knowing.

Theo was feeling giddy and mean, his blood up from playing thug with Draco. Draco hadn't always been a good friend, but there were moments when Theo was reminded why Draco was his favorite. It wasn't even the stunt with the tongue, though that had felt good. It was the way he always wanted Theo with him, no matter what people like Crabbe thought of Theo.

"Are you—"

"I'm whatever I need to be," said Theo. It sounded like a line, but, then, people often assumed Theo was lying when he was telling the truth.

Right now, he needed to be someone who would give this boy a push—not to do something he didn't want to do, but to do something he *did* want to do.

Theo very overtly looked to the blond's mouth and then up to his eyes. "Are you going to suck my cock in the toilets or in a room upstairs?" he asked.

The Rosier cousin's eyes widened, his pupils blown out in the dark pub. "A room upstairs."

"Good boy," said Theo. He stood and pulled the blond up by his shirt collar.

Twenty-five minutes later, Theo had a room in an extremely disreputable inn in Knockturn and this ingenue on the rug, talking him through it. Theo had played the eager to please neophyte many, many times. The role reversal gave him a slight out of body sensation.

"That's it. Relax," he murmured, stroking the blond's head. "You're doing so well. You can take a little more."

Theo winced. He was catching a lot of teeth, but what could you do. It still felt good. And the blond had been hard from the start, fisting himself as he looked up at Theo, letting Theo push his cock deeper into his mouth.

Theo let him work, his fingers light in his hair, his thoughts drifting to Charlie. *See ya.* But Theo didn't think he would. He didn't think Charlie came to places like this. Theo *did* come to places like this, and he'd never seen Charlie here. Of course, maybe that meant Charlie hadn't heard the worst of the gossip. . .

Theo had sold some things of his father's he probably shouldn't have admitted to having, traded for some items he shouldn't be caught holding, slept with some people who'd turned out to be trouble just because, well, why not? Theo wasn't very good at saying no. He was better at finding out what happened when you didn't say no. Usually something fucked up! But what else was new. Being alive was very fucked up.

Right now, it was fucked up he was thinking about what Charlie was thinking about him. Charlie wasn't thinking about him at all—Charlie had already walked away and forgotten him, which was what Theo was meant to have done. But Theo had a bad habit of thinking. (People thought he didn't think because he acted impulsively. But a lot of people thought a lot slower than Theo did, and they didn't know just how much he'd thought about it before he'd let the intrusive thoughts win.) What if Charlie *were* thinking of him? Could this be a nice little fantasy Theo could spin out to keep himself occupied? Life was so tedious because no one ever wanted to have fun—they usually wanted to do things to you

He dropped his hand, his voice becoming businesslike. "Vance Crabbe called me to him to remind me of my loyalties. He finds my past behavior a disappointment and my present behavior proof that I am a blood traitor. He advised me to redeem myself—"

"How?" she blurted.

"I'm afraid I forgot to ask before I cut out his tongue." A corner of his mouth quirked, a ghost of his usual sneer.

"You cut out—"

"Nott helped."

Hermione's heart was racing. "Because—"

"Because he did not recognize my right to run my house as I see fit. He insulted members of my house. He insulted me."

"But I insult you all the time, Malfoy! Are you threatening to cut out—"

"Of course not," snapped Malfoy. "It is a wife's duty to share her opinions on matters of her household—"

"It's my opinion you're a violent, controlling psychopath!" Hermione ignored the sniggers coming from the settee.

"I am the violent, controlling lord of your house. Just because your opinions are *wrong*, love, does not mean you can withhold them from me. I will not allow it. You are educated, you are intelligent—I demand you contribute. Or will you defy me with blessed silence?"

Hermione opened her mouth and paused, stymied.

"Speechless, darling?" A faint smirk as he touched the pad of his bloody thumb to her chin. "Rest assured I never tire of your tongue, even if you only use it to lash me. It is worth more to me, even, than what I have been offered for it on the potions black market."

A sharp intake of breath as her lip curled in revulsion, his hand falling away. "Are you telling me this to scare me?"

"No, I am telling you what your husband does. I meet from time to time with an ingredients broker who has fielded inquiries. I've told him I will not entertain offers or make items available. I assume you already incendio your hair and nail clippings?"

"I'm not a *firstie*, Malfoy," she sneered.

"Then continue to take care. The wards are too strong to let treasure hunters in, but the Reconciliation Act has renewed interest in you. I know you find me old-fashioned, but I have a duty to protect my household and, now that you have demanded it of me, a duty to inform my wife. I am doing my duty."

Malfoy looked at her, a strange tension in his face and shoulders. Godric, why did he cling to duty like this? Hadn't the war shown how utterly bankrupt it was? Hadn't it already ruined his life?

But Hermione *was* someone who wanted to know things. And apparently that insatiable appetite for information had led her to make a deal with this devil. He wanted her complicit, corrupted—

—*a real wife to me*.

Hermione shuddered.

"Thank you, Malfoy, for letting me know," she said, distracted by her need to get away, to think.

He ducked his head. Had she ever thanked him before? Quietly, he asked, "Why were you looking for me?"

"What? Oh." Hermione had come here prepared to talk to him about blood and had found him covered in it. She hadn't been prepared at all. She cast about. "I was looking for Crookshanks."

"Who?" said Malfoy.

Hermione snapped to. "My cat! Have you seen him?"

"No," chorused Nott and Parkinson from the settee.



angling his left wrist away from hers, his fingers still lightly holding her arm. And then the metal talon on his thumb was puncturing his wrist—he didn't hesitate—his arms tighter around her—Godric, the heat coming off his skin—and the blood was burbling up—she gasped as it jetted.

His right hand was holding her wrist—his arms so warm and taut around her—and he had turned his left wrist to meet hers, his forearm above hers now. The blood was flowing freely onto her wrist, running into his hand as he slid his arm with the Dark Mark along hers, dragging his blood down her forearm, across the scar, his hand gliding along her skin as blood pooled beneath his palm.

Hermione whimpered and slumped against him as a wave of relief washed over her from her wrist inward, the breath pushing from her lungs as her shoulders dropped. His arms and thighs tightened around her as her head fell back against his hard shoulder, cradled against his neck. She sighed, the burn of her skin cooling, the pulsating pain in the scar slowing with her heartbeat. Godric, he was kneading his blood into her—the bloodletting ring discarded, his thumbs pushing and circling, his fingers digging into the muscles of her forearm, his blood slick between them, pumping out of his wrist into the broken skin of the scar.

Hermione panted weakly as he murmured above her. "You hate me, love, you hate me so much . . . You could have come to me . . . I could have done this for you . . . I could have made you feel better . . . But you hate me so, *so* much. You hate me, you hate me."

His hands were rubbing his blood into her arm. The relief felt like pleasure, radiating out from the scar, spreading like warm, bubbling treacle through her body. The back of her neck prickled, her head lolling against him. Her back tingled against his bare chest—she could feel the raised lines of his scars against her as he breathed. Her chest was buzzing. She felt lightheaded, as though she were the one losing blood, as though she were the one bleeding out.

"You hate me," he cooed. "You hate me so much, love."

She could feel his fast heartbeat through her back, feel heat pooling low in her belly, her cunt throbbing, blood dripping off her arm and into her lap.

"I hate you, Draco," she murmured, collapsed inside the warm, hard frame of him, surrounded by him.

His pointy chin twitched toward her. Bloody fingers were catching her chin, angling her face up as he ducked his head and, quick and impulsive, kissed the corner of her mouth. "Oh, love."

She sighed, her eyes drifting closed.

His hands on her, his arms around her. His hands slowing, stilling. Him sighing, his chest moving against her.

She heard him quietly healing himself. An accio, one arm around her, potion bottles clinking against each other as they were thrown down into the sheets. Her wand was somewhere, forgotten.

Then he was turning her with him, his arms around her, pulling her down with him, her legs tangled in his, a hard knee wedged between hers. Her body was heavy and warm, buzzing with a soothing pleasure. She was too tired to open her eyes.

"Sleep, love," he whispered, wet fingers brushing her hair back from her temples, his breath ghosting across her cheek, his heat all around her. She could barely smell the citrus and cloves under the scent of his blood.



SUNDAY JULY 27, 2003

Hermione woke to weak morning light. She was enveloped in warmth—on her right side, him curled behind her, his arm under her neck, the smell of blood heavy on them, her nightdress still damp with it. Her clit was throbbing—his left arm was snaked over her hip, his hand gripping her inner right thigh through the thin silk, the edge of his palm hard against her core. She sighed, her body moving against his

hand. Pleasure sparked and Hermione stopped breathing, her neck, her back, her chest prickling with heat. Something bad was about to happen.

It had been ages—she'd been very single when the Reconciliation Act had passed. He'd been harassing her for weeks and she hadn't been touching herself, refusing to because it would mean admitting she was thinking of him. Now her cunt was pulsing with her heartbeat against the pressure of his hand, his chest rising and falling against her as he breathed—asleep, though she imagined his grip on her tightened.

She took a deep breath and her hips shifted as she exhaled, pressing her clit harder against his hand. Her cunt clenched and she shifted her hips again. She was breathing harder, her stomach tightening as she pressed against him, her clit radiating pleasure, everything tightening as she thought of him waking, pulling the nightdress up, his fingers plunging into her and then him holding her against him as his cock pushed into her. She was grinding against his hand, imagining him stroking into her, his hips snapping against her as he whispered “You hate me, love. You hate me, you hate me, you hate me.” He was hot against her and everything was tightening and then she was pressed hard against his hand as her cunt spasmed, waves of pleasure rocketing through her. She shuddered. She never came this fast. She was twitching against him. She was breathing hard.

Was he breathing harder too? Was he awake?

Her adrenaline spiked even as heat rippled through her. Her hand flung out—sharp pain. Suddenly she was wide awake, awash in shame. *What was she doing?*

She was panting as she looked around her in the low light—a thorn. She'd thrown her hand onto a crushed rose, one he'd conjured while he waited for her. The bed she was sleeping in looked depraved—wilted roses and empty potion bottles, her wand discarded alongside the bloodletting ring on twisted, bloody sheets. Her nightgown was bloody. Her arm was covered in dried blood. The hand she'd just rubbed herself to orgasm on was gloved in blood, the diamond band crusted in it. The forearm that pressed the Dark Mark to her was streaked in blood.

Hermione inhaled sharply, trying to catch her breath. *What was she doing?*

He sighed heavily, his weight rolling into her. Had he been awake? Had he woken to her getting off on him? What was she thinking? She started to pull away from him, but his arm snaked around her waist, cinching tight.

“Five more minutes,” he murmured, his body hot against her. “You were late. I have you for five more minutes.”

“You’ve already broken—you’re not meant to be touching me,” said Hermione, swallowing the words when she realized—*what was she saying?*

But he only whined, “Stay anyway.”

She had to get out of here. She struggled to her elbow, propping herself up and pushing him back. He fell off her, not resisting, and she looked over her shoulder to see him lying disheveled and boneless against the pillow. His hair was wild, streaked with blood where he’d pushed it back from his forehead. He gazed at her stupidly, his lips parted.

“I’m not sorry,” he said.

Hermione exhaled. Was there a more Malfoy thing to say?

She stared at him. She wouldn’t say sorry either—he’d use it against her forever. More leverage. Was this how Malfoy lived—no thanks or apologies, just trading bad behavior?

Malfoy was turning her into a terrible person. Or she’d already been one.

Hermione picked up her wand and climbed out of his huge, blood-soaked bed without looking back. She walked down the dim hallway, through the dark sitting room, and into her own suite, where she picked up speed, moving directly to the clawfoot tub in her bathroom.

She stripped off the stiff, damp nightdress while the tub filled itself, and then incendioed the dark green mass in the sink. The blood had seeped through the silk and her body was a red impressionist landscape. She could smell the heat from her cunt. She looked at her face in the mirror over the sink. Her hair was feral, twisted with blood and sweat. Bloody fingerprints marked her chin and temple. *Oh, love.* She could feel the kiss on the corner of her mouth.

His blood-flecked face opened up to her—his clear gray eyes seemingly unguarded, his lips just slightly parted. He was suddenly still, calm, as though focused solely on her answer. As though it would please him if she had been.

Hermione’s chest and back were tingling, buzzing, like something important was happening. Something inevitable. Something awful that couldn’t be stopped. How could he look so calm right now? Why did she feel like she could not look away from him?

“What happened?” she murmured. “Is . . . is any of this blood yours?”

A smile tugged at his lips. “No, love, I’m fine. You’re worried?”

“Disappointed,” she said, looking straight into his eyes.

He huffed a laugh, his sharp chin jerking up. “Someone else just called me a disappointment.”

The chill ran all the way down Hermione’s back. “What happened to them?”

She was hemmed in against the bookshelves, the door at her back her best escape. Nott and Parkinson were conspicuously not interrupting.

He licked his lips, watching her face. “Do you want to know what I did? I thought you had no interest in knowing where I am.”

Hermione stiffened at hearing her own words. She thought of what she’d told Shacklebolt.

I’m not his parole auror. I’m not responsible for his actions.

“I deserve to know what kind of man I’ve been married to,” she said, a hedge.

“You know what kind of man I am: Death Eater, war criminal, convict.” The heat was rolling off him. Hermione’s nose was full of the smell of blood.

“That was in the past,” said Hermione, tripping over what she meant by that. She didn’t mean anything—she was making a point. “I deserve to know what’s happening around me now.”

“What I did.”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded.

“Because you want to know what I do,” Malfoy said. “You want me to tell you.”

“All right, yes,” she said impatiently. She was not a person who *didn’t* want to know things. “I want to know what you do. I want you to tell me.”

Malfoy seemed to thrum with satisfaction, his gray eyes boring into hers. “You demand to know what your husband does.”

Hermione clenched her teeth, her lips pressing together.

You demand to know what your husband does. His jaw tight, his eyes pinning her.

The back of her neck prickled. *Fine.* “I demand to know what my husband does,” she bit out.

He ducked his sharp chin, raising his eyebrows as though it was important that she understood what came next. “Because you take an interest in your house.”

Fuck.

Hermione met his gaze.

A lady—beautiful, powerful, a real wife to me . . . You are the lady of my manor, and I cannot marry a different one to do the things for me that you won’t . . . Do you wish for my mother to continue running the Manor? . . . Do you wish to be kept as a pet?

Hermione stared at him, her desire to keep her distance from Draco Malfoy warring with her desire to know everything. She didn’t want to be kept in the dark, a prisoner, a dumb guest in the place she lived.

But if she agreed to this . . .

Hermione swallowed. “I take an interest in my house.”

Malfoy lifted his chin and looked down his nose at her, the gesture haughty, his eyes clear and serious. He raised a hand, his signet rings streaked with blood, and caught her chin between deft fingertips. Hermione went still as he leaned in and very, very gently kissed the center of her forehead, a bizarre benediction.

"C'mon, Granger. He's a dog—walk him like one. But you've got to have something more interesting to talk about than *Draco*," Parkinson had turned back to the *Vogue*, faintly smiling as she flipped the page. "What do you do for work again?"

"Oh, erm—" Parkinson looked disinterested but, well, she'd asked. "Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. There are caseworkers but I'm in administration. I'm currently working on a legislative proposal that would commit the Ministry to subsidizing monthly wolfsbane potion for the child victims of Greyback."

"Makes sense." Parkinson's tone was offhand but her expression was thoughtful. "I'll tell my man in the Wizengamot to support it."

Hermione was caught off guard. "Your man in—"

"The Parkinson hereditary seat?"

Her expression said Hermione was a dullard, and Hermione suddenly thought maybe she was. She hadn't realized *Pansy* was the one directing her family's representative now.

"I'll tell our rep to vote for your little proposal when it comes up." Her expression said this—doing the right thing for the greater good and having to talk about it—was all very annoying.

"That's wonderful, Pansy. Thank you—"

But Parkinson waved her off, turning another page. "I do care about *children*, Granger. And besides, I'm about to be heavily invested in Longbottom's plant empire." She raised an eyebrow. "I expect the Ministry or some brewers will want to buy some wolfsbane."

Hermione's thanks caught in her throat. *These fucking Slytherins . . .*

Parkinson looked up as the room's floo flashed green and Malfoy and Theo Nott stumbled out—laughing in muggle suits, their hands streaked red.

Hermione pushed off from the bookshelves, turning to stare. Malfoy, closer to her, grinned nastily as Nott, laughing, jostled him. Their hands were painted in fresh blood, blood splattered on their faces, smeared where Nott had rubbed something—a hand, a sleeve—across his forehead and into his thick hair. Malfoy's signet rings were bloody, his diamond band—once again—glinting through blood. He held a small, wet sack that he dropped to the hearth flagstones with a meaty smack.

Hermione's chest and back were tingling, like something bad was coming.

Is this the part where I tell you he's sweet if you give him a chance?

Parkinson said, "What have you two been up to?" just as Nott called out, "Oh, Pans, it was brilliant—"

And then Malfoy was turning toward Hermione, saying, "Mrs. Malfoy," amusement still written across his features. He was smiling, something more tempered now than the feral grin, his eyes bright with a cold fire.

He looked her up and down—his interest intense and matter-of-fact. He'd bloodied someone violently—maybe worse—and now he wanted to bed her. Where was the sad boy from last night?

"*This* psycho decides—oh, hullo, Granger—" Nott stood still for a moment, his arm thrown tightly around Malfoy's neck. "It's good to see you again, Granger. I always enjoyed our classes together back in school, and I'm happy to hear you're thriving after the war. As I am forever indebted to your husband for his many kindnesses to me in childhood, I am now your faithful servant as well. Please do call on me if I can be of use." He gave her a dazzling, sincere smile. "And your man was in fine form today!"

He landed a kiss on Malfoy's temple and then spun away to the drinks cart. Malfoy didn't take his eyes off her.

Hermione watched as Parkinson began fussing at Nott to let her scourify the blood before he got it on the glassware. He booped her nose with a bloody fingertip and she began smacking him in earnest.

Hermione looked to Malfoy, her eyes narrowed. "What the fuck—"

"Just like the Gryffindor common room?" Malfoy smiled indulgently.

"Malfoy—"

He stepped closer, and her breath caught. He reeked of blood, the barest hints of citrus and cloves below the copper tang. "Yes, love?" His voice was low, light. "Were you looking for me?"

She stayed in the tub a long time. All the blood washed off and the scar was a pale, healthy pink, the only break in her skin the scratch where she'd pricked herself on the thorn. She ran her fingers up and down the scar, trying to decide how to feel.

She could still feel his arms around her. His scarred chest moving against her as he breathed. His shoulder cradling her head. His hand tight on her inner thigh. The relief seeping through her.

She was ashamed of what she'd done while he slept. But there were some things she wasn't sorry for either.



SUNDAY JULY 27, 2003

Theo slipped into Fernsby's cluttered curiosity shop, a front for his business fencing dark artefacts, banned poisons, and questionably sourced potion ingredients.

He found the proprietor in the back, stood behind a counter that was also a display case, leaning forward at an unhealthy tilt.

"Tell Longbottom he didn't have to hit back so hard," said Fernsby as Theo approached, his shoulders drawn in in the cramped aisle. The man's skin was pale, tinged gray, and damp with perspiration. "I never told those McDuffie boys to try him."

Theo arched an eyebrow.

"In fact, I specifically said he's particular about who he sells to and I said—I know I said this—to take no for an answer."

Theo winced as Fernsby turned to the side to vomit, then took the opportunity to survey the selection of enchanted hourglasses in the case while Fernsby retched and coughed. It sounded like he had a bucket on the floor back there.

Fernsby slowly faced forward, wiping blood from his mouth with a shaky hand. His breath rattled through him. "Tell Longbottom he doesn't have to do this—if there's an antidote, I'll pay the price. Anything he wants in trade from the shop. I'll make it up to him. Whatever he wants."

Theo canted his head from side to side, his lips pursed, considering.

"I know Longbottom doesn't like the firms," Fernsby swallowed hard, his hands braced against the countertop, and looked up at Theo. "Tell him I've learned my lesson. I have."

Theo nodded slowly, spinning his wand. "Well, Fernsby, that's good to know," he said. "But I'm Malfoy's man—here about something else you fucked up. You're on your own with Longbottom."

Theo grimaced as Fernsby vomited again. This was why it didn't pay to fuck with Longbottom.



Draco was lying on the settee nearest the fireplace, the orange abomination on his chest, one knee drawn up, when the flames flashed green and Theo stepped out of the floo, rubbing his elbow.

"Oh dear," he said, looking at Draco. "You've gone full Victorian ghost. What's happened?"

"Nothing. Lost loads of blood last night," said Draco, running his fingertips through the kneazle demon's fur. "That replenishing potion is shite, by the way. Three doses and I'm still not right."

"Tried to take Granger to bed, then?" Theo was busying himself at the bar cart.

familiar black bob—longer than at school but just as sharp—above the back of the settee closest to the door. Hermione cautiously made her way nearer, hugging the room's built-in bookshelves, until she was near the large hearth. She had never had a good relationship with Parkinson—who had?—and she could see now that Malfoy's ex-girlfriend sat with her back to the settee's arm, her legs stretched across the velvet cushions, one ankle crossed over the other. Black stiletto heels lay beside her on the Persian rug. Her eyeliner was thick and precise, her lips dark red against her pale skin.

"Parkinson. What are you doing here?"

Parkinson looked up and raised an open *Vogue* from her lap with an expression that said this was obvious.

Hermione shifted her weight, annoyed that she was glad she was still in her heels and dress from work. "Are you here a lot?"

"Jealous, Granger?" Parkinson smirked. "Relax, I'm riding way too much Longbottom dick to bother with Draco. Please tell me you Gryffinbitches were passing that around. No?" She snorted at Hermione's expression before turning back to her magazine. "Too late, witch. That's all mine."

"Poor Neville," muttered Hermione. Godric, Parkinson was abrasive.

But Parkinson only laughed. "Oh, Granger. He can more than handle me. Not my fault you twats overlooked what you had right in-house." She flipped a glossy page. "More like poor Draco. You're here chasing me off when you don't even want him."

"I'm not—" Hermione's anger was building fast. "Any time he wants, Malfoy is free to take off this ring and shag the city—"

Another indelicate snort. "Yeah, but Draco's not going to do that, is he?"

"Why not?" said Hermione nastily, crossing her arms as she leaned back against the bookshelves. "He had no problem fucking around on you."

Godric, Slytherins brought out the worst in her.

"Touché." Parkinson's eyes were narrowed, but then her face cleared. "But we were never betrothed. Draco always knew he wasn't going to marry me."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at this rationalization, but Parkinson looked at her with an expression that said Hermione really didn't get it. "He grew up watching Lucius and Narcissa. All the family lore—

"She adopted a sing-song cadence: 'Malfoy men worship their women,' 'Malfoy men don't stray,' 'Malfoy men protect what's theirs.' Yeah, Lucius really shagged the hippogriff on that last one, but Draco takes it seriously. Now that he's bound, he'll sire a half-blood—" A pointed look at Hermione. "He won't sire a bastard."

"Merlin, you people talk about yourselves as though you're cattle."

Parkinson just shrugged, already back to her magazine.

"And poor Draco is never going to worship me—"

"Oh, get over yourself, Granger." Parkinson slapped her magazine closed, her finger marking her place. "Draco's known he'd have an arranged marriage since he was five. He's been sleeping across from his future wife's empty bedroom since he was out of nursery—"

Hermione flinched. Merlin, that was depressing.

"So please stop thinking you're so *different* and *special* that you're the *one person* Draco can't do his duty for. Godsdamn." She jerked her chin. "Let me guess—so far he's bought you a bunch of clothes and raided the family vault for jewels. Flowers? Yeah, boo hoo, Granger. I can see why you broke his nose again."

Parkinson had the nerve to roll her eyes, and now Hermione was leaning forward, her arms crossed tighter against her chest. "Oh, *please* stop pretending this is romantic. He is the slimiest, most controlling, most manipulative, insulting—"

Parkinson burst out laughing. "Is this the part where I tell you he's sweet if you give him a chance?" She kept laughing, slowly shaking her head. "No, he really is a terrible prat." She was giggling now.

Merlin. Hermione sighed and leaned her head back against the shelves.

Crabbe bucked beneath them.

"Watch yourself, Nott," Draco said, a quick jerk of his chin to focus Theo's attention on the sharp end of his wand as he settled his full bodyweight onto Crabbe.

Now it was just a problem to solve. It was a tricky angle—Draco had to duck and tilt his head, avoiding Theo's elbow—but he hooked his thumb in Crabbe's lower lip, dragging his jaw down, and Theo yanked Crabbe's tongue up, and Draco got a good cut at the base. Blood began to spurt. The breath heaving from Crabbe's silencioed bellows was harsh and frantic, blowing blood and saliva into Draco's face as he sliced cleanly through, Theo falling forward with a jerk as the tongue came free.

Blood gouted thickly as Theo fell onto his shoulder and rolled over, bouncing back up to his feet with a laugh. "Phew!" He cracked his neck, then held up the tongue still gripped in the forceps' beak, dripping blood. Suddenly, it was done.

Vance Crabbe was a quivering, blotchy, bloody mess, tears streaming from his eyes.

Draco felt a buzzing numbness.

"Crabbe," he said, crouched near the older man's head, "I'm turning you onto your side so you don't drown in your own blood. Vince was a good friend to me when I needed one, and I don't want to be responsible for another Crabbe death. But you kept insulting me when you should have held your tongue. Now I'm going to take it back to the Manor and feed it to my wife's cat."



Hermione had spent a frustrating afternoon at the Ministry, incendioing howlers and mulling Bill Weasley's professional advice while her thoughts traveled back to a nearly naked Draco Malfoy, his bare skin warm against her, his fingers on her arm, his blood dripping onto his snowy white sheets. Now she wanted that blood. Could she just . . . ask?

No, he was a scorpion. Everything was mind games and dirty tricks. He stared at her body while he told her their marriage was a humiliation. He swallowed her blood and told her she was a curse. He looked at her with open want as he told her he hated her. He'd like to fuck her—so what? She'd be a fool not to believe him when he told her how he really felt.

Then he acted surprised when she didn't want to play paper dolls with him, dressing up like his pretend pureblood wife. Maybe pureblood wives were accustomed to their husbands saying "I hate you."

But she could still feel his fingertips dragging down her forearm. Could hear him saying "I hate it" so sadly . . . Should she believe that too?

Her memory returned again and again to the Dark Mark. Some part of her was always aware he bore it, always imagining it lurking under his sleeve. Had she thought, maybe, that it would look worse? It was strange, seeing him lying in bed—hurt and pathetic—with it on his arm like it was just another tattoo as he swiped at his face, took the potion bottle from her, reached for her wrist . . .

She was thinking again about his fingertips running across her scar, about his pale hand gripping her thigh, the bloodied diamond band winking in the low light, the Dark Mark so close to being pressed against her. (Had it touched her? It hadn't—she was sure.)

I hate this.

Maybe she could just ask.

I hate it.

She would—she would ask.

She drifted down the Manor hallway outside their suites, having only stopped to remove her robes before she'd begun to look for him.

She reached his study door. She knew he worked here but she'd never sought him out. Now she slipped inside and stopped. She did not sense Malfoy in the room but she could see Pansy Parkinson's

"Obviously." The beast's claws were out, pricking him through his shirt as it purred. "She only wants my blood. Drained me, got herself off, and left me with a raging hard on in my own bloody sheets."

Theo burst out laughing. "You poor little slut." He threw himself into an armchair, all elbows and knees, tumbler in hand. "How soon till you can do it again?"

"Don't know," said Draco morosely. "Bella left a curse in her arm, when she carved her up—"

Theo hummed sympathetically.

"And, you know, I didn't stop her—Bella. I did fuck all." He was angry with the shame of it, couldn't look Theo in the eye. "Stood there and listened to her scream. I can still hear her—"

"Nothing you could have done, mate. Bella would have carved you up too—"

"She *would* have done, sooner than later—and I stood there and let her cut up Granger like that would save me. Like if I were just *pathetic* enough—Swotty, pain in the arse Granger stood up to her more—"

"Course she did." Theo laughed. "Remember that rumor she set Snape on fire? Remember her in Divinations?"

"Merlin, she was *mental*." Draco almost smiled. "And now the curse is acting up—probably my fault, making her live here. And my blood makes it better, but she hates me so much—she didn't tell me till it was poisoning her. She'd rather her bloody arm rot off than touch me—"

"But that's Granger," said Theo. "She'll never admit when she doesn't know something. She hates asking for help."

Draco nodded noncommittally, looking at the half-kneazle's judgmental expression.

"Is it the ring?" asked Theo, off-hand.

"What?" Draco finally looked up at him.

"Making the curse act up. You've got her wearing Black betrothal jewelry, right? Supposed to react to harm done by your bloodline?"

"Fuck." Draco let his head fall back against the settee arm. "Fuck! She kept asking me to take it off and I told her it wouldn't be safe for her—just fucking with her because I like seeing her wear it, right? And now she won't ask again because—godsdammit, she probably thinks I'm going to rape her if I take it off—or Lucius will kill her. Which, all right, he did consider before he decided he and Narcissa were all in. And now she's reasoned it's safer to let her *arm rot* than be unprotected around me. Fuck."

Theo was laughing helplessly. "Oh, mate. You just keep digging your own grave."

"I did say some horrendous shit to her in school." It felt good to say it to Theo, someone who had been there and understood. "She was an easy target, you know? And I hated her for being Potter's."

Theo snorted. "Merlin, he would have been lost without her."

"Right? And she thought he was so bloody brilliant." Draco looked to Theo. "Do you reckon we would have accepted her? If she'd been sorted into Slytherin?"

"I don't know—"

Draco felt deeply unsettled, watching Theo contemplate this, as if Theo's answer would change the past.

"Yes," said Theo finally, decisively. "Once she proved herself. You would have been a right arse at first. But there's always firstie hazing. And there are half-blood snakes. After she proved herself, we would have looked after her."

Draco nodded, wishing this were true.

"Imagine if she'd broken Potter's nose," Theo said with a grin.

"Salazar!" Finally, Draco laughed. "All right—then we would have." He was smiling now. Imagine.

They're going into Hogsmeade and she's wearing one of those awful muggle jumpers and he's teasing her, telling her he's going to buy her a proper coat to hide it under. She shoves at him, and he grabs her, throwing his arm over her shoulder, and she leans into him, her wild hair in his face. She asks him the questions she used to ask Weaselbee and for once—for once—she listens to him when he answers.

They're partnered up for potions—determined to beat Theo and his partner's marks. They're working late—it's a multi-day brew—and her curls are frizzy with steam, knotted up off her neck, their shirts unbuttoned at the wrists and collars. They're bickering about her chopping technique, she's scolding him, and then he follows her into the ingredients closet,

pushes her up against the shelves. He kisses her and she kisses back, and then he's licking the salt off her neck, his hand up her skirt, and he says, "Don't tell Pansy," and she says, "Oh, I'm telling her. We're going to have a proper catfight over you," and he's smiling against her mouth as his fingers push into her.

It's the Yule Ball and he's dancing with Pansy but he's watching her. He lets Pansy get too drunk so he can leave her with Millie, steal Granger from the prat she came with. "Come outside with me," he whines until she relents and then he has her up against the rough stone, he's kissing her hungrily, his hands on her breasts, her arse, wrinkling her delicate dress. "I wanted to come with you," he says, and she pulls back. "Then why didn't you, Draco?" she says, sharp. "Are you ashamed of me?" He's trying to kiss her. "C'mon, no, it's not like that. I just have to—you know how Pansy is." But she's not having it. "It's because I'm muggleborn, isn't it?" He's pressing into her, trying to keep her there. "Don't be like that," he murmurs into her ear. "I want to fuck you again. I want to be inside you. Please, Granger. Let me." And then she's pushing him away, starting to cry. "I hate you, Draco."

Yes, imagine.

"She slipped." He couldn't look at Theo. He sounded like a third year, saying this. But he couldn't stop himself. "Called me by my given name."

"What'd she say?" asked Theo gently.

"I hate you, Draco." He couldn't control what his face was doing.

"Mate." Theo's voice held a note of warning.

"She'll never forgive me."

"Merlin, what shit have you been listening to?" Theo sounded truly frustrated now. "Forgiveness isn't a real thing. Have you ever *forgiven* anybody? No. It's just something the Puffs and Gryffindors talk about because it sounds all mysterious and high and mighty and then they can beat each other up about it. Salazar. 'I forgive you.' I don't forgive you.' Then they pretend they don't still feel the same way. You know it's all bollocks." He huffed angrily, his face turned away.

Draco thought about it. "That's true," he said. "I've never forgiven anybody."

"She's not going to forgive you, mate. She'll just decide she can live with you now or she can't."

Draco nodded slowly. They were talking about each other now—about the years when Draco was dicking around with Crabbe and Goyle instead of Theo, because Draco knew what Theo's Death Eater father had done to him and was letting himself get pulled in anyway. Draco had both understood why Theo distanced himself and told himself Theo was being a weak little bitch. And Theo had both understood that Draco had no choice and felt betrayed. They didn't talk about it. They just decided they could live with each other now.

"She did bargain with me for the blood." He looked to Theo. He hated that he had reminded Theo of the past, made him unhappy again. He let his voice go sing-song: "And then I broke *all* the rules. So—"

"So you're holding her cat ransom," said Theo, beginning to smile.

"I'm going to make it love me more than her." He pointed his chin at the teacup on the side table. "Do a mouse for it."

"Ooh, a classic!" His grin was back.

Theo transfigured the teacup with a deft flick of his wand and snatched up the mouse by its tail, flinging it at Draco.

"Oil!" yelled Draco as he and both animals jolted, the kneazle launching itself off his chest in a flurry of fur and claws.

Then he and Theo were laughing uproariously at the frenzied chase.



And now you parade around the Ministry's mudblood, letting her humiliate you, and carve up Marcus Flint—another good boy. Over a *mudblood*?"

"I *carved up* Marcus Flint because he touched a Malfoy witch without my permission," growled Draco, his own anger jerking him forward.

"Not a Malfoy, a *mudblood* you've stuck your cock into—"

"A witch in *my* house. And I decide whether I will let insults to my house stand. Insults you're now being free and plentiful with."

"Draco, respect your elder. Shacklebolt is playing you like a marionette. But you can still redeem yourself—"

"Funny, Shacklebolt said the same thing," ground out Draco. "My father, the Dark Lord, the Ministry—everyone would be my master. Now you think you should be the one to pull my strings, Crabbe? I'll concede you're right about one thing. My loyalties no longer extend beyond House Malfoy—as I see fit to run it."

"Boy, you've turned out to be a disappointment to us all, a blood traitor—"

Draco cast a lightning-fast incisor and then a silencio as Crabbe began to scream at him in earnest.

"Right. I think I've heard enough of your insults."

Draco's heart was beating hard, a resigned fury—he would always have to feel this anger, this shame—settling high in his chest, at the base of his throat. How dare these people make him feel this way. He could never, ever undo how they made him feel.

His torso bound in ropes, overbalanced by his own rage, Crabbe fell forward against the edge of his desk and then tumbled from his chair.

Draco slouched back and looked over at Theo, who had gone silent and still as the older man berated them. His face was a blank Draco remembered well from childhood. Toward the end, his face had been a blank too.

"Nott." Draco leaned over his chair's arm to peer up at Theo from under raised eyebrows. "Help me take this fucker's tongue out."

A wide grin broke across Theo's face as he looked to Draco. "Yeah?"

He sprang up with a laugh. His eyes were alive and sparkling, his face aglow. He bit his lip, scanning Crabbe's desk. "We really need forceps for this kind of work . . ."

It felt good to see Theo happy. Draco felt a rush of adrenaline spiking down through the knot of anger and resignation at the base of his throat. He pushed up from the armchair and stepped quickly toward Crabbe's writhing form.

Theo cast, transfiguring an ornate letter opener, and snatched up the result as he rounded the desk on long legs.

Draco wrestled Crabbe's corpulent form free from his chair's legs and squatted on his heels to speak low near Crabbe's ear. He was nearly nauseous with adrenaline now, a cold sense of inevitability falling over him. "I'm not going to immobulus you, Crabbe. Nott likes it when you fight back."

"I was never allowed to." Theo shrugged. "Vance," he said, kneeling with his kneecap digging into the struggling man's gut, "you remember how my father used to beat me to toughen me up?" He raised his eyebrows high, holding up the forceps and clacking the beak. "It worked."

His laugh was wild as he leaned in.

Draco set his jaw, smirking as Crabbe thrashed under their weight. He was fighting hard but Draco got a good grip on the man's jaw, digging his fingers into Crabbe's fleshy cheeks to force his mouth open. Draco clenched his teeth, breathing hard through his nose as he ground his other palm against Crabbe's forehead, pushing his head back against the floor.

Theo, good with precision work when he cared to be, had caught Crabbe's tongue, stretching it from his mouth with a firm pull.

Draco nodded toward his own left hand, where the diamond band twinkled in the lamplight, and Theo took over there while Draco dropped his hand down to Crabbe's greasy chin, freeing his right hand for wand work. "Sectum."

based in Black blood. If *you* had Black blood, the curse would not affect you. As it is, the ring's efforts have riled it up and Malfoy's Black blood—immune to the curse—soothes it."

"So I should make Malfoy take the ring off. It's useless if it can't counter curses from the family I'm married into!"

Bill shook his head. "Bellatrix was a very powerful witch—her knife's blood curse is not typical. The ring still protects you from the majority of harm, including imperius. Can you trust the Malfoys will not abuse you if you remove the ring?"

No, she could not. "They won't need to if this itching and burning drives me mad," she muttered. Just talking about it made Hermione want to scratch her arm raw.

Bill canted his head, considering. "With enough Black blood, you may be able to break the curse manually. If you were to fall pregnant, you would share blood with a direct descendant of the House of Black while the child was in your womb—"

"No, not happening," interjected Hermione.

"Understood," said Bill with a smile. "Though it's not the most extreme technique for cursebreaking. Your other option, then, is external application. This will be a much slower process—repeated application—if it works. You'll need Malfoy's blood."



Vance Crabbe. Vincent's father. He should have been in Azkaban with Lucius, but he'd cried from his cage in front of the Wizengamot about losing his only son to the error of his ways.

Draco stepped out of the floo into his office, Theo a step behind, and looked around. Crabbe was a large man, his furniture oversized to match. As a boy, Draco had found him intimidating, then ridiculous but imposing. Now his office felt musty and unsophisticated. The books on the shelves were few and far between. The rug was dated. And Draco thought taxidermy was gauche.

"Crabbe. You know Theodore Nott," said Draco, nodding toward Theo as he settled uninvited into the armchair to the right of Draco, in front of Crabbe's heavy slab of a desk.

"Theodore, yes. I heard you boys were . . . close." A flicker of distaste.

"Right." Theo grinned.

"And I haven't heard from you since I was arrested." Said neutrally. Draco hadn't much wanted to hear from Vance Crabbe.

"A sad time for us all," said Crabbe, frowning. "I've perhaps been remiss in not reaching out earlier, not being there for you, Draco. Now Lucius is gone and I see you struggling to find your footing. A young man needs the guidance of the older generation. Given recent events, I feel compelled to express my concern—"

"Yes, I received your card." Draco thrust out his chin, cocked his head—a reflexive gesture that now called attention to the tattoo on his neck. "But I still have a father. Lucius is in Azkaban, not dead."

"I am reminded of that *frequently*," said Crabbe as he shifted in his seat, anger seeping between the cracks of him. "Lately he reminds me my loyalties to him extend to you, and I am *reminded* that your loyalty has a way of faltering."

"And you would remind me where my loyalties lie?" said Draco coldly.

"You boys." Crabbe snorted, settling back with an air of paternal disgust. Draco could see the ghost of Vince in him and felt a pang of grief. "Coddled by your mothers. Then we send you to school to play grab-ass and suck each other's cocks, and when it finally comes time to do your duty, Draco, you *lower your wand*—"

"Yes," snapped Draco, "I could have been the perfect dead soldier like Vince—"

"Vincent was a good boy," snarled Crabbe, his fury propelling him forward in his chair, and Draco felt a flash of shame. "He would have been *ten times* the man you are, you effete, sniveling mummy's boy."

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She and Malfoy did not talk about the night she'd spent in his bed. But his visits to her office became erratic but *frequent*.

Malfoy dropped in unannounced and complained incessantly. He lounged in her guest chair while telling her how uncomfortable it was. He used her quills without asking and bemoaned the cheap Ministry ink. He rifled through her files and reports haphazardly, alternating between glaring at her and ignoring her when she tried to take them back. When he thought she wasn't looking, he eyed her hungrily, his gaze drifting to her arm. When she thought he wasn't looking, she watched his hands and his mouth and the pull of his shirts across his chest and biceps.

"I'm looking at this," he snapped at her now as she reached across her desk for the file in his hand.

"Malfoy, you're not meant to read that."

"Then don't leave it out."

"It's *out* in my office, where it's *meant* to be."

"Well, I'm in your office," he said, flipping pages.

"Yes, that's the problem," she said. Francesco watched them nervously.

"This is wrong," he said, picking up her quill to decisively strike out a line of text.

"Malfoy, you're not meant to—"

"This says Rolf Scamander is the only current supplier of Ashwinder eggs but Nott heard from Lovegood that Goldstein recently got into the business." He was making a margin note, his handwriting annoyingly precise. He marked up the rest of the report, then tossed it aside and groused for fifteen minutes about the quality of the Ministry's tea.

"Tell your man to go out for better tea," he said, ignoring Francesco.

"Francesco is *working*, Malfoy."

Malfoy grumbled, retrieved his robes with a flourish, and left.

"Your quills are rubbish," he said the next day, dropping a luxury brand packet of swan quills onto her desk. He threw himself into her guest chair and pushed aside some parchment to read an interoffice memo upside down. "Do you have any biscuits?" He looked up at her. "Why not?"

He replaced the inkpots in her office. He replaced the rug in her office. He bought a muggle coffeemaker and griped until Francesco learned how to operate it after Hermione said she preferred coffee during the workday. He changed her filing to reverse-chronological order. (She changed it back.) (They fought about it.) He told her she was using Ulysses to send too many work owls from the Manor and gave her a snowy owl named (she did not comment) Penelope.

Malfoy was currently slouched in her guest chair in his shirtsleeves and waistcoat, reading draft legislation and eating muggle candy. (He had a vicious sweet tooth, and she'd accidentally got him addicted to high fructose corn syrup.)

A knock sounded and Padma walked in with a stack of reports.

"Don't tell me—" groaned Hermione, rising and rounding her desk to meet Padma near the door.

"Afraid so." Padma's eyes darted from Francesco to Malfoy to Hermione.

Hermione awkwardly took the files from her, glancing back at her overloaded desk, one corner still occupied by the oversized vase and its ever-refreshing white tulips. Where was she going to put all this paper?

While she watched, Malfoy pushed aside candy wrappers to pick up one of the swan quills then aggressively circle a line of draft language.

Padma cleared her throat, and Hermione snapped to. "Unspeaking are hoping for your thoughts by week's end."

"Week's end! But I'm currently a month behind. Why—"

"You know I can't tell you," said Padma with an apologetic frown. "Maybe Malfoy can help you out."

"I don't work here, Patil," he said derisively, not looking up. He drew an arrow to his margin note.

"Right," said Padma, raising her eyebrows at Hermione as she left.

Malfoy threw down the quill and casually extended Hermione's desk, then reached for the top report as Hermione dropped the stack onto the new corner. "What's this nonsense, then?"

He started reading as Hermione retook her seat, watching him out of the corner of her eye. "Waste of time," he muttered, beginning to underline sections.

"Malfoy, I have a lunch," she said.

"Go," he said, waving her off. "I'm leaving as well."

"All right," she said, gathering her bag and robes as he flipped a page. "Francesco, I'll be back in an hour."

When she left, Malfoy was shaking his head as he crossed out a paragraph of text.



When Hermione got to the Leaky, Ron and Harry were already there, Ron coming back from the bar with a pint in each hand.

"Oh, you're here, Hermione," said Harry. "We'll get another."

"No, none for me," she said primly. "Padma has dumped a load of files on my desk on short notice and I'll need my wits about me."

"Not retiring on us yet, Mione?" said Ron, sitting heavily and sliding one of the glasses to Harry. His tie was loosened, his sleeves rolled up over his muscular forearms, the rumpled schoolboy of Hermione's memory having transformed seamlessly into the rumpled auror.

"What's that meant to imply, Ronald?" Godric, sometimes she forgot Malfoy wasn't the only one who pushed her buttons.

"Golden Girl's Giving Spree," recited Ron, waving his hand in an arc as though the most recent headline was on a marquee above them. "Hardly need a Ministry job with Malfoy's money."

"I'm doing my job because I believe in it, Ron. It's not about the money!"

"Spoken like a true millionaire philanthropist," said Harry slyly, and Hermione laughed despite herself. "It would be irresponsible *not* to give Malfoy's gold to good causes while I have the chance," she said. "What, did he have a fit when he found out, then?"

Hermione knew Ron wanted to hear that Malfoy had raged at her before snatching back her Gringotts key. Then they'd be back on familiar ground.

"Proper meltdown," she admitted. "Said I wasn't donating enough and it made him look poor."

Harry snorted while Ron rolled his eyes, muttering, "Oh my Merlin."

"Otherwise, he doesn't even notice it," she added—knowing she was saying it to get back at Ron.

"Oh, he definitely notices you rehabilitating his name," said Ron. "Every other headline is about Hermione *Malfoy* saving war orphans."

"So I should tell the war orphans to piss off because someone might forget the Malfoys are Death Eaters?" She shook her hair out of her face. "He's got an Azkaban tattoo on his neck, Ron. Nobody is forgetting!"

"Rescue some puppies and *Witch Weekly* will be doing a spread on how prison runes are in for spring."

"Ron has a point, Hermione," said Harry. "Isn't the whole idea of the Reconciliation Act to get people to forget—to accept the Slytherins back into society?"

"Well, then, it's hardly all down to me making a few donations, is it?"

"No, but he'll never fuck off to France at this rate," said Ron.

Hermione looked from Ron to Harry. "I'm not the one who invited him to quidditch—"

"That was all *Ginny*—"

"—where *you* were oohing and aahing over those brooms he set me up with, thank you very much, Ronald."

She nodded and he led her into the labyrinthine depths of the bank, past dark tunnels and stone steps, until they were in a cluttered space that smelt of parchment, hot sand, brimstone, and lilies.

"Sorry for the mess," he said, moving aside a Fabergé egg, a small golden figure in the shape of the demon Naberius, and several rolled maps as he cleared a seat for her. "I'm never here."

He moved a stack of books and a shrunken head from the other chair onto his desk and produced a tea service from somewhere on the floor behind them, looking it over and placing it with a clatter on the small table between them. "This should be safe," he said, conjuring tea.

"May I?" he said, holding out his hand, and she placed her left hand in his. "I cleared this piece," he said, leaning forward and tilting her fingers so that the Black betrothal ring caught the lamplight.

"It's been friendly," she assured him. "But, ever since Malfoy put it on, it's irritated this—"

And she flipped her hand with his to open her forearm to him, pulling up her sleeves as she did.

"Yes," murmured Bill, bending closer to examine the scar, his hair tucked behind his ears so that she could see him frowning through his own scars.

Hermione played the old game: Would she rather have disfiguring scars she couldn't disguise but could be proud of, or a scar she viscerally hated that was easily hidden?

"When Malfoy's blood touched the scar last night, it calmed the irritation," she said, watching Bill.

"How much blood?" asked Bill, peering up at her.

"Smeared, not soaked," said Hermione.

Bill nodded and then straightened and cast separate diagnostics over the Black ring and Hermione's scar, turning her arm back and forth, his touch unapologetic.

Finally, he released her arm and sat back, drinking his tea with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Right," he said. "Here's what we know. Bellatrix's knife was cursed such that wounds from it never fully heal, leaving remnants of the curse in the scar. The Black betrothal piece is intended to prevent members of the groom's bloodline from abusing or killing the bride. Bellatrix Lestrange and Draco Malfoy are both blood descendants of the House of Black."

"Correct," said Hermione, who always appreciated a recital of facts.

"Now here is what I'm speculating," said Bill. "Bellatrix cursed her knife using her blood, and members of her bloodline are immune to the curse. We can assume that Bellatrix did not want to be harmed by her own knife, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and either wanted to be able to threaten her family members without doing permanent damage to them or," he shrugged, "inadvertently created this loophole for them."

He set his cup down and casually waved his hand. "The Black ring now recognizes the curse remnants in the scar as an attempt by your groom's bloodline to harm you—retroactive but otherwise fairly straightforward. The ring is trying to expel the curse from your body—hence the irritation to your arm."

He looked at her intently, now fully engaged by the puzzle. "Remember that the Black ring has traditionally been passed to brides along the Black bloodline—it assumes your husband will *not* be a direct Black descendant. It's my understanding that Narcissa Malfoy loaned this ring to you because you do not have your own family's protective betrothal pieces."

Hermione felt herself pause. Malfoy's contract terms had insisted on the Black ring but she had not considered that Narcissa might see it this way, as Hermione's mother-in-law stepping in to protect her in the place of her own absent mother—her own family's lack. (She imagined telling her parents she needed the family's heirloom betrothal pieces and them howling with laughter. "Didn't your Great Aunt Gertie leave you some rhinestones, Jean?" That laughter turning to incredulity when she explained they were meant to stop her husband from murdering her.) She shook the thought off. The ring was just the Malfoy alibi. Narcissa didn't want Hermione cuckolding her precious Draco.

It is my dearest hope that you will come to see Draco as a husband worthy of your good regard, in a fruitful marriage that grows into mutual respect and companionship.

Bill continued: "I believe the Black magic is in conflict with itself here—the ring's efforts to purge the curse frustrated by the fact that the curse is Black in origin, not merely cast by a Black descendant but

"No offense, Granger—"

Hermione braced for Pansy Parkinson to say something highly offensive. She had insisted that she and Hermione were going for girls' drinks—meeting Hermione at the bookstore after Hermione had met with the staff and then selecting a bar in an extremely expensive hotel in Muggle London. When Hermione had questioned this, she'd said only, "I like going places where people don't spit on me, Granger." Now she sat in a dress as black as her hair, her manicured fingertips on the stem of her martini glass, regarding Hermione with an appraising eye.

"—but Magical Creatures is a dead end. Oh, don't look at me like that—I know you care deeply about centaur mating habits. But other people do not, you know. Now any time there's a fuss they say 'we have the brightest witch of her age working on it'—"

Pansy's sing-song voice here was indeed offensive.

"—and then everyone goes away because it's *you* working on it. But then they don't pass anything you propose and nothing happens—"

"That's not true!" Hermione leaned forward. "That's—"

"That's mostly true." Pansy raised her eyebrows like they both knew she was right. (She was.) "And then, when you *do* negotiate your treaties, they're good for ten years and it's just babysitting—"

"It's not—"

"Seriously, Granger, what is the point of being brave if you're afraid of ambition? I saw it last night—your friends think you should be picking up kneazle poo for the rest of your life."

"Just because they're supportive—"

Parkinson fixed her with a skeptical look over the edge of her martini glass. "You really *aren't* in competition with Potter for who becomes Minister of Magic first?"

Hermione opened her mouth. *What?*

"Or you are—and you don't know it." Pansy smirked at her, satisfied she'd worked it out. "That's why they're telling you to stick to thestrals. Sneaky."

"Who says I want to be Minister of Magic?" Of course she'd thought about it. But it was unlikely. It *shouldn't* be—she was smart enough. But Hermione was learning that political success was not entirely—and maybe not at all—about brains.

"Everybody." Parkinson rolled her eyes. "Lucius probably has a fifteen-year plan for you."

"That ends with me pardoning him?" asked Hermione sharply, her spine straightening. A month ago, she would have let herself be distracted by even the—yes, highly offensive—suggestion that she was a pawn in Lucius Malfoy's schemes. Pansy probably would have quite enjoyed that. Now that Hermione had accepted she was surrounded by scorpions, she could see the play.

Parkinson cocked her head, eyebrow raised. "So you and Papa are on the same page, then."

But it was perversely laughable—the idea that the Malfoys wanted her to become Minister of Magic, much less counted on it. "I'm not *pardoning* Lucius Malfoy—"

"Not from Magical Creatures, you aren't. You're letting the Ministry sideline you. Get yourself transferred to International Magic if you want to move up," said Pansy, toying with the olives in her drink, a smile twisting her lips. "Chop chop."

"Because you're the expert, Parkinson," said Hermione, leaning back against the leather banquette, thoroughly annoyed. "What's your big ambition?"

"Right now, it's to get Longbottom to shag me so hard I forget my name," Parkinson said with a snicker as Hermione failed to settle on a facial expression. Hermione took a drink of the pricey white wine Pansy had ordered for her. "But after that I'm going to adapt muggle cosmetics for the wizarding world. I'm working on a new line of semi-permanent lipstick."

"Oh, well, that's—"

"I'm field-testing it on Longbottom," said Pansy, making an obscene gesture involving her hand and her tongue in her cheek.

Hermione groaned, grateful the bar was too dark for everyone to be watching this exchange. "You're a sex pest, Parkinson."

"Genius lipstick name! I'm writing that down," said Parkinson, who proceeded to actually do so, rummaging through her bag for a tiny muggle notebook and pen set while Hermione watched. "Sex Pest. Thanks, Granger. I'm glad we're best friends now."

Hermione sighed. "Anytime, Parkinson. Did you really invite me to drinks to stage a career intervention?"

"Yes," said Parkinson. "It's just too sad, watching you flail about with the rest of the Gryffindorks." A sly look then. "Why? What did you think I wanted to talk about?"

"Honestly?" said Hermione. "I was expecting a lecture on what I'm doing wrong with Malfoy."

Parkinson snorted. "Why would I want to talk about *Draco*?" She waved a dismissive hand. "What's to talk about? He's a mummy's boy who grew up idolizing his father. He wants attention, approval, and a baby snake to look up to him like he's Lucius."

Hermione raised a dubious eyebrow. "When Draco Malfoy—who recently cut out a family friend's tongue—comes up in conversation, your third association is babies? I know you people are obsessed with heirs but—"

"You know, the firsties used to worship him." She sounded wistful, defensive, her fingers absently twisting the stem of her glass. "He'd terrorize them but he paid attention to them, didn't he? Always coming up with little games for them, silly songs. He'd boss them around, tell them what they needed to know. They loved it." She glanced at Hermione, looked away. "I know it doesn't seem that way to you, but Draco was *fun*."

Hermione tried to imagine this. Malfoy was *mean*. And Parkinson was a bitch—of course she thought terrorizing people was a good time. But if Hermione stood on her head (and guiltily remembered some quips about McLaggen he'd recently made in her office) she could see it. How it would have felt different if he was on your side. How it *had* felt different when it was the Gryffindors making up nasty rhymes about the snakes. Only George and Fred had ever gone to the elaborate lengths the Slytherins had done.

"Then everything happened . . ." Parkinson looked lost for a second before a mix of anger, despair, resentment washed over her face.

Then she tossed her hair and picked up her glass. "Draco's depressed now—don't give me that look. I can read, all right? I know about depression and suicidal ideation, fuck you very much. And, yes, that's why Draco's always trying to get you to hurt him—always running around with Nott, doing stupid things."

Parkinson took a sip of her martini, looking sullen and then like she'd come to a conclusion. "But he's the same, deep down. Still obsessed, *as you would say*, with getting his family's approval—with getting *your* approval now."

"*Draco* doesn't care about my approval," said Hermione.

"No," said Parkinson sharply. "He doesn't think he can get it. There's a difference."

Hermione frowned into her glass, remembering Malfoy calling himself a whore. The moment simmered in a confusing stew of drink, adrenaline, and shame. The strange ease of standing next to him in the Leaky as she chewed over the events of the evening; then the nervy humiliation of being accosted—one of her howlers in the flesh. If that hadn't have happened . . . maybe something else would have happened when they'd got back to the sitting room and he'd brushed her hair back from her temple. But as soon as that wizard called her a whore, she couldn't stop hearing it—couldn't ignore the queasy feeling that, if she went to Malfoy's bed after he'd spent so much money on her, it said something about what it took to win her over. And then Malfoy'd said—

His words were a blur, but what came through clearly was the anger and resentment. He didn't even know the worst of it, and he felt he was owed more than he'd got. (Owed what? Attention? Approval? The sex that Ron had got? That crack at Ron—*did* he know?) There had been a moment in the pub—he holding her wrist, pulling her behind him when the man came at them—when she'd felt safe with him. Then he'd jerked her against him in the sitting room and she'd felt that anger and she'd run.

"Look," said Parkinson, jarring Hermione from her thoughts, "*you're* the one who wants to talk about Draco. I didn't actually come here to give you the 'treat him right' speech or whatever you're expecting. Treat him however you like. I love him, but he's not my job anymore. And thank Merlin—because, frankly, that job was *exhausting*." She cocked her head. "You know, he doesn't have to be your job either—"

"I'm—"

"You're stuck with him. So what? The Manor is big enough for the two of you. Move into another wing." Her eyes played over Hermione. "But you won't do that, will you? Because you get off on fighting with him—"

"I do not—"

"You do, or you'd find a way not to. You're bright enough." Parkinson's grin grew wicked. "If you really want him to leave you alone, give him an heir to manage. They can figure out what feelings are together—"

"I'm not—"

"I know, I know! You would never." Parkinson was laughing. "So prepare for him to interfere with everything you do. How else can he get your attention?"

Parkinson's expression turned serious, and she looked Hermione right in the eye. "Draco is selfish. Don't let him get in the way of you getting what you want. If you're not going to put him to use, then put him to work. How are you going to become Minister of Magic without a beater?"



TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2003

Hermione was wearing a long-sleeved gown, the skin around her scar now too red and inflamed for her to trust her weak glamour skills. It was a beautiful champagne silk with delicate beadwork and a muggle open back—daring for the wizarding world and a distraction, for Hermione, from the arm she had to hide. She had properly splurged at Madam Malkin's—Pip would not be purging the dress from her closet.

It was the Ministry's Autumn Solstice Ball—a last-minute chance for Hermione to practice her (also weak) networking skills before she presented the wolfsbane potion proposal to the Wizengamot in her role as Ministry sponsor of the measure. Hermione did her best to be charming with the big-galleons donors, but she really didn't want to talk about the war anymore, and the high neck of her backless dress did not stop the older wizards from staring at her chest.

An intrusive thought: Would they stare so openly if Malfoy were standing next to her, glaring at them the way he did Ron?

(Godric, she was spending too much time with Malfoy if she thought traveling with a henchman was the solution to anything.)

Hermione allowed herself a break from the donors as she remembered her recent visit to the bookstore Malfoy had sent his henchman to buy for her.

Hermione felt hurt whenever Ginny or Ron casually accused her of overthinking. (And this hurt came out as anger, which they didn't enjoy either.) First of all, her *overthinking* had saved everyone's arse quite a few times, hadn't it? Convenient for everyone to complain in between relying on it. Second, it was hard *not* to see every angle when her critics certainly did.

People had a habit of insisting Hermione was too strong-willed to be bothered by the howlers and hit pieces. Ginny gave her rah-rah pep talks about them only motivating her to give the bastards what for. But—sorry to disappoint!—being viciously criticized for a decade didn't make anyone *more* confident. And now it felt like Hermione wasn't allowed to admit it got to her without then being criticized for

(He could hear his own voice, harsh: "Oi, Granger!" Right before he insulted her.)

"Oi, watch yourself!"

Draco jerked to his full height, turning to block her body with his as he scanned—there. A man stumbling toward him. What had he been thinking, letting himself be half-drunk and distracted by her in public? Stupid.

Not the wizard who had accosted him earlier, with Nott. Younger, but Draco didn't recognize him from Hogwarts.

"What's this, then? Fucking Death Eater date night? Fuck you doing here—"

"Shove off, mate." Draco leaned into him, his voice low and menacing. He wanted to shut this down before half the pub was involved.

"Oi, Hermione! You really letting them whore you out to this piece of—"

Wandless langlock. The man was struggling to breath—his tongue stuck for a few seconds to the roof of his mouth, making him feel like he was choking on it—and Draco dropped her wrist and punched him in the throat.

It was a hard, fast jab to his Adam's apple. Then the man was going down, his butterbeer splashing onto other drinkers who were turning to stare, and Draco was turning himself—back to her, his arm finally around her, his body pressed to hers as he pushed them past another couple and into the floo. He hadn't used his wand—nothing for the Ministry to trace.

A flash of powder, green flame, and they were tripping out of the fireplace and into their sitting room—the familiar dark walls, the velvet settees. Safety.

Draco used the momentum to pull her to him, steadying her. She was breathing hard from the surprise of it all, her chest rising and falling against him. He wanted to run his palms all over her.

"All right, love?" He lifted a hand to brush the hair away from her face, finally. She was flushed. Her body soft and warm against his. He wanted her back in his bed like this, panting and trembling and collapsing against him, her hair wild. He'd bleed to get her there. Did she need him yet?

Her moving against him, the thin silk hot and damp against his hand, soft flesh over hard bone. Merlin, he'd wanked so many times to the memory of her using him.

"Stay with me tonight?"

Stupid to ask. Drunk and distracted by memories of her, by her closeness now.

She shook her head, still wrapped up in his arm. Her hand was flat against his abdomen, the Black ring mocking him as it caught the low light. "What? Malfoy, no—I'm not actually a whore."

His whole face twisted. "Because some *drunk* in a *pub* called you—"

"Everyone calls me a whore because of you." Her face had hardened too. "I get fifty howlers a day calling me a whore."

He jerked her tighter against him, rough. "Since when do *you* care what other people think?" His lip was curled, his chin jutted toward her as he leaned his face closer to hers. "I'm your *husband*."

"You think you can buy me—"

"*Gifts.* Just like your friends do. Do they know I'm the whore—selling my blood to you for a scrap of your attention?"

Why was this so painful? Why did he feel flayed open when she looked at him, like she was cataloging everything he'd ever done to make him come up wanting. She saw him, didn't see? Oh, she saw him. Always for his worst.

He had to beg his own wife to come to his bed, just so he could clutch at her while she pushed him away.

She pushed him away now, and he let her. She walked away and didn't look back.



of it. It was making him a bit mental, really. He forced himself to stop thinking about her in that thin nightdress.

He was feeling clever about the bookstore, though. She stayed out of Muggle London but she bought all the muggle books. He wasn't the only one nostalgic for a lost childhood, was he?

"You can't rename Flourish & Blotts!" Patil had exclaimed. "It's an institution!"

"Really, Patil?" he'd sneered. "What do I care about two long-dead fuckers?"

"They founded it!" Sounding defensive. "It's been in business for five hundred years."

"Well, now *I'm* buying it," he'd said. Why was this hard to understand? "Are you saying *Hermione Granger* doesn't deserve to have a bookstore named for her?"

Strange to say her maiden name like that, her given name rolling around his mouth. He'd meant what he'd said—they'd never been on a first-name basis. That name was for her friends. She wouldn't appreciate him using it.

"That's not what I'm—"

"Sure, Mione does," the Weasel had cut in—that childish diminutive that made Draco's teeth ache. "But maybe she doesn't want *your* name on it."

"Oh, am I tainting the Golden Girl?" Draco had smiled nastily. "You know, now that I know what that nickname really means—"

"Malfoy!" Her cheeks had been bright red.

Weaselbee's head had snapped back and forth between them, the moron. "What's that meant to—"

"Didn't get you there, darling?" He'd been staring right at her, could see her eyes widen, her nostrils flare as she sucked in a breath. He *hadn't*, had he? Probably lasted thirty seconds.

"Oh!" The Weaslette hooting. Pansy cackling. And Draco realized his mistake. Now they were *all* imagining his wife with the Weasel.

"Malfoy."

"Inside joke?" Potter, his tone pointed.

"So to speak," he'd said, smirking as though the mental image of Weasley on her—*inside* her—didn't send nausea spiking through him. He wanted to hold the Weasel down and oblivate him. For starters.

He'd turned to Patil. "Shacklebolt wanted reconciliation, Patil. In another five hundred years, they'll think we were Romeo and Juliet."

His wife had blanched.

He hadn't been able to resist. The wizarding world would see the name Granger every time it bought a book. And then it would see *his* name, a reminder she'd been tied to him. They'd given her to him and then they acted like he was a thief. Well, too bad. If they were giving, he was fucking *taking*.

He'd wanted her to be pleased with him—she wouldn't be. He'd wanted his revenge—he'd got that at least.

He looked over at her. Could she be pleased with him, if he weren't such a prat? (Sometimes, together in her office, it seemed like she might be. *You're terrible*, she'd say, her eyes blazing.) But he was, wasn't he? He was, he was.

He remembered her pulled close to him in his bed, finally not fighting him. *I hate you, Draco*. Said as though she meant something else. He wanted to kiss her mouth.

She sighed heavily, looking irritated. Her hair was wild around her face. He wanted to smooth it back like he had in bed. Gentle fingertips at her temples. "Malfoy," she huffed out, finally looking up at him, "why won't you call me Granger anymore?"

This was what she was wondering? He felt his brow furrow. "It's not appropriate. I'm not—I'm not denying the bond."

Did she understand? Calling her Granger made it sound like he was refusing to acknowledge the marriage—like she was an outsider living in his house. It was polite to address your wife properly. (And she *wasn't* up for grabs.)

He shook his head, trying again. He didn't know why—he'd just explained. "That's how I knew you before."

caring what a load of wankers thought. And so Hermione was on her own, trying to protect herself by anticipating what she would be criticized for next. She'd gone to the bookstore braced for recriminations.

In fact, a few of the younger, more progressive booksellers had quit rather than be paid in Death Eater gold. But it soon became clear that Malfoy's offer had been high—high enough that the previous owners had no qualms taking it. And now the store managers were happy to take Hermione into the back and ply her with tea and publishers' catalogues. It came out then—as she met with the team to discuss the muggle author selection—that the bookstore was a birthday gift. And Hermione could see the booksellers exchange glances and *feel* the conflicting narratives being projected onto her. One thought it was romantic. One was embarrassed for her—a good girl forced, like the store, to make the best of a notorious new owner. And one thought she was a complicit rich bitch now, blithely accepting this exorbitant gift as her due.

But Hermione now realized that the gift Malfoy had given her was even bigger than the bookstore.

Her name was being erased. She had obliterated it from her parents' minds. Malfoy and the Ministry had changed it. There was no House of Granger—no one else to make sure others remembered that it was a Granger who had helped save the wizarding world, a Granger fighting to make this world better, that Grangers belonged here.

But Padma had said it: Flourish & Blotts had been in existence for five hundred years. Every class of Hogwarts students passed through its doors. Hermione imagined the next five hundred years of Hogwarts students seeing Granger when they bought their books. *That* was the gift Malfoy had given her. He was a prat who wouldn't use her name, but he was forcing everyone else to use it. (Godric, what was *wrong* with him?) Did he understand what that meant to her? She thought maybe he did. He certainly obsessed enough over his own name.

It was a dirty trick, making her feel grateful that her own things hadn't been stolen from her and destroyed. He had taken her name and now he gave her this consolation prize. Her principles wouldn't allow her to enjoy it when she knew why it wasn't enough. But Hermione felt a surge of selfish defiance. Maybe she just wanted to have this and not feel bad about it. *I'm not sorry*. Malfoy said this when he broke the rules. Could she say that? Just enjoy it?

Also, she was an arsehole. Malfoy had bought her a gift. It was a bizarrely over-the-top gift that involved his best mate committing fraud (Godric, what was wrong with them?) and several people quitting in protest, but it was a gift. And... she loved it, despite everything. (*I'm not sorry*) And she hadn't said thank you. She had stared at him and then accused him of thinking she was a whore.

(She had trust issues—she understood that. She'd come by them honestly. The press had lied about her since she was a teenager. Authority figures had misled and used her. Her parents hadn't been able to protect her. A certain classmate had betrayed everyone. There had been secrets and spies and double agents. Not even a rat could be trusted to be a rat. So, no, Hermione didn't have *trust issues*—she had an appropriate response to learning the world wasn't trustworthy. Trusting the wrong person would get your heart broken—right before it got you killed. You had to protect yourself. No one else would do it for you.)

She should tell him thank you. But, also, she shouldn't—because then he'd think he was owed. She could feel him jerking her against his rigid body in the sitting room, the hurt and anger radiating off him.

Talk of the devil and he doth appear. Hermione heard a subtle ripple of reactions and swiveled to see Malfoy and Nott in muggle tuxedos, headed straight for her. She had come alone, but she was no longer surprised when Malfoy turned up like a bad sickle. He came and went from her office, and she heard the muttered asides and whispers in the lift.

"Malfoy."

"What's he doing here?"

"Always thought that sentence should have been longer."

"Did you see him coming out of Avery's office?"

"Have you heard—"

There was a strange disconnect lately between the Malfoy these whispers described and the ridiculous git who ate candy and marked up reports for her while pretending he wasn't doing her work, conjuring ladybugs to leave on Francesco's desk and picking fights over muggle novels he read behind her back. A disconnect between the Malfoy who gave her a gift he knew she would love and pulled her body behind his in a pub brawl and smoothed her hair back from her face and the Malfoy who was so angry he couldn't get what he wanted from her. Now her disreputable husband and his disreputable shadow were striding toward her, and she observed the two Slytherins through her colleagues' eyes.

Malfoy looked like a sharp knife, all lean lines and hard edges, black and white, the gleam of the betrothal band to his left, the signet rings and harsh Azkaban tattoo on his right. His face looked cruel, predatory—his eyes assessing, his mouth ready to quirk into a sneer.

Nott was taller and lankier, with darkly lashed bedroom eyes under wavy hair kept a touch too long—forever the boarding-school boy who hadn't had a haircut. His marks had battled hers and Malfoy's at Hogwarts, but he'd often seemed invisible then. Now he grinned, a hand casually in his pocket, as he loped behind Malfoy and heads turned. He wore his own signet ring and, on one lapel, a Pucey brooch—the tribute acknowledged by Malfoy's beater, Malfoy's favor still withheld.

Pansy's voice came back to her: *Always running around with Nott, doing stupid things.*

Hermione felt uneasy about how things had been left with Malfoy. Was he coming to continue the fight? But he only nodded when he reached her, sliding his hands into his pockets. His eyes were alight—predatory in an entirely different way. "Mrs. Malfoy."

"Lady Malfoy." Hermione startled as Nott bowed the proper bow of an aristocrat, bending low and catching up her hand to raise it to his sensuous mouth, his eyes boring into hers as he kissed it. Hermione's breath caught despite herself.

"Stop eyefucking my wife, Nott," said Malfoy with no heat.

Nott released her hand and laughed. "Hiya, Granger."

"Nott," said Hermione carefully as he fell in beside Malfoy, jostling him.

"Can I still eyefuck you, Dray?" He was grinning, leaning in.

Malfoy chuckled his chin. "Anytime, love, but your man is here."

"Where?" Nott looked eagerly before turning back to Malfoy, his grin widening. He bounced his eyebrows, clapped Malfoy on the arm, and then he was gone.

Malfoy watched with a smirk as Nott drifted across the room to where Charlie Weasley was stood talking to Anthony Goldstein.

"Nott and Charlie?" asked Hermione, and suddenly they were back in her office, gossiping about her coworkers.

"Just the once so far," said Malfoy, watching as Charlie turned to Nott with a smile, casually throwing an arm around him and folding him into the conversation. "Nott's been pining ever since."

Nott looked back over his shoulder and winked at Malfoy. Malfoy laughed. "And he's in."

He turned to Hermione and shrugged. "I offered him to Ginevra, but she hasn't ditched Potter yet. Looks like I'll be standing up at a Weasley wedding after all. Or they'll just shag each other's brains out." The smirk was back.

Hermione looked between Nott and Malfoy, stood relaxed beside her. *Nott's arm thrown tightly around Malfoy's neck.* "Are you and Nott . . ."

Malfoy looked amused. "I'm not gay, love, I'm a slut. You didn't snog everyone in the Gryffindor common room?"

"What? No! We—"

"Did you *study*?" Malfoy was sniggering now, like the prat fourth year he'd been. "It was slim pickings over there."

Hermione put her hand on her hip and settled in to fight dirty. "I had *loads* of sex while you were in Azkaban."

She looked at him watching her. She hesitated and then accioed it over. The envelope sprang open and out slid . . .

"I didn't get you a book," said Malfoy, staring at her. "I got you a bookstore."

"What the fuck?" said Ron, looking at the piece of parchment in Hermione's hand.

It was the title deeds to Flourish & Blotts, now owned by Draco and Hermione Malfoy.

"You buy all the novels in the muggle fiction section. A material condition of our offer was that they expand their muggle author offerings," said Malfoy. "As part of the rebranding."

"Rebranding—"

"I negotiated the deal, didn't I?" said Nott, overtly bragging. "I completed a law mastery while I was under house arrest, you know."

"What the fuck?" said Padma, turning to stare at him. Pansy was sniggering.

"Malfoy," said Hermione, as she looked closer at the deeds, "did you forge my signature on a legal document to obtain this?"

"Of course not," he snapped. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I did," said Nott happily. "I have the fairer hand."

"What the fuck?" said Harry. He turned to her. "Hermione, I'm not arresting someone at your birthday drinks."

"I should hope not," said Nott, sipping firewhisky.

"I might," growled Ron, leaning forward onto his elbows. Neville started to laugh.

"You're a horrible show off, Ferret," said Ginny, echoing Hermione's own thoughts, but she was grinning as she asked, "What's the store rebranding as?"

His tone suggested Ginny was thick but he was used to it: "Granger & Malfoy, of course."

What the fuck?

Hermione looked up and his pale gray eyes were locked on her.

"Happy birthday, darling."

And then he smiled like it was a game and he'd won.



Draco's hand encircled her wrist as they waited for the floo, his body buzzing with alcohol and adrenaline and the memory of his fingers on her wrist in his bed. He didn't need to be touching her yet but the Leaky was loud and crowded now, and it had been easy to pull her closer, out of the way of foot traffic, and then not let go. He didn't like them being out in public like this. Nott had slipped away with Patil, leaving his back unprotected, and the Gryffindors were sloppy drunks—not thinking at all about her safety for all their sneering at him. He wanted a firm hold on her.

He wondered how her arm was doing. Did she need him again yet?

Would she ask? He could give her a vial of his blood, so she wouldn't have to. He wasn't going to. He was much, much too selfish.

He stole a glance at her. Her eyes were distant, a slight frown pulling down her mouth. She'd try to shake off his hand soon. Probably still angry about the gift. He wouldn't get any congratulations if he pointed out his heroic self-restraint regarding lingerie.

If she weren't his wife, he'd have done it—given her obscene muggle lingerie to unwrap in a pub, just to see the Gryffindors' faces. (The Weaselette could tell as many raunchy jokes as she liked—they were squares, the lot of them.) But he wouldn't let anyone else imagine her in those wisps of lace and silk. (Certainly not her weasel ex-boyfriend who left his own wife at home and sat too close to her. Draco had kept himself in check so he wouldn't be accused of ruining her birthday. He wouldn't get congratulated for that either.) And it wasn't fun when he still couldn't get her into any of it so that he could get her out

She and Ron had been dating when Malfoy was on trial—the papers full of photographs of her and Ron walking hand-in-hand next to pictures of Malfoy in chains. (She and Harry had testified on behalf of Malfoy and Narcissa; Ron decidedly had not.) No wonder that was how he remembered them.

The idea of Malfoy being jealous of Ron—anyone at Hogwarts would have scoffed, Malfoy loudest of all. Now Malfoy's eyes were coldly measuring the distance between her shoulder and Ron's. She heard Malfoy whining *stay anyway*. Ron hadn't had to whinge and extort—she'd gone to his bed willingly. The first time had been painful and awkward. The break-up had been painful and awkward too—probably predictable from the start. She sometimes wished they hadn't dated. But she wouldn't regret him being her first—and Malfoy could guess that now, watching Ron whisper in her ear and her laugh.

Well, he was sat next to *his* ex. Hermione waited for him to start something with Pansy. They'd staged a regular evening show in the Great Hall and the occasional matinee and, yes, Hermione had looked over every once in a while as Parkinson hung on him while he ignored her or he smirked while she hexed every witch with a lovebite. Now he could show up both Hermione and Neville—maybe stir up enough of a fuss to draw in Hannah Abbott, who was stood behind the bar but hadn't come over to say hiya.

But while Malfoy and Parkinson kibitzed and rolled their eyes—and Nott and Parkinson threw wadded up serviettes at each other; Merlin, the Slytherins were the worst—they seemed to make a point of not touching. Malfoy and Nott were oddly polite—almost deferential—to Neville. A favor to Pansy? She fussed over Neville's drink and then let him talk to Ginny uninterrupted, but Hermione caught the frequent loaded glances between them, and as the evening wore on, Pansy leaned into Neville's side, nestled under his arm. They really were together.

Malfoy settled for pointedly ignoring Ron. He traded quidditch insults with Harry and Ginny and gossiped about Ministry employees with Padma—Hermione could tell he enjoyed this—and no one brought up tongues or the dark artefacts rumored to be at Nott Manor or anything that had been suggested just before the Battle of Hogwarts. A birthday favor to Hermione.

Hermione laughed too much—she was drunk—when the presents finally came out, stacked in the middle of the table: one book-sized rectangle after another, all in Flourish & Blotts gift wrap.

Hermione unwrapped the rectangles. Her friends bought her novels the booksellers had likely recommended—she'd have to exchange one she'd already read. Pansy gifted her an illustrated history of cosmetics—"You'll find that eyeshadow in the chapter on the 90s, Granger"—and Nott gave her feminist poetry, gazing at her with those bedroom eyes when she looked up from the cover in surprise. Padma's contribution was a dense work of scholarship on centaur mating habits, which Hermione would definitely use at work.

Malfoy watched her, his head canted to the side, his fingers on his glass. It made her self-conscious. He was an arse—scrutinizing her opening her gifts when he hadn't even got her one. Hermione thanked everyone and charmed the books featherlight, pushing away the strange wave of disappointment. It wasn't that she *cared*; she'd only been curious what he would choose. Merlin knew he wouldn't stop buying her things she didn't want on every other day. But of course he was a coward—wouldn't make himself vulnerable to judgment by picking out something for her to open in front of everyone.

She was looking up from stowing the books in her beaded bag when Malfoy met her eyes and laid an envelope on the table.

"What's this, then? A Flourish & Blotts gift certificate?" she teased. Giddy because he hadn't snubbed her after all. Merlin.

"I don't know what a gift certificate is, love," he said indulgently.

"It's credit at a store—you can buy me credit at Flourish & Blotts and I can use it to buy a book." A kind of joke—clearly everyone thought she only bought books. She was drunk.

He nodded at the envelope. "Go on, then."

"I helped with this!" interjected Nott, drunk too. Padma had startled when he spoke and Hermione had a bad feeling Nott's hand was in Padma's lap, under the table.

"Go on," said Malfoy.

"I'll bet you did," Malfoy said bitterly, looking her up and down. He licked his lips and Hermione felt the back of her neck prickle. "Give me a list, so I can put their eyes out. I don't want them looking at you again."

"It's a long, *long* list," said Hermione. (It wasn't.)

"My jealousy is tireless when it comes to you." His gray eyes were on hers.

"I shagged all of London."

"Consider London destroyed."

"It was a world tour."

"I love to travel."

"Then who will be keeping me company here?" asked Hermione sweetly. They were leaning closer, staring each other down.

"Can it be me, love?" Malfoy looked at her mouth. "If I leave your many, many lovers alive? Maybe I want them to see you with me after all."

"They'll only see me annoyed because you can't behave," said Hermione as though bored.

"Then they'll know I have your attention," purred Malfoy.

"Is that all you want?" asked Hermione, knowing immediately, guiltily that it was. Pansy was right. He was a slut. "So, so needy."

"I need you coming on my cock," said Malfoy, low. "Can I have it? If I'm good?"

"I don't think you could be that good," said Hermione, letting her eyes rake down and back up his body, a skeptical arch to her eyebrow.

"Let me try, love. *Let me*," he murmured, drawing out the words. "You can punish me if I'm not good enough."

"You'll never be good enough for me, Malfoy." Parkinson's voice: *He doesn't think he can get it*.

"Maybe I'm counting on it, love. Maybe I want to be punished." Malfoy swallowed. "Only by you, though."

"Malfoy," said Hermione, her chest and back tingling, buzzing, the smell of citrus and cloves all around her, "stop telling me the truth."

"It's horrible, isn't it, dear," said Malfoy, smiling sadly. Then he raised his eyebrows as someone approached.

Hermione was suddenly aware that she was standing very, very close to him in a crowded ballroom. The heat was rolling off him. The Black magic hummed between them. Her cunt was begging to be touched. Anyone would think they were lovers. Anyone would think their marriage was real.

"Minister," said Malfoy, his head still tilted low toward her, his eyes hard on the other man.

Hermione turned to see Shacklebolt stood beside her, his face grim.

"Malfoy," she said, turning back to him and watching as his pale gray eyes immediately shifted to her. "Be good and get me a drink."

Malfoy's eyes went heavy-lidded, a faint smile starting to play across his mouth. He looked at her, then leaned in, his lips landing lightly on her cheek. "Yes, ma'am," he murmured, his lips moving softly against her skin. Then he pulled back and his eyes locked onto Shacklebolt's, his grin growing into something wicked. He looked like he wanted to laugh in the other man's face. Malfoy only walked away, looking smug, without another word to the Minister.

"So you've brought Malfoy to heel?" asked Shacklebolt.

"Wasn't I meant to?" said Hermione sourly, distracted by the last expression she'd seen on Malfoy's face.

"Or is it the other way round?" His face was stony.

"What is that meant to imply?" She was genuinely surprised.

"While you're stood here flirting with your husband—"

Hermione's eyebrows shot up.

"—I've been informed that Rita Skeeter will publish a story charging the wolfsbane potion measure is rife with corruption, nothing but backroom deals for financial gain."

"So she's exposing Harold Higgs for his silver interests? It's not my fault members of the Wizengamot habitually profit off their positions without disclosing their conflicts. Why is she singing out *my* measure?"

"Because it's *your* conflict of interest she's concerned with, Mrs. Malfoy." Shacklebolt's words were clipped. "Malfoy LTD just announced it will be shipping Higgs silver in anticipation of the measure passing."

"Are you suggesting I passed inside information to Malfoy?" Hermione's thoughts raced along with her heart. What had Malfoy done?

"I don't have to suggest it," said Shacklebolt. "He's been coming and going from your office at will."

"That is the fault of your old-fashioned wards that give him access to my office because *you* made me marry him." Hermione was fuming now. "You forced that wizard on me and now you complain that he's exactly where you placed him."

"We've already discussed this. You assured me you'd never allow your work to be compromised."

"Your words, Minister. But it's become clear to me," she ground out, "that all work involving the Wizengamot is compromised by political and business interests. Do not single me out for punishment for working within the system for the greater good. As your own Reconciliation Act has proved, change is messy."

Shacklebolt gave Hermione a mollifying look. "I appreciate your efforts, Hermione. But, ultimately, it's not me you have to convince of your intentions. This press will look bad for you, and I'd hate to see your promising political career tainted."

"You married me to a Death Eater! You torpedoed my promising political career!" Hermione whispered harshly.

"Bad timing?" drawled Malfoy, who had appeared at her side and was pressing a champagne flute into her hand. "Your favorite, darling."

"Champagne is *not* my favorite, and I am only taking this so I can throw it in your face," said Hermione.

"Look to your house, Hermione." And, with that, the Minister walked away.

Hermione turned to Malfoy, who had a defiant smirk on his face. She could see the tension in his shoulders, though, around his eyes. When had she started noticing these things?

Hermione steeled herself. "Malfoy, are you using information from my office to inside trade?"

"Yes," he said.

Hermione looked around. Malfoy was too noticeable—people stole glances in their direction, no doubt waiting for their next public brawl. If she threw the champagne in his face, Rita Skeeter would report that she and her co-conspirator were seen trading recriminations after their plot was uncovered. (Hermione scoffed internally. Uncovered? Malfoy had announced the shipping deal.) She didn't want to be standing here, everyone freely watching their faces while they had this fight.

Hermione drained the champagne flute. "I demand to know what my reprobate husband does," she said dryly. "Dance with me and explain."

Malfoy caught up her elbow, smoothly setting his flute on a passing tray as he guided her toward the dancefloor, where couples were locked together in a series of steps Hermione didn't recognize. No matter—she knew Malfoy could mercilessly lead her through anything taught in a pureblood dance class.

He swept her into him, holding her closer than she thought strictly necessary, his godsdamned hand on her bare shoulder blade, his fingers firm against her back. She turned off the part of her brain that wanted to think about what step she took next and let her body react instinctively as he moved her back, turned them together, pushed her subtly toward him, her hands on him, his thigh pressed to hers, their breathing synchronized, his face tilted attentively toward her.

"Malfoy," she said, not looking him in the eye, "the *Prophet* is reporting on your deal with Higgs, and it makes me look like I'm either corrupt or stupid. You have to stop using inside information from my office."

"No," he said. "It's the best way for me to advance your policy objectives. The *Prophet* is doing you a favor. Your allies and opposition both need to know you have leverage and will use it."

"What's the problem, Weasel?" snapped Malfoy. "You only like boys who are still in the closet?"

"What's *that* meant to—"

"Aw, you gonna stick up for me, lover?" Nott cocked his head to look at Malfoy, his grin mischievous. "Nott, go get drinks," said Malfoy evenly.

"Yes, dear." He winked and slipped away, hands in his pockets, without asking for anyone's order.

"Was that Nott?" asked Parkinson, dropping an oversized leather handbag onto the table with a thud. "Nott?" she yelled. "Firewhisky for my man!"

Neville appeared behind her, and Hermione caught herself staring. She knew he'd turned handsome since they'd left school, but now he was in crisp, tailored black instead of fair isle wool—clearly Parkinson's work. They were *really* together? Ginny had seen them at the Ministry reception but Hermione hadn't believed half of what Ginny had said. Ginny thought a lot of men were good looking. And the things Parkinson said—Hermione could never tell how much Pansy was just winding her up.

Now Hermione watched as Neville casually dropped his large hand onto the back of the much shorter Parkinson's neck, his other hand in his pocket. Pansy's face didn't change but she subtly pressed back into his grip, his fingers flexing on the margins of her throat. Neville nodded to Harry and Ron, who had gone still.

Hermione realized she was wetting her lips. She could feel eyes on her—Malfoy was staring at her, his gray eyes soaking in her reaction to Neville and Pansy. Did he want something like that? Did she?

He's a dog—walk him like one.

"Longbottom," drawled Malfoy.

"Malfoy." Neville gazed at him levelly.

Ron and Harry looked at each other.

Malfoy caught her eye, his expression amused. *Your friends are easily riled idiots.*

She raised an eyebrow at him. *Your friends are all sex pests.*

He laughed.

Harry's eyes darted between them, and Ron looked to her, scowling.

Malfoy turned, still smiling. "Here you two are," he said, chucking his pointy chin toward Nott and Ginny—as though they were a couple he'd personally invited—as they neared the table, levitating trays of firewhisky and butterbeer.

Ginny was laughing, her sparkling eyes on Nott. His head was ducked toward her, his expression confidential. He bit his lip.

"All right, that's enough." Harry moved toward his wife.

"Hiya, babe!" she said cheerfully as the trays landed roughly on the table, butterbeer spilling over rims.

Nott took the seat next to Padma, ignoring her martyred expression, and Hermione noticed the Slytherins stuck together—Nott, Malfoy, and Parkinson sitting in an arc on the round pub table, angled so they could see the floor, Neville the buffer between Parkinson and Ron.

Hermione thought Ron was still too close to the snakes—and Susan wasn't here tonight to elbow him in the ribs. Though, with Malfoy and Nott, she'd more likely sit back and quietly egg him on. Hermione nudged Ginny to trade places with him.

Ron dropped with a grunt into the chair next to hers and looked over at her, leaning in. "These fucking Slytherins," he muttered in her ear.

Hermione snorted a laugh and he turned to Harry, sat on the other side of him. Hermione looked up—and her breath caught.

Malfoy—her husband, Hermione remembered—was *staring* at her ex-boyfriend sat beside her, a set, angry expression on his face. Then his eyes shifted to her and he saw that she'd seen. He lifted his chin, his face falling blank. His eyes played over her face and back to Ron.

Now you're imagining me fucking. Now you're jealous.

Hermione began to drink.



FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2003

Hermione looked up to see Malfoy making his way through the Leaky to the table near the back where her small group stood clustered, his platinum hair a beacon in the dark pub, the taller Nott visible behind him. Godric, he really didn't know how to make an appearance without a henchman in tow. She remembered him perpetually flanked by Goyle and Crabbe in school. She'd always wondered how he could stand it, dragging around those morons to watch his back. (A jolt as she realized he'd probably say the same about Harry and Ron.)

Malfoy's head turned, the Azkaban tattoo flashing on his pale neck, as someone said something to him. His lip was curling and then his teeth were bared. Suddenly Nott's arm was around him, his other shooting out to knock the drinker back, a hard look at the man as he bodily moved Malfoy away. Hermione's memory skipped back to Malfoy's arm around her outside Gringotts, his hand gripping her shoulder, his body pressed against her as he moved her through the crowd.

Then Malfoy and Nott were approaching—all crisp, dark button-downs and black trousers and pointy dragonskin shoes and signet rings, overdressed even in their casual clothes—Nott's arm loose over Malfoy's shoulder, Malfoy smirking.

"Good Godric, here we go," groaned Harry beside her, his jaw flexing. Malfoy had been in her office when Harry had dropped by to make after-work drinks plans for her birthday. Somehow, it'd felt impossible not to invite him.

"Darling," said Malfoy, staring at her from across the table as though they were alone, even as Nott lounged on him. He radiated tension, a coiled energy in his lean body.

Harry and Ron bristled perceptibly. Next to Nott and Malfoy, they looked rougher—disheveled hair, wrinkled shirts, their bodies thicker with auror-trained muscle—in a way Hermione found endearingly human and familiar.

"Granger." A delighted smile and then Nott's long arm was dropping from Malfoy as he turned to greet the other witch present before he addressed the men. Godric, these old-fashioned Slytherin manners.

"Hullo, *Padma*," he purred, his gaze intense.

"I'm married now, Nott," said Padma sternly, looking up at him. "You know that."

"I'm not married," he said cheerily, as though that mattered. His smile widened when she rolled her eyes. He turned and looked Harry up and down. "Potter."

"Nott," said Harry dryly.

"Weasley," said Nott, lifting his chin. "Tell your brother hiya for me."

"Which one," said Ron, his eyes narrowing.

"Whichever one you think most recently had my face pressed against a wall," said Nott, smug.

"Godsdammit, Nott!" Ron jerked forward, Harry yanking him back.

"What do you care about my policy objectives?" hissed Hermione, his fingertips gently, firmly pressing into her back as they turned.

"You're a Malfoy. Malfoys win."

There it was. His words were clipped, decisive. It couldn't be that simple, despite his refusal to use her name. "I'm not—"

"You *are*," he said angrily. "Stop saying that. You are carrying my name. I won't be married to someone who can't get her initiatives enacted."

The blood rushed to her face. "I should have known. Pure ego—"

"Where's your ego?" he snapped. "I know you have one, Miss Know It All. You spent years rubbing it in my face. Now you're telling me you're happy watching the inbred aristocrats in the Wizengamot block your ideas while your imbecile colleagues succeed because they know how to scratch a back? You're too smart for that. I told the Minister weeks ago to increase your budget. Has he? Has he done anything to advance your proposals so that I don't? Has he done anything to protect your reputation from mine? No, he *torpedoed* your promising political career. Now I have to step in. And you fight me every step of the way when you should be *thanking* me."

They were dancing close together, his body hard and warm against hers. She could feel him breathing faster. "*Thanking* you? I never asked you to do anything. In fact, I just told you to *stop*. I don't look smart when you cut deals behind my back. I look like the dumb wife—"

"But you *did* ask me to do something, didn't you?" he said nastily, his voice going lower as he leaned in. "And I did it. And you left me bled out and alone. But I know it was good for you. I know you got what you wanted. I just want something too."

The dance had come to a stop. Hermione found herself stood on the edge of the dancefloor with him, his arm around her waist now, holding her to him, her head tilted back as she stared at him, one hand still in his.

He did know.

She'd been lying to herself, telling herself he didn't. Telling herself he would have said something by now. Telling herself it hadn't been that bad—hadn't really happened. The truth rushed back in on a nauseating wave of adrenaline.

She jerked her hand from his grip. Her other hand had slid from his shoulder to his chest, flat against him as though to push him away, the diamond and sapphire ring glinting—reminding her that she could never truly escape. His arm was still wound tightly around her. They were opposing forces, locked in place.

Her instincts screamed at her to protect herself. If she admitted she was a terrible person, she'd be defenseless. It would be an open pitch for him. He'd tear her apart.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I asked you to do something because I was in *pain*—"

Something flashed across his face—he hadn't known how bad her arm was when he'd made his demands. She remembered his fury when he'd found out.

(Hermione could hear the testimony in front of the Wizengamot, the description of how the Dark Mark had burned—but not from Malfoy. He'd never said a word. He had hurt his own defense, refusing to say the Mark had been forced on him. When he'd been asked whether he'd taken it willingly, he'd said only, "Yes," expressionless.)

"—and you *refused* unless I came to your bed *without knickers on*. Have you already forgotten how you extorted me?"

It was shame flashing across his face now, and then his mouth quirked cruelly. "I know you'd have to be *desperate* to get anywhere near me. You should have cut off your arm, *love*, if you didn't want me to take advantage."

"That's all you do, isn't it? Take advantage of others' pain." Her lip was curled but it felt like her chest was caving in. He was looking at her like she'd ruined everything.

She pulled free, his arm dropping away, her pushing him back with the hand against his chest. She couldn't meet his eyes as she turned from him and stalked away.

"You'll be back next time you want to get off," he shouted at her back.

"*You snake.*" She had turned, her wand out and the stinging hex cast, before she could think.

He howled in pain, bent over, his eyes squeezed tightly shut as the hex crackled against his face.

Then he was upright and casting, his face twisted with fury—a look she'd seen in school—his arm still outstretched as the conjured snakes hit, hissing and writhing, at her feet.

Screams as Hermione flinched—not bitten but startled.

She hit him with another stinger—him baring his teeth against the pain—and he blasted her with icy water. Hermione gasped, her body locking up before her heart kicked back in like a jackhammer.

She raised her wand, clawing soaking wet tendrils of hair out of her eyes, and heard distressed cries—he had already turned. Was she going to hex him in the back? *Yes, I am*, she thought before she caught herself with a jolt.

Hermione watched him push through a scrum of onlookers before he spun away with a whiff of black smoke, the perpetual reminder of the Dark Mark. But she saw plenty of dark looks turned her way as she lowered her wand. Someone had vanished the snakes but she was cold and drenched, dripping on the floor—her delicate dress ruined—and she could see aurors moving toward her as she cast the first drying spell. The other partygoers stole scandalized glances at her, the half of the corrupt, volatile couple who had cast first and then wanted to hex her husband in the back. Her teeth were chattering but her cheeks were warm. She had so many things to be ashamed of.



"No one ever wants to come all the way out here."

"Funny, no one ever wants me in their home," said Theo.

Charlie should have been wary after a statement like that, but he just laughed and pulled Theo in by his shirtfront as he pushed open the door. Theo stumbled into the cottage with Charlie's tongue in his mouth, his hands reaching for Charlie's waist.

Charlie broke the kiss and tossed the portkey into a ceramic bowl by the door. "Stomach all right?" he asked, looking Theo up and down before he walked away, toward the bed visible through an arched doorway.

Theo was a little nauseous from drink and travel but he just shrugged and began stripping off his tuxedo jacket. "No matter." He eyed Charlie's back, his easy saunter. "I'll be gagging soon enough either way."

"Yeah you will be," said Charlie, turning with a grin. "C'mere, sweetheart."

Theo followed orders, letting Charlie pull his head down and kiss him, Theo's hands roaming over his ribs. Charlie was stronger and more muscular than he was. Theo wanted to lick the burn scars on his neck and chest. He wanted Charlie to hold him down and use him.

Charlie kissed him aggressively, his hand in Theo's hair, his other hand pulling Theo's hips toward his own. Then he turned with Theo and shoved him onto the bed.

Theo let himself fall back, biting his lip as Charlie climbed on top of him. He reached for Charlie's trouser button as Charlie leaned over him to kiss him. He worked Charlie's hard cock free and let his tongue travel over the textured skin on Charlie's neck. The clothes came off quickly then.

It was Charlie who was the sweetheart, though. When Theo had walked up to him at the ball, Charlie had reached out for him and said, "There you are," as if he'd been waiting for Theo this whole time. And when, later, Theo surprised himself by asking, "Can we go to yours?"—which Theo never said, unless he was intentionally making someone nervous—Charlie just grinned and said, "Let's go." Now he was sitting on Theo's chest, his cock in Theo's mouth, and Theo was gagging a little—it was a good-sized cock—but Charlie wasn't purposely choking him on it while he pinched Theo's nose shut and called him slurs, which had been plenty of Theo's Tuesday nights, not all of them bad ones.

After that, he brought her tea and cake—he was really very sweet—and they ate naked in bed.

She was watching him when he looked over at her and smiled. Merlin, he looked good. She'd move him into the Manor. A proper en suite. A better lab—she had some ideas she wanted to collaborate on. They'd maintain the cottage, and their children could summer here when they were insufferable teenagers and needed to be reminded how good they had it at home. They'd have two, she'd decided.

"Why didn't you and Abbott marry?" she asked him. "I'd assumed you had."

His expression was carefully neutral as he looked down, began picking crumbs off the bedding. She could see the tension around his mouth again. "She thought I needed to let the war go," he said, his jaw flexing. "That I was obsessed. That's why she didn't want to tell me about Avery Manor."

She turned more fully toward him. "But how do you do that? Let the war go." Pansy was asking—she was really asking. Because she didn't know. It felt like the war was all around her sometimes—like they were in a ceasefire that could end at any moment. It was ridiculous for her to feel that way—she hadn't been hurt, she hadn't been made to fight. But she felt that way, like something inside had broken and the edges would always be rough.

"I don't know," he said, looking over at her. "So I didn't."

"Right," she said, nodding. That was right.

"Why are you all right with what I do?" he asked, watching her intently. "You grew up with these people."

She sighed, looking down at his hand, concentrating on the thin scars across his fingers. They hadn't really talked about this, not quite. "Because . . . they used us. The boys, especially. They ruined them—all the boys I cared about. And for nothing. A stupid, made-up idea."

She stopped there and moved to lean against him. She knew she couldn't ask his sympathy for those boys who'd been such shits to him—he'd only been a boy, too, and they'd made his life worse. Finally, she said, "They lied to us—about a lot of things. And I just . . . hate them now."

He nestled her into him, his arm around her. He didn't tell her that she shouldn't hate people or that she'd feel better if she focused on the positive. He wasn't a liar.

"I'll take care of them," he said.

She looked up at him, quick, and grinned. Love was too solemn a word for what she felt right then. It felt like flying and champagne bubbles and running her fingertips across chinchilla fur. Like her heart was racing and she'd cry if she tried to explain it.

"Do you want to read my response to Hannah before I send it?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I trust you."

She pulled him down and kissed him, scattering all the crumbs he'd collected.

He left it out for her to read anyway. He wrote to Abbott that he was well and she needn't concern herself with his match, that he and Pansy understood each other and she made him happy.

"In bed," she added and sniggered. But she was good—she didn't write it in.

"Which means I don't cheat." He looked up at her, his expression serious.

She nodded. She believed him—she believed he believed it, anyway.

He watched her face. Her eyes skittered over him. She could feel herself breathing, could feel his cock in her. She was meant to drop it now.

He took his hand from her thigh and reached over and picked up the envelope. He held it out, offering it to her.

She shook her head, her lips sucked into her mouth. No, she knew better.

"It's not a test," he said. "Open it."

"What does it say?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "You can tell me."

She looked at him.

"Open it, Pansy."

She hesitated. She took it.

She stole a look at him as she slid her thumbnail under the seal and then pulled the stationery from the envelope, but his expression gave nothing away.

She read quickly—in for a sickle, in for a galleon. He already knew she was a jealous, distrustful bitch. He would already be cross, find some way to punish her.

His hand reached forward and—a surprised inhale from her—he began to rub circles on her clit. She tightened on him and glanced up. He was watching his hand touch her, his cock inside her as she read the letter from his ex-fiancée.

"What does it say?" he asked.

"She said she wouldn't get involved and she won't. She debated whether to tell you this, but she's noticed increased floo traffic between the Leaky and Avery Manor. She hopes our match isn't bringing up the past. P.S. Am I as awful as I was in school," said Pansy, rocking her hips, squeezing Neville's cock as pleasure radiated up from his thumb on her clit.

Her heart was racing, adrenaline coursing through her. She didn't give a good goddamn how big of a bitch Hannah Abbott thought she was so long as nowhere in the letter did Abbott say, *Ner, I enjoyed sucking your cock this morning. Let's do it again.* She didn't. The tone was stilted, as though they rarely spoke now. Pansy sensed real concern but there was a clear line of bad feeling running through it.

Now Neville would dump her off him and tell her to go home, she'd insulted him.

"What shall I tell her?" asked Neville.

"Tell her I'm worse. A terrible shrew," said Pansy. "You've never met anyone so jealous in your life. I never let you go anywhere or do anything or have any fun, and I hex you if you so much as look at a witch sideways. It's hell on earth for you here."

He snorted a laugh, smiling as she got the balls of her feet under her and began fucking him properly, letting the stationery fall to the floor beside the bed. "I'll tell her you're devoted and protective and a brilliant shag."

"That's what I just said," said Pansy.

She watched his face as she fucked him, his eyes falling closed, his lips parted as he let the sensation wash over him.

"I am awful and I will read your post again," she said, low. Now he would tell her that she was paranoid and crazy, that he couldn't trust someone who invaded his privacy, that she needed to stop being so insecure.

He laughed, his eyes still closed as he tilted his chin up, his head back, luxuriating in her. "Read it all," he said. "I'm not scared."

He let her wear herself out on him.

Then he rolled over with her and fucked her fast, turning his head away so he didn't shout in her ear when he came. He turned back, shuddering, and kissed her face. He was breathing hard, his cock still in her, when he murmured, "Pansy, you're the only witch for me."

"I know that," she said.

Charlie shifted forward, braced himself on the wall and thrust into Theo's mouth, careful not to hurt him, and Theo's grip on Charlie's thighs was firm instead of frantic. He kept his throat relaxed, his tongue over his bottom lip, over his teeth, Charlie's cock sliding in and out, slick with Theo's saliva, the repetitive motion soothing when Theo felt . . . safe? He dropped one hand down to stroke his own cock and looked up at Charlie, all freckles and curls and working muscle. He could get used to this. He pushed away the thought.

Then Charlie didn't flip him over. He kept Theo face-to-face and kissed him while he fucked him. He said "all right?" and "yeah?" and looked Theo in the eye, smiling, watching Theo's face as he thrust into him, kissing him again. His hands on Theo were sure. He smelled like firewhisky and cold wind and smoke. Theo could feel every part of himself here, in Charlie's bed, with Charlie focused on him. He was staring at Charlie, sighing and whimpering as he kissed back. He started acting up—started biting—and Charlie laughed and pulled back, pulled out and rolled him over, jerked him by the hips and fucked him hard, Theo coming all over his sheets. "Is this what you wanted?" he said, low, near Theo's ear. Theo didn't know what he wanted.

But Charlie didn't seem to mind. He cast a tempus with an alarm—he *did* have to be up early; there were animals kept for the dragons, and they had to be fed—and then pulled Theo close and kissed him until he fell asleep. He didn't seem to worry what Theo thought it meant.

Theo left after that. Charlie slept soundly, none of the nightmares Theo was used to—it was easy for Theo to slip out from under his arm, watch him breathe while he dressed, Charlie's wild ginger hair spread over his pillow. Theo left the Pucey brooch on the side table. Draco wouldn't care. (Draco. It never worked with Draco because they both wanted all the attention. They were too alike that way. He hoped Granger liked being on top.)

Theo paused by the door to take a portkey from the ceramic bowl. By the dish was an old muggle watch, gold. Theo wondered if Charlie's father had given it to him. He wondered if it was important to Charlie.

He slipped it onto his wrist and walked out the door, into the dark, whistling.



WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2003

IT'S WAR!!!: Draco & The Golden Girl Square Off

DUELING MALFOYS: Ministry Dance Disrupted

INSIDE THE CORRUPTION IN MAGICAL CREATURES

CHEERS!: Hermione Malfoy Models This Season's It Color

Hermione stormed down the hallway of the Manor—her high heels muffled by the runner, the scar on her arm burning—until she reached Malfoy's study door. She flung it open and marched in, her chin raised.

The one upside to her disgraceful public duel with Malfoy was it completely overshadowing Skeeter's exposé. No one cared about the dry details of a business deal when they could watch her Slytherin spouse cast snakes at her in a loop on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. The downside was the entire wizarding world thinking she was deranged. After retrieving her confiscated wand from the Auror Department and paying her fines, she'd wasted the day incendioing howlers. She'd still been stewing when Shacklebolt had pulled her into his office right before she'd left work.

Now Malfoy was up and rounding the corner of his desk—war veteran reflexes—a wand Hermione had never seen before in his hand.

"Get that veritaserum out of this house," she yelled, not caring that Parkinson and Nott were huddled on the settee, staring at her. "You're about to be raided."

Parkinson's hand had paused—she'd been painting Nott's nails.

"We're about to be raided," shouted Malfoy. He'd clearly spent all day seething too.

"I had *nothing* to do with this—"

"That's not what I'll tell them," he snarled, advancing.

She was shocked. "They'll never believe it. I'm—"

"The witch who broke every rule at Hogwarts. Who kept Rita Skeeter in a jar." He had cleared the settee. "Who broke into Gringotts. Who works in an illegally extended office with a private secretary loyal only to her. Who just bought *an institution* with Malfoy gold—"

"Your blackmail and extortion is *all*—"

"For your benefit. And I'll tell them it was at your direction." He had room to cast on her cleanly, his chin jutting toward her.

She closed the distance. "No one would *ever*—"

"Shacklebolt's seen me fetching your drinks. Every member of the Wizengamot knows me as your errand boy—"

"I've never—"

"I fed Crabbe's tongue to your cat, and I told *everyone*—"

on his face and then she was coming with a gasp, her hand flat on his chest. She stilled as her cunt spasmed and his tongue delved into her. Fuck Hannah Abbott. Everything was fine. It was *fine*.

She put all her weight on Neville's face and he sighed into her as the last of it rippled through her. Then she pushed off—he was sucking in air—and turned on her knees to face him. He looked good—panting, muzzle wet, licking her off his lips, his hair disheveled. She straddled him, took hold of his cock, and made sure he was watching while she lowered her wet cunt onto him and then took off her bra. She squirmed on him a little, letting everything jiggle—his fingertips were reaching for her thighs, his eyes on her breasts—and then she started riding his cock.

The problem with this angle, though, was that she could see the post piled on his bedside table. Had she wanted another look when she took this position? She pushed it out of her mind. It was only a letter. It didn't mean anything.

Neville wasn't the cheating type.

But Pansy had thrown herself at him and he'd shagged her immediately. What if Abbott came round and threw herself at him? Why wouldn't she? He was fit—loads fitter than that drip Macmillan. They'd already been together. Men didn't even think that was cheating, when they went back to the well. He and Pansy hadn't executed the bond yet. There was always some reason why it wasn't cheating and you were being a bint. Abbott managed the Leaky now. (Pansy could understand owning a pub—she owned several hotels herself—but running it?) She could pop out in the mornings, catch Neville at his unwarded greenhouse—

Pansy realized she was frowning, even as she moved on top of him.

She blinked and looked at him—and he was watching her face. He tilted his head back, eying the table. He cleared his throat. "What's in the post, Pansy?"

"Nothing," she said, slowing, her rhythm gone.

His eyes moved over her face. She looked guilty—she knew it.

He pushed up onto his elbows, his stomach tensing under her. He looked over at the bedside table. Then he reached across himself and, while she watched, shuffled through the post until he saw it. "Is it this?"

He turned back to her, the envelope in his hand, and studied the sender's name. Pansy's eyes roved over his shoulders, the stray scars on his forearm, the veins on the back of his hand. Then he tossed the letter down onto the sheet beside him.

He shifted with her still on him—he was reclined against the pillows, one arm up behind his head, one hand on her thigh. He looked relaxed but there was a tension around his mouth. His gaze was unwavering. "Tell me."

Pansy shrugged, rocking on him a little. He was still hard inside her. Her heart was pounding. She'd just had to keep looking at the post, hadn't she? She didn't want to have this conversation, except she also did.

"I saw it and I got jealous." She tilted her head, her eyes playing over his stomach, the hair on his chest, finally meeting his eyes. "Are you angry? Do you think I don't trust you?"

He looked up at her. "I know who you used to date," he said evenly.

"I know you're not Draco," she said, immediately unsure whether it was the right thing to say or the very worst.

Neville raised an eyebrow.

The worst. Why had she said his name?

"No," he said. "I'm not."

She was holding her breath. Here it came—their first huge fight. She'd made sure it happened. Everything seemed to slow down, this moment too familiar. She didn't want to fight with Neville the way she'd fought with Draco, though. It wasn't fun.

"For one thing," said Neville, absently running his thumb and finger up and down either side of her thigh muscle, "I'm not a coward."

She held very still. "I know that, Neville."

In school, she'd told herself she didn't care. Draco was tops—fit, popular, the Malfoy heir—and the rules were different for him. She had him, or close enough, and treating the other witches as competition was beneath her. But it was a lot of work—raising enough fuss to try to keep him in line but not so much that he threw it in her face. He threw it in her face a lot. And it was automatic—the drop in her stomach she'd feel when she was in his fourposter and a girl came by his room, when she sat down in the Great Hall and the boys' eyes moved from him to her and they hid their smirks, when he disappeared in Hogsmeade and claimed he'd been there the whole time, when she had to decide whether to start a fight or pretend she hadn't seen him kissing witches in the common room, when he didn't hide the lovebites and she had no choice.

Now she felt the same drop in her stomach, the same rush of nervy adrenaline. The letter was marked with the sender's name: Hannah Abbott Macmillan—Longbottom's former fiancée. Why was she writing to Neville?

If this were Hogwarts and she were in Draco's bedroom, Pansy would rip it open immediately. But she was a grown woman, and she was in Neville's bedroom. She shoved the envelope back into the stack and put the post on his bedside table.

She wouldn't look at it again.

Pansy took off her dress, another black Gucci—she liked this season's collection. Her bra was an architectural marvel that kept everything lifted and on display using lace, wire, three hook-and-eye closures, and probably a unicorn horn core. She left it on, along with the matching knickers. She got back on the bed and arranged herself for full effect. She did *not* look at the post.

The bath's door opened with a puff of steam and eucalyptus and he emerged, naked, his skin scrubbed pink, his hair still wet. He smiled when he saw her, and she let him see her look him up and down—broad shoulders, taut stomach, a big cock she was about to make bigger. He closed the distance and crawled across the bed to her.

"I'm all yours now," he said, leaning in to kiss her.

She smirked against his lips. "I know that."

She sat up and he kissed her on his hands and knees.

"The post came," she said. Just couldn't wait to make herself unhappy, could she?

"Later," he said, kissing her.

She nudged his shoulder. "Lie down. I'm in charge."

"Always, Pansy."

Then he was on his back, looking up at her, his expression pleased and anticipatory. His eyes moved over her bra. He wasn't thinking about the post.

Pansy leaned over him to kiss him, her breasts pressing against his chest, her hand reaching down to toy with him. When he was worked up, breathing harder, she shimmied out of her knickers and straddled him on her elbows and knees, giving him a good look at her cunt while she sucked his cock, a firm grip at the base, her hair curtaining her face as her mouth moved on him.

"Merlin, Pansy," he muttered as his fingers played over her clit. Then his stomach was tensing as he lifted up to lick her cunt. She hummed around his cock and he licked harder. "Pansy," he murmured, tugging at her hips.

She shifted forward and took him deeper. "Hm?"

"Merlin," he whispered. He exhaled. "Please," he said louder.

She raised her head and shifted back, fisting his cock. He was licking her hungrily, his tongue pushing into her. He pulled back enough to say, "Please, Pansy. Sit on my face."

She let go of his cock and sat back, letting him pull her down onto his mouth. She put her hand to his chest, kept just enough weight on her thighs that she could move freely, rolling her hips, fucking his face as he ate her cunt. She exhaled, trying to clear her mind, trying to focus on the rhythm of her hips, on his hot tongue, on suffocating him just enough to keep him happy but not so much he couldn't keep going. She closed her eyes and concentrated. He wanted her, he wanted this, this was hers . . . She was grinding

Hermione's breath caught, her eyes wide.

"Everyone knows you're the brains of the operation and I'm just the pet Death Eater you keep *on a lead*. You won't fuck me, but I'm still all over you." His mouth was open like he wanted to take a bite. "You're filthy with me, Mrs. Malfoy."

Hermione was stood staring at him, her lips parted.

"Granger!" barked Nott. "Love, am I being raided?"

"I don't know." She tore her eyes from Malfoy. "But they know you're in and out of black-market brokers' offices. They think it's to do with the veritaserum—"

"Right?" Nott leapt up, vanishing Parkinson's varnish bottle. He looked to Malfoy. "The stables." And he was gone.

"Pans!" snapped Malfoy. He held out the wand, his expression tense and focused. "It's in the dungeons. Get it to Longbottom."

Parkinson was standing from the settee in one fluid motion, her face blank. She snatched the wand from him and then she was gone too, her magazine lying slumped on the Persian rug.

Malfoy was already on Hermione, the coiled tension finally released as he crowded her back, her tripping over her heels. "You're so high and mighty," he snarled as they hit the shelves, his body jarring against hers, "but I'm the one doing the dirty work to keep you above me."

"Malfoy—"

His hands were on her ribs, his fingertips digging in. He had her up against the books—citrus and cloves and the smell of first editions surrounding her—his voice lowering with his head as his lips brushed her ear. "Then you fight me in public, dear, and people think I'm vulnerable. But they're not only my enemies now—they're yours too. What will you do, love, if I'm back in Azkaban?"

"I can defend myself—"

"You can't even stop *me*," he growled. And he bit her. Hard.

She gasped, her hips jolting forward, her head falling back as though she wanted him there. She could feel his teeth on the tendons of her neck, his hard thigh pressed between her legs. She was frozen in place as he sighed against her skin. His mouth released its hold, and then he bit her again, gentler, where her neck met her shoulder.

"Malfoy," she whispered, her breath hitching. "Are you—are you trying to help me or hurt me?"

"I don't care," he murmured into her skin. His arm was around her waist, his hand squeezing her breast, his thumb rubbing across her hard nipple, all reserve gone. "I'll rise by your side or drag you down with me. It doesn't matter to me. I've got you either way."

"You horrible prat," she choked out. He was biting the corner of her jaw, pressing her into him, the heat rolling off him. "It—it very much matters to me."

"Then you'll have to take control, love," he whispered in her ear. "Stop playing the victim."

She got her hands on his shoulders and shoved at him, hard, but he was right back on her with his hand dropped to her cunt, gripping her through her skirt. She thrashed against him and it only rubbed her clit on his hand.

"That's it, dear." He was kissing the side of her face as she gulped in air, murmuring in her ear. "I know you like using me. I like it too. I'm not sorry it happened—I just want it to happen again. Put me to use, love. Just tell me it's good for you."

He moved his hand on her and she huffed. "No—"

"Liar," he breathed into her ear, his voice low and obscene. "How wet is your cunt right now? Shall we find out?"

And then his hand was fisting the fabric of her skirt, his fingers gathering it up as she twisted in his grip, his arm wrapped tight around her. But she wasn't fighting hard enough . . . Her hand was clutching at him, on his shoulder, the hard muscles of his arm, as he shuffled his hold on her and her skirt, jerking her side into him, the fabric wadded in his hand at her hip, his leg pressing her knee open, and then his fingers were against her wet knickers as he breathed into her ear.

"Oh, love," he murmured, stroking her through the thin silk.

Hermione could feel the flush on her cheeks, her chest, the back of her neck. His fingers moving on her clit—it was wrong how good it felt. She was squirming, her eyes closed tight, trying to shut him out as he whispered in her ear. “Tell me it’s good, love. I want to be good for you.”

“Liar,” she ground out.

His hand pushed her knickers aside, her going still, his finger sliding in and then plunging into her. She was so wet—he was in to the knuckle, his hand firm around her. She made a noise low in her throat, and his breath caught.

“That’s it, love.” His voice was thick.

He pumped his finger into her and she panted, refusing to moan. Her hips were shifting toward him and he pressed the heel of his thumb against her clit, the digit wedged hard into the crease of her inner thigh, and she keened, grinding against his hand.

“Yes, love. Use me,” he sighed into her ear. “I’m not giving you up, love. You don’t want me to, do you. That’s why you warned me? You want to stay with me? You want to keep me too?”

“I want you to go to hell,” she whined, her hips shifting to meet him as he fucked her with his hand.

“Then I’m bringing you with me,” he said, biting her ear hard enough that she flinched, and he pushed a second finger into her. She made an impatient, breathy noise, bearing down to take him as he worked his way into her. She could feel the Malfoy signet ring. “You’re so lovely, dear. And I’m not giving up this cunt.”

“Malfoy—” She could feel his erection against her hip, her body clenching around his fingers.

“That’s it, love.” He was humming with satisfaction, grinding the heel of his hand into her clit. “Did he tell you he’d have me arrested? Did he promise to break the bond?”

She whined, incoherent.

“But you want to keep me, don’t you, love? So I can fuck you like this?” He was gripping her tightly, his body warm and hard against her as his fingers plunged into her. “So you can use me?”

She whimpered, grinding into him desperately as he fucked her faster.

“You won’t come to my bed, love. Can I come to yours? Will you keep me there, so I can fuck you like this every morning? So you can tell me what to do at night? Will you let me use my mouth? Will you keep me busy if I beg? I want to be good for you.”

His lips were on her cheek, the fragile skin beside her eye. He was whispering in her ear. “Did you lie to the Minister for me? Did you tell him I’m your pet? Did you tell him you’re keeping me?”

Her cunt was clenching, everything tightening. His body was hot against her, caging her in. He was murmuring, “That’s it, love. That’s it. I can fuck you as often as you like. I want to fuck you all the time. Keep me so I can fuck you.”

She panted, everything tightening.

She was enveloped in his heat, the smell of citrus, cloves, her own cunt. He was hard against her. Her clit was swollen, her cunt throbbing. He kept fucking her, fast and steady. Her hips kept pressing toward him. She shouldn’t be reacting this way. It was disgusting and she couldn’t stop—

“That’s it, love.”

And then he lowered his head and bit her, hard, and she came.

“Oh,” he breathed into her as her cunt spasmed and she grabbed his hand, holding it hard and still against her. “Oh, love.”

His grip on her tightened and then he was kissing her temple while she shuddered against him. He kissed her cheek, the side of her face, fast and light. “Lovely,” he murmured. “You’re so lovely, dear.”

Hermione shivered, sagging against him, against the shelves, waves of pleasure rolling through her. He held her to him, his lips against her temple, his fingers inside her, his hand against her clit.

What had happened? They’d been screaming at each other. He’d attacked her. She’d let him—

She shook her head, dizzy. She began to push him away, to push aside his arm. He held firm as the last of the spasms wracked through her. She pushed again and he made a noise of dissatisfaction as his fingers slid from her. Her cunt clenched as her skirt fell from his hand when he finally relented, pulling his arm from around her, taking a step back.

His wife pinching his earlobe tight between ink-stained fingertips, dragging his head down, his ear to her mouth, cooing, “On your knees, Malfoy. Be a good boy.”

His wife pushing him back against his pillows, her hand gripping his cock as she throws a leg over him, saying, “I need you now, Draco.”

His wife settling her perfect arse atop the brokerage statements on his desk, pulling him to her by his belt, murmuring, “I have more important work for you.”

If she would have his child—an impossible fantasy—the two would have his full attention. Malfoy heirs were rare, doted upon. What better task did he have? Burke had said it himself—the estate could run itself. She wouldn’t be able to keep him away. His son—it would be a son, unless her unfamiliar magic somehow overwhelmed the Malfoy primogeniture magic—would go to school and learn to resent him. He would learn Draco was the villain. Draco would take crying and clinging before it became silence and pushing him away.

Draco was swamped by nostalgia for the childhood he wanted to recreate. Flying practice, dance lessons, playing in the gardens, stealing sweets from the kitchens, Christmastime shopping trips to buy presents for his mother, learning to read a stock report, even the tedious comportment classes. It all felt quaint and safe now. His own childhood had been steeped in blood purity—so pervasive he was not even aware of it as a distinct feature—but his child’s needn’t be. If he’d thought he could bargain his wife into a baby—what would it take?—he would make any concession she liked. Muggle Studies, forays into Muggle London—fine, fine. His wife could handle the lectures about shared humanity and the rights of all magical creatures, and he wouldn’t contradict a word. He would enforce respect for her as the child’s mother and, surely, she wouldn’t poison the child against him.

It was a dangerous daydream he needed to quash. It wasn’t true. She would fight him every step of the way. He wouldn’t concede on anything. He would roll his eyes at her impassioned speeches. She would call him a bigot. They would argue at breakfast over the morning *Prophet*. Scream at the dinner table. The child would prefer her. Draco would be the tyrant before his son even got to school.

He was already the bad guy, wasn’t he?

The jealousy curdled to disgust. Here was Burke, taking it all for granted. Burke, who still hadn’t learned that everything he had could be taken from him.

“I’ve heard some things,” he said to Burke, “about the attention you found in America.” He smiled.



Longbottom shouldered open the door and she sat up, but he saw the look in her eyes and held up his hands. “I’m toxic—” He was wearing gloves, goggles slung around his neck. “Don’t touch me until I’ve washed.”

She slumped back against his pillows. “Get on with it, then.”

He raised an eyebrow and disappeared into the cramped bath. The cottage was charming if you enjoyed exposed beams and Eighteenth-Century plumbing, Pansy supposed, but she had plans to move Longbottom into Parkinson Manor. Right now, she could barely hear the owl tapping over the screaming pipes.

Pansy climbed off his bed and moved to the window, where she batted away the devil’s ivy reaching for her and cranked open the casement. Unlike his greenhouse, Longbottom’s cottage was warded to the teeth with some very nasty spellwork, and she was currently the only person besides Longbottom who could open doors or windows. She collected the evening post and gave the owl a treat, closed the window. Then she eyed the pot of mind-your-own-business on the sill before going through Longbottom’s mail. She didn’t pretend to have a good reason. She was nosy—that was her reason.

But the problem with looking for trouble was that you found it. Like this envelope in Hufflepuff yellow.

Avery pursed his lips. "I'll think about it, Draco."

"Brilliant," said Draco, with a snide smile for this less-than-generous concession. "I'll leave you to it, then."

Avery nodded, then let Draco reach the door before he said, "By the by, I heard Vance Crabbe lost his tongue." A little snort that indicated Avery had never thought much of the man. "What happened there, son?"

Draco looked over his shoulder. "He didn't address my wife properly." He lifted his chin and rapped on the doorjamb in farewell, then turned into the hallway, a bounce to his step.

Draco's plans as he left Avery's office were vague but solidifying. Draco did not want Avery whispering revivalist fairytales in Lucius's ear, and he'd been too honest with Avery about Lucius's own plans for his wife. He'd used the most cynical framing because he knew it would speak to Avery, but he did not want it getting back to her. He was going to have to deal with Avery. Which meant, at some point, Draco was going to have to fuck with Longbottom.



Benedict Burke was ten years older than Draco and the model for what his life would have been like if he'd managed to avoid the war the way Burke had done. Burke had sat those years out in America and returned to take over his family's hereditary seat in the Wizengamot. He was handsome, well dressed and trendily coifed, the father of an heir and a spare. They still told stories in the Slytherin common room about his prowess on the quidditch pitch. In another life, Draco would be a younger member of the man's political cohort, working diligently to emulate and then surpass him while Lucius ran Malfoy LTD. Even now, Draco felt a pull toward the wizard—the team captain or friend's older brother he wanted to notice him. Unfortunately, Draco was here to blackmail him.

Well, maybe he wouldn't have to.

It was easy enough to run into Burke in the halls of the Ministry, drop the names of a few Slytherins in common, and feign an interest in his exploits in America—Draco was largely telling the truth—and he was soon invited into Burke's office for a cup of tea. Draco admired the classic, subtly masculine style of the man's décor. Yes, his Wizengamot office would have looked like this, only slightly updated. House Malfoy hadn't been stripped of its seat but it was hard to serve when you were in Azkaban—like Pansy and Theo, Draco was using a representative who wouldn't be spottable on by former Order members.

Burke was currently flattering Draco as an excuse to brag about his own twenties.

"You're lucky, though, Draco. Oh, I know the last few years have been tricky! But now life goes on and you're young, you're free, no stuffy job like mine, no children crying and clinging to you. You manage your estate—and what's that? A few investments to look after? All made years ago for the long term. Practically runs itself, right? And then you can do whatever you like! Flying. A little sport. Chase the witches, eh?"

"Well, I've recently become wed," said Draco, declining to tell Burke that for most of his young, free years doing whatever he liked, he'd been ready to avada himself.

"Oh, yes! That exotic little minx in *Magical Creatures*—"

Draco felt his entire face go hard, his eyes flat. *Exotic little minx*. It sounded filthy in Burke's mouth. Was that how he sounded, thinking about her? Burke made her sound like an animal he was about to fuck. Draco decided he was going to fuck Burke up.

"Feisty, isn't she? That'll keep you busy for a little while! But as soon as they're pregnant, forget it—then it's all about the baby, and you have to look elsewhere just to get a little attention."

Draco was nearly nauseous with jealousy. He would kill—he *might* kill, considering his thoughts on Avery—to have his wife be *keeping him busy*.

"Malfoy—" She was breathing hard. "What are you thinking?"

He was watching her, his face open.

She shook her head. She tried to look past him, focus on the room. His quill discarded on the desk. Pansy's magazine on the floor. Nott's drinks glass. What did he have in the stables? "Malfoy, really." She couldn't catch her breath. "You need to clean up—"

He dropped to his knees, reaching for her skirt. His eyes were on hers, his lips parted.

"Malfoy!" She pushed him away, her hands on his shoulders.

He sat back on his heels and looked up at her as he lifted his hand to his mouth. His eyes fell closed, his eyelashes long and delicate, as he began to lick his fingers.

She held her breath, watching his pink tongue curl around them, his cruel, beautiful mouth tighten to suck. He licked his signet rings clean. His pointy chin was ducked; he looked up at her from under his brows. "Can I do it again, love? If I'm good?"

"You're never good, Malfoy." She said it as though keeping in practice. No heat behind it.

"It wasn't good for you, dear?" A tone of faux innocence, concern. He reached out and twisted the hem of her skirt around his fingers. He looked up at her. "Can I try again? Until I get it right?"

You will have to take control, love.

Hermione pushed off the shelves behind her, taking a step toward him. He immediately lifted off his heels to meet her, no longer sitting back but on his knees, his face tilting up to her, his hand still clutching her skirt.

Hermione raised a hand to his brow, smoothed back a platinum lock. He hummed with pleasure at her touch. Then she grabbed a handful of hair, twisting her wrist. He grunted and she pulled his head back, exposing his throat. He didn't resist, didn't break eye contact.

"Do you like being on your knees, Malfoy?" Her voice was low. She looked down her nose at him, his perfect face. His sharp cheekbones. Hard jaw. The Azkaban tattoo marring his skin.

He sighed, his eyes heavy-lidded. "For you, love."

"Maybe you'll get another chance," she said. "If you aren't in Azkaban."

She pushed his head away—he let her—and walked out of the room. She refused to look back at him. She was tingling, buzzing all over. Something terrible had just happened. Something terrible was coming. Something inevitable.

She could feel her scar burning. She'd forgotten it for the first time in weeks.



Pansy walked down the center aisle of the greenhouse, her heels clicking on the cracked tile. She angled the wand upward, holding her levitating cargo steady. She neared the back, the leaves rustling, vines reaching for her ankles, and found Longbottom looking up at her from where he leaned against the sideboard, a letter in hand.

He straightened, tossing the parchment to the counter, where a map was spread, and watched as Pansy lowered the potions case until it settled heavily on the tile with a rattle of glass bottles.

"What's this, then?" His expression was faintly amused as he stepped toward her, looking down at it.

"Veritaserum. Draco's expecting a raid." Pansy tossed her hair as Longbottom's eyes shifted to her. "He thought you might want it."

Longbottom raised an eyebrow. "In exchange for?"

"For not telling any aurors where you got it." Pansy laughed. "The Ministry doesn't come here, does it?"

"No," said Longbottom. "Shacklebolt looks the other way while I keep things outside the country."

"Good." Pansy twirled the unregistered wand between her fingers. "I left Nott's bombs outside."

Longbottom snorted, reaching for her as he shifted closer. "Let's go take a look, then. I might have a use for both."

"Thought you might," said Pansy, smirking at him as she raised up on tiptoe to kiss him. "After that, I have a use for you."

"What do I get to do to you this time?" he asked, his hands on her waist.

"Whatever you want," she said, gazing up at him.



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2003

They came at midnight. The wards alerted and Hermione apparated down to the Manor's formal entryway in a jumper and hastily pulled on jeans, her heart racing, adrenaline spiking through her. Even suspecting it was coming, even knowing it was only a search, it felt too much like the war.

She found Malfoy lurking in the dark in his shirtsleeves and trousers (*Malfoy on his knees in those trousers, licking her off his fingers*), glowering at the hearth. He looked over when he heard her, and then his hand was on her upper arm. His head turned toward the floo as it flashed green, and he pulled Hermione behind him, his body blocking hers when he stepped forward to greet the first aurors to clear the fireplace. The Lord of the Major surprised at home—but not that surprised. A convicted criminal used to repeated raids.

Hermione shifted to see Harry and Ron at the front, their faces tense, wands lighting up as the soles of their shoes scraped stone. A surreal moment of nightmare logic: If this was the war, then they were the enemy. No—she shook it off. But she felt the twist of betrayal in her chest, knowing they hadn't warned her. How afraid would she have been, waking without warning to the wards screaming?

Had they thought she would tip off Malfoy? (She had.)

The harsh lumos light flickered over Malfoy's arm and she watched as Harry's and Ron's eyes caught on the Dark Mark—Malfoy had his sleeves rolled to the elbow, allowing it to show. Honestly, she wanted to lunge forward and smack him. He just couldn't help himself, could he?

Gawain Robards stepped to the fore of the crowd of aurors. They'd sent a large team for a large manor. A notorious manor.

"Draco Malfoy, you are credibly accused of possessing illegal quantities of a controlled potion. Per the terms of your sentencing and release, we are now free to search Malfoy Manor for veritaserum and other contraband." Robards dropped his voice. "Do you have anything to tell me, Malfoy, before we begin?"

Malfoy's expression was impassive, the face of a man who resented his treatment but did not expect better. "While at the Manor, my wife does not leave her rooms on the second floor. She has no knowledge of my activities. Any statements to the contrary are lies, and nothing discovered outside her suite should be associated with her in any way."

Hermione looked to him but his focus remained on Robards.

"Your statement has been noted for the record," said Robards dryly. "Nevertheless, we will require all human members of the household to be present and to surrender their wands for the duration of our time here."

Hermione felt a small jolt of humiliation. She couldn't look at Ron and Harry as she stepped forward to relinquish her wand.

"Of course," said Malfoy, holding out his own. "We'll wait while you paw through my wife's lingerie."

A long-suffering look from Robards as he took the wand in the same hand that held Hermione's.

"If you kill my wife's cat," said Malfoy, "we will sue."

"Noted."

"In that case," Malfoy turned to her, "darling, if you'll join me in the Green Room?"

Draco favored Higgs with his smuggest expression. "I'm not the kind of man who feels the need to order his witch around like a house elf," he drawled. "Tell me, Higgs, is it want of resources or lack of stamina that has you begging off from satisfying your women's whims? My mother wants me to wear green to her Yule ball, I wear green. My wife wants underprivileged workers to have rights—" He waved his hand dismissively. "I indulge her. It's no effort for me to do these little things to make her happy." A derisive chuckle. "After all, I'm merely talking to you."

Higgs raised an eyebrow and puckered his lips as he lined up a letter opener topped by a brass pineapple with the edge of his pristine blotter. "Well, Draco, rumors are swirling about the last person you talked to." His eyes shifted to the younger man's face.

"If you're referring to Crabbe, he isn't the last person I talked to," said Draco, letting his voice go mean. "But I held him down, cut out his tongue, and fed it to my wife's cat. So I *was* the last person *he* talked to." He smiled.

"So you *are* here to intimidate me," said Higgs sourly.

"Are you feeling intimidated?" asked Draco, eyebrows raised, his affable tone back. "I'm merely suggesting you support Mrs. Malfoy's preferred regulatory language."

Higgs was shaking his head. "No, no, those measures are simply too costly—"

"For those who own silver mines," said Draco. "Yes. But those costs will be offset when you contract with Malfoy LTD for your shipping at a discounted rate. Your wife's margins will remain intact. Malfoy LTD will gain a new business partner. You'll get some press as a reformer." Draco waved a hand. "Or I can tell my competitors that they should raise their rates because I won't be undercutting them. Mrs. Malfoy will no doubt alert the ethics committee to your wife's involvement." He shrugged. "Like the cat, she has a taste for blood."

Higgs nodded unhappily. "I can see you both do." He turned resentful eyes on Draco. "Perhaps the Ministry was right to think you two well suited."



"Avery, I understand you're opposed to Mrs. Malfoy's policy initiative. We'd like you to support it." Draco had scarcely sat down in Avery's guest chair, but there was no point in delaying with Avery. He crossed his legs and gazed neutrally at the older man.

"Really, Draco!" Avery's feigned shock made whatever he was about to say all the more insulting. "That choke chain must be tighter than I thought. She has you out here running her errands?"

"My father's, actually." It rankled that this was true, but this was the better tack with Avery, who still didn't respect Draco and wouldn't easily be intimidated. "Lucius has plans for my Mrs. Malfoy. He wants to see her advance."

Avery pulled a face that settled into a frown as he leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers before him. "I can understand Lucius wanting to use her as an asset inside the Ministry . . . but isn't the point for her to do your bidding, rather than the other way round?"

"Malfoy interests are, perhaps, more complicated than you comprehend," said Draco mildly. "We're thinking long-term. Rest assured that if it has the Malfoy name on it . . . we are interested in it succeeding." His look was pointed.

Avery harrumphed. "Yes, well. I do feel for Lucius, martyred for the cause as he is. I think he should have more faith in our own plans to restore order to this country . . . I don't think he needs to resort to these kinds of—"

Draco raised an eyebrow, suggesting Avery not insult Lucius to his son's face. He clearly had no compunction about insulting Draco's wife, and Draco was not yet prepared to be in open conflict with him, given Avery's deep connections within the revivalist movement. He wanted to play out the options there over more time.

Hermione was reading *The Daily Prophet* while Malfoy sat in her guest chair, flipping through a quidditch magazine and idly conjuring finches. He'd already been through the paper and marked every article he thought was of interest.

He did this now—sending her a constant stream of clippings and white papers on subjects he deemed relevant to her work. They fought about the contents sometimes and it was—Merlin help her—oddly gratifying, the way Malfoy was always game to spar. When Harry rolled his eyes and changed the subject or Ron played dumb or Francesco agreed with everything she said, it made her feel like her ideas were too tedious—her feelings too strong—for anyone to bear. In contrast, Malfoy's arguments only got slyer and more specific—his rejoinders more carefully calibrated to annoy—as if he had endless time and energy to spend on thinking about irritating her. He'd even steadily discarded the more bigoted, ignorant opinions from his repertoire, as though to make sure she couldn't dismiss him out of hand.

Recently, he'd begun to send her annotated reviews of novels. Hermione felt she was dangerously close to being invited to a book club.

Now Francesco ducked as a finch circled and landed on his desk.

"I'm surprised Harold Higgs is supporting the wolfsbane potion proposal," said Hermione, scanning an interview with the Wizengamot member. "He's always been congenitally opposed to helping anyone in need."

"Of course he's in favor," said Malfoy with a snort. "He has a silver mine. He'll make a killing selling silver nitrate to the brewers who spring up to take advantage of the subsidy."

"What? There's no silver mine on his conflicts disclosure," said Hermione, looking up.

He was in a black shirt and black waistcoat, his collar open at the throat. A lock of white-blond hair had fallen over his forehead. "It's under his wife's name," he said, turning a page to frown at player stats.

"And he has the nerve to block my provision that all ingredients be sourced under fair labor standards when he's personally profiting from this measure?" said Hermione, incensed.

"That'll cut into his profit margins," said Malfoy blandly, for once not engaging.

"The unmitigated greed!"

Malfoy shrugged and looked up. "Do you have any of that sour candy?"

"Draco," said Higgs. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was on level four," said Draco as he dropped into the garishly upholstered guest chair in front of Higgs's suspiciously clean desk. "Thought I'd pop by."

"Ah, yes. Magical Creatures. I've seen you in the *Prophet* lately, with Miss Granger." Terence Higgs's uncle was a round, fussy little man. Someone who begged to be bullied.

"Mrs. Malfoy now, thanks to the Ministry." A small, noncommittal smile.

"I'll have you know I voted against the Reconciliation Act." A tone of showy, false concern. "It's shocking what's been done to you."

"Quite." Draco nodded sagely.

"I hope she's not trying to drag you into her ridiculous little projects. I know how wives can be." Higgs hiccupped the laugh of someone who was definitely being bullied by his wife. "Perhaps you need to remind her of her place next time you're on level four?"

"I don't know where the Green Room is," ground out Hermione, resentful that the truth now sounded like a script.

"I'll show you the way," he said, completing the scene. And he gestured her forward as he caught her elbow between light fingertips. The skin of her inner forearm itched and burned.

Hermione turned back one last time—Harry looking apologetic, Ron not meeting her eyes—and then let herself be led away, reduced to a prop.

Malfoy pulled her close, energy thrumming between them as she remembered his body against hers, his fingers inside her, him whispering desperate nonsense in her ear. She'd hid in her rooms after, replaying it over and over in her mind as she changed her clothes and then rearranged books in her study, acting as if nothing had happened though her only audience was Crookshanks. Now Malfoy led her silently through dark hallways, forcing the female aurors flanking them to light their wands if they wanted to see. Sexist, Hermione thought, to assign the witches to babysitting duty.

The ground floor sitting room appeared in the roving spotlights from the aurors' wands to indeed be furnished in green, and Malfoy again made no move to light their surroundings—as though, stripped of his wand, he could do nothing. Hermione wondered whether the elves had all been sent away with the Manor's remaining dark artefacts and amortentia or if they were at that very moment filling her dressing room drawers with Slytherin green silk and lace to embarrass Robards's men.

Malfoy stood to the side, holding her elbow, and gestured to the chairs clustered near the dark hearth as though the aurors were guests to be seated first.

"Darling?" His hand was held out toward the matching settee, his fingertips on her elbow pressing her toward it.

She hesitated.

"It will be hours," he said gently, his Lord of the Manor affect gone.

She looked at him then, as an auror turned and her lumos lit up his face. His expression was closed off but calm, his eyes focused solely on her. She saw in them no regret for what he had done in the study.

I'm not sorry it happened—I just want it to happen again.

She nodded, her breath catching, and took a seat. He sat beside her, crossing his legs, and did not offer the aurors tea.

Hermione sat, without her wand, in the uneven glare of the aurors' lumos charms. She watched the aurors' eyes flit between her and Malfoy, evaluating their postures, the distance between them, the looks they exchanged. They would report back everything. Hermione should have been fighting him the entire time—the innocent forced to live with a monster. The man who had kneeled in front of her with molten eyes, parted lips, lost in her gaze, now regarded the witches with icy disdain—the villain they were expecting.

Hermione imagined the aurors could somehow see what she and Malfoy had done earlier, imagined her face was still flushed, the bite marks visible on her neck. She could still feel his breath on her cheek as he whispered in her ear. He had been right about her lying to Shacklebolt but not about Shacklebolt's promises.

She had answered the Minister's summons grimly prepared to be disciplined for dueling at a Ministry function. Instead, Shacklebolt had waved away her stilted apology to focus on Malfoy. Rumors were spreading that Lucius continued to exert influence from Azkaban—Hermione knew from Ron's loose talk that this had always been the case—and that Draco was now shaking off his self-imposed exile after his imprisonment and house arrest to emerge as a volatile political player.

Hermione had hummed noncommittally, trying to ignore the burning skin on her forearm. "Because of this shipping contract with Higgs?"

"Draco's business ethics leave much to be desired but no. It's his renewed involvement in the blood supremacy movement that's of concern. He's been observed visiting Alastair Avery, a known revivalist, as well as other Slytherins with Death Eater ties. He's most likely working under Lucius's direction but I'm worried by signs he's not." The Minister had settled back in his chair, steeping his fingers. "Draco is young, undisciplined. Prone to emotional outbursts. In addition to the altercation with Marcus Flint that

you were unfortunately present for, he's rumored to have personally mutilated another former Death Eater—Vance Crabbe—for reasons unknown."

"You believe he's engaged in violent rivalries within revivalist circles," said Hermione.

"It seems so," said Shacklebolt. Then, sharply: "What has he said in front of you?"

Hermione worked hard not to let her frustration show. Was Shacklebolt surprised when the Death Eater he'd married her to now acted like a Death Eater? It was win-win for him, wasn't it? If she couldn't civilize Malfoy, she could inform on him.

"He characterized his attack on Flint as defending his wife after Flint assaulted me. He told me Crabbe insulted members of his household, which I took to mean me," said Hermione evenly, resisting the urge to rub at her arm through her sleeve.

"He tells you he's defending your honor to Death Eaters?" Shacklebolt harrumphed, and then favored her with a sardonic side-eye. "Draco *does* like to talk about his duties as head of house. But, no, I don't buy it. The Malfoys continue to harbor larger ambitions. And with this new set looking to revive blood purity, Draco is fighting for status—"

"Which I only lower," said Hermione, pulling at the cuff of her sleeve.

Shacklebolt nodded sagely, and her mouth formed a thin line as she exhaled.

"Most likely these are existing rivalries having to do with schemes we're still working to unravel. We've received a tip that Malfoy is trafficking in large quantities of veritaserum. Perhaps related to this, Theodore Nott, a known associate, has been seen entering the offices of black-market brokers and dark potionmasters all over town—and leaving many of them in flames or with a bloody mess on their hands."

Hermione blinked, remembering Nott's sincere, blood-flecked smile. Had Malfoy sent Nott after the treasure hunters?

"Establishing a monopoly maybe. No one will press charges—for obvious reasons."

Hermione nodded. She hadn't reported the inquiries because there were always threats and rumors—and there was nothing, really, the Auror Department could do.

"What do you know about Malfoy and controlled potions?" prompted Shacklebolt.

She cleared her throat. "Anything he's brewing illegally will be in his dungeons lab."

Shacklebolt studied her, his expression inscrutable. "That's all you have to tell me?"

Hermione shifted in her seat. If this were wartime, she wouldn't balk at being his spy. But it wasn't wartime, was it? It was her life. And if it were the war, maybe she'd have been briefed on the plan from the start. Maybe he'd have listened to the intelligence she brought back.

Hermione shrugged one shoulder. "He's a bored, spoiled git. He comes to my office and eats candy and reads the quidditch scores when he's not conjuring birds and butterflies. He complains about the quality of the Ministry's tea and quills. He thinks your rugs are cheap and the ink is too thin. Frankly, my focus has been on my own work. You know how important the wolfsbane potion proposal is to me, and with my presentation to the Wizengamot coming up tomorrow—well, that's all I've been thinking about lately."

Shacklebolt frowned, not meeting her eyes. "Tomorrow, yes. Well, I'm sure that will go swimmingly, Hermione. You know your work in Magical Creatures always has my support."

Hermione knew immediately that the Minister had planned whatever was coming with no consideration for her presentation before the Wizengamot. He probably expected it to be postponed in favor of an emergency hearing on Malfoy's arrest. He was probably planning to raid the Manor that night. Even a cache of veritaserum would likely result in little more than a hefty fine. No, the Minister wanted to find something in the Manor that would trigger an interrogation—the veritaserum only the way in—and he'd been hoping Hermione had a list of dark artefacts and their hiding places ready to go for him.

But he was making no promises in return. She had signed the marital contract in blood. His law forced her to live with her husband. And if he thought Malfoy was dangerous, he was not promising to protect her when Malfoy got out of Azkaban again. He was not promising to reward her as a Ministry spy. He was not promising material support for her own disrupted work. He was not promising Ministry oathbreakers to break the bond.

"The Nimbus 3000 is pretty sweet," said Ron, raising an eyebrow at Harry.

"Sick turn radius," agreed Harry.

Hermione groaned and commandeered the rest of Ron's butterbeer.

"Has he cut up any more of his friends?" asked Harry darkly.

"Not that I know of," muttered Hermione. Part of her wanted everyone to know what she was dealing with over there. Another part of her regretted telling Ginny about Crabbe, and she didn't like to examine why. Did she feel . . . disloyal? "And I can't prove anything," she added quickly.

"No charges to prove," said Ron. "Crabbe hasn't come in to voice a complaint. Tell us his side of the story. Talk us through—"

"I get it," said Hermione.

"Ron's take is tongue in cheek," said Harry, and Ron broke—turning his head to snigger into his shoulder, "but you *will* tell us if Malfoy's threatening you?"

"Nothing to tell," said Hermione, omitting everything there was to tell.

"Merlin, he's a psycho," said Ron absently as he got up to get his own pint.

Hermione wasn't going to tell them she'd been in the psycho's bed, whimpering, the relief sweeping through her until she sank back against him and he held her to his scarred chest, the Dark Mark dragging along her arm.

Part of pretending the scar didn't bother her was not talking about it to Harry and Ron—because it only made them feel terrible. She wasn't meant to feel ashamed, like she'd done something wrong, because of something that had been done to her—she'd been told this over and over. But Hermione *did* feel ashamed, like some better version of herself would have talked faster, fought harder, somehow prevented it from happening. It didn't matter what she was meant to feel; she felt what she felt. But if she told Ron and Harry this, they would tell her, no, *they* were to blame for not stopping it. And she would tell them there was nothing they could have done and they would tell her the same, and none of them would feel better, only freshly upset. They felt what they felt, too—Ron especially.

And so Hermione hadn't wanted to tell them that the scar was burning and itching and poisoning her, Bellatrix's curse revived, when all they could do was feel that they'd failed her. And now she didn't want to admit that she had let Draco Malfoy use it to get her into his bed in a thin silk nightdress and no underthings. They would be sickened. And they would tell her how she could have talked faster, fought harder, to prevent that night from happening. And she wouldn't be able to tell them that she had let Draco Malfoy wrap his arms around her and spill his blood on her and sleep against her, his hand gripping her thigh, and it had been her own actions—not his—that had sent her running, ashamed all over again.

So, already, she was lying to them.

When Hermione got back to her office, Francesco pointed to a stack of files—half the original—now on the corner of his desk.

"He stayed for fifty-five minutes and threatened me with disembowelment if I didn't have them summarized for you by end of day."

Hermione had noticed Francesco avoided saying Malfoy's name, as though it might summon him.

She paged through the reports. With no way of knowing what the Unspeakables were looking for, Malfoy had marked trends, inconsistencies, and anything he thought supported her current policy stances. The minimum of rude commentary told her he had been working quickly.

Malfoy's opinions were more conservative, cynical, and business-oriented than her own. But he was increasingly able to mimic hers with surprising accuracy. Or maybe not surprising—he had been a terror in school because of not brute force but biting wit. He had been observant—with an unerring eye for insecurities and a nasty ability to create new ones with his pinpoint criticism. He always knew when she and Harry and Ron were fighting, ready to corner her and pick her apart when she didn't have back up.

Hermione thought of the amortentia and veritaserum he was brewing in his renovated dungeons. He was still trafficking in gossip, insecurities, division, now on a larger stage. And now she and Harry and Ron didn't even have to be fighting for him to divide them—he had only to bargain her into his bed and she would do it for him.

gripped his shoulder, thrust herself onto him, rubbing against him—touching him without apology or hesitation, like grappling with him on the steps of the bank.

He was dizzy from the blood-play. Shot through with pleasure—fuck, she was going at it. The hard pinch of her hand, her cunt hot and wet and tight on him, the impatient noises she huffed out—it all felt so much better than all the times he had imagined her slapping him, punching him, pushing him down.

His hands played over her hips. He kept his mouth shut for once, afraid of reminding her who she was using.

But she'd said it—Draco—as though she were exquisitely aware. She'd said it—good boy—as though she might be willing to say it again.

He'd spoken the truth to Crabbe—everyone would be his master. His purpose had always been to be used. He'd lorded every scrap of power and status he'd had over his peers—why shouldn't he, when he knew his own place? He hadn't always resented it. It felt good, to know your use was important to the people around you. *We need your blood, your spunk, your magic, Draco. You're key to our plans.* They wanted him; his body held value. *Only you can do this for us.*

Then Voldemort had marked him, Potter scarred him, Azkaban tattooed him—his body a map of his failure, his cowardice, his disgrace. But now she touched him like none of it mattered—like she could see the Mark and the scars and the runes and she only saw permission to make her own claim.

His eyes roved over her stomach, her breasts. If it weren't for the rings, he'd be finiting her contraceptive charms, whispering fertility spells right now. Just as well he couldn't—she'd be done with him then. She'd terminate the pregnancy and cut him off or she'd take the baby and move to another wing. (Then he'd tear the Manor apart to get to them. The press had no idea if they thought they'd seen the Malfoys fight.) The rings made him key to her plans but they also made him subject to hers.

Could he keep her here for five years? He'd promised to tell her the truth. A horrible prospect. He'd show her who he really was and she'd pull away, push him away, run. He was already regretting—Merlin, what had come out of his mouth in the sitting room? But—did part of him thrill at the idea? He liked telling her what he did. He liked watching her pupils blow out as she took him in, liked that moment when her face screwed up because she cared too much not to fight him. And now maybe he liked that moment when he told her and she didn't fight him at all—when he told her the truth and he saw in her eyes that she accepted it. It was almost like—Merlin, no, he sounded like an idiot, thinking this way. But she knew about the blackmail, the potions, him sending Nott to Knockturn—and she didn't mind one bit, did she? She had a vindictive streak too, just like him. She liked knowing better than Shacklebolt. He'd told her the truth and here she was, right now. The Dark Mark was uncovered, his arm was touching her, and she only pulled away to push herself back onto him. And she felt so good. It all felt so good—all of it.

He pinched her nipple. *Look at me.*

She did!

He smiled. *Don't forget it's me, love. Look at me look at me look at me.*

He was pinching both nipples as she ground on him.

I'm going to be key to your plans.

She was grinding, her cunt clenching. Then her thighs, her hips, her arse—everything tightened and shifted, and she knocked his hands away and went still, her cunt spasming wonderfully on him while she held her breath. Then she exhaled, hard, her palm pushed against his chest, her eyes closed, her hips rocking forward, her head falling back as she came on his cock.

Yes—he'd been right when he'd told her he needed this.

Now she was breathing hard, the sapphire necklace rising and falling with her breasts. A shiver ran through her and she squirmed and tightened on his cock. She sighed, her eyes closed, her hair wild around her face.

He waited while it rippled through her, watching her face. He got to see this now. Nobody but him ever got to see this again.

She took a deep breath—

His turn.

Her eyes snapped open when she felt him move. His knees were bent and he sat up, wrapped one arm tight around her, pushed up with his hand against the bed so that his feet were under him, and then she was clutching at him, falling onto her back, and he was on top, his cock having never left her cunt as he flipped them from the head to the foot of the bed.

A startled noise from her. Then her legs were around him and he was braced above her, kissing her hungrily, ravenously, as much as he wanted.

She kissed back—she didn't push him away. She let him cover her with his body—her mouth, her cunt open to him, her hands on him.

"Mine," he murmured between kisses. "Mine, mine, mine."

"Draco . . ." The hint of a warning.

But she was calling him Draco. "Yes, love," he said, kissing her throat.

He thrust into her slowly. "I'm yours, love," he murmured into her ear.

Did she want that? No, surely not. He wanted her to want that—to want him to herself, the way he wanted her.

He fucked her slowly, kissing her, his free hand reaching between them for her clit.

She sighed into him, kissing him like he was hers.

Then she knocked his hand away and shifted her hips to take him deeper, to pull him closer, her face tilted up to him, and he was fucking her in earnest, whispering, "You'll never be rid of me, love, never never never . . ."

He was fucking her harder, she was gasping and clutching at him, he might have been whimpering, her arm was thrown out to brace herself, her head was thrown back. He was fucking her hard, fucking himself into her like he'd always wanted, fucking her like she would never, ever be rid of him—

The noise he made when he came, incoherent, keening—

...

He was breathing hard—

"Love, are you—"

She nodded. "I'm fine." Her voice breathy.

He kissed her face, his body shaking.

She was all right. He hadn't hurt her. She didn't hate him. She wasn't angry with him. Not in this moment. Not yet.

He kissed her face, her throat. Around the necklace—his necklace—she still wore.

He kissed down her body, pulling out of her with a groan—he hated that. But she'd said he could use his mouth and he was collecting. He licked her nipples, bit her breasts as she panted and sighed, then trailed his lips down her blood-smeared stomach, until he was between her legs, kissing the tender flesh of her inner thigh. He drug his teeth along her skin and she kicked at him—"Oi!"—and he huffed a laugh, his mouth on her, and bit down. She made a noise and her head fell back and he bit her again.

Then his mouth was on her cunt. She smelled like blood and semen and her. He licked up her—so swollen now—and circled her clit. She was engorged, responsive, already twitchy with breathy moans. He delved into her—salt, copper, her. He licked and licked. The semen—he didn't mind it because it was his, in her. The blood—it wasn't his. Had he—had he hurt her? She was shifting her hips, pressing into his mouth. No—it was the blood she owed him. He would collect on that too. But now he slid his thumb into her welcoming cunt, so warm and wet and enveloping. He sucked her clit and she clenched on him, and then his tongue was on her and her hand was in his hair, holding him down—yes, he loved that—and she was grinding onto his face as he licked and licked, his jaw aching, and finally she was spasming on him and he was licking and sucking, tasting her through the copper.

Godric.

Godric.

She was panting.

Wrung out.

His thumb was out of her. He had lifted his mouth off her, he was kissing her thigh, she was sighing and twitching.

He raised his head and—his muzzle was bloody. Fresh blood, bright red against his pale skin.

“Is that—”

“The blood you owe me.” His gray eyes were on hers as he climbed onto his knees. Blood was streaked across his arm, his taut stomach, the blond hair at the base of his cock. He was hard.

“I—” Ron had had a schoolboy’s aversion. Others less so, but she’d never got over the feeling that no man really wanted—

He licked his lips.

“Oh—”

“I don’t mind, love.” He was looking at her cunt.

He kissed her bent knee, then yanked her up by her hips—

“Oh, Godric.

He was pushing his hard cock back into her slick, swollen cunt. He turned his head and wiped his mouth, his chin on his shoulder, smearing red.

He thrust all the way in, and she exhaled. Then he was leaning over her, fucking her steadily.

“I’ve told you,” he said, “it’s mine, anyway.”

She sucked in an outraged breath, her face twisting as she propped herself up on her elbows, which only brought her face closer to his. “You controlling—”

“Vicious—” He kissed her, his mouth opening hers, his pace never slowing. His tongue tasted like copper and salt and her.

“Possessive—”

“Little—” He was fucking her harder.

“Psychopath—”

“Beast.”

She fell back against the bed. She wouldn’t come again but he was hitting all the right places. His cock filling her, her clit buzzing.

“I’m yours too,” he panted. “My blood is yours too—don’t I give it to you?”

He did, but—“Draco—”

“Yes, love—” He lowered himself over her. “Yes—”

He was fucking her hard and fast now, his body an inch off hers. He was sticky with blood and sweat, the heat rolling off him bringing with it copper and cloves. She shifted her hips. He made an impatient noise and fucked her faster.

She rolled her head, exposing her neck, letting him bite.

“Draco,” she sighed, because she knew he wanted to hear it.

His pace grew frantic.

“Draco.”

She clenched her cunt on him and he whimpered and came, collapsing onto her, suddenly so heavy on top of her, her nose full of copper and cloves and sweat and sex. His arm snaked under her to press her to him, his hot skin tacky with blood, his heart racing against her.

He was breathing hard into the crook of her neck. He began to kiss her face, braced on his forearm. “You’ll stay, love.”

So greedy, so needy. Still inside her and already wanting more from her. What had she done, shagging him? “Malfoy—”

He was breathing now, his chest rising and falling. He didn’t answer, only watched as though he had no say in what happened next.

“Get down here,” she said.

He dropped down immediately, and then she was pushing him back against the pillows. She stripped off her bra and ruined knickers and climbed onto him, her hands on his shoulders, his hard, wet cock between them. He didn’t move as she straddled him, only reached for her hips. She rolled them, grinding her clit against his cock, and he bit his lip, his eyes lowered to watch.

Then she lifted up onto her knees and reached down to position him—he sucked in a breath and began whispering lubrication charms as she lowered herself onto him. Then he was exhaling heavily through his nose as he pushed into her, her bearing down to take him in.

“Fuck,” he murmured, his hands hovering just above her hips as though he were afraid to interfere.

Finally, he was in, and she sat for a moment, clenching her cunt on him, him making little breathy noises as she did. She squeezed and he tilted his hips, pressing his cock into her as far as it would go.

“Oh,” she said, “good boy.”

She didn’t know why she said it. It was just—he was always saying it. *I’m not good. I’ll be good. Tell me it’s good.* She’d been talking to him too much lately. He was always talking. The words slipped out.

And he melted. There was no mistaking it. His face went slack. He exhaled and his shoulders released and he stared up at her as though he were hypnotized.

“Oh, she thought. Oh!

His face was open to her, his eyes unguarded. Pain and a kind of wonder pooled in them. Beautiful. Pathetic.

“Draco,” she murmured, drawing out his given name, letting the o linger.

He sighed, his eyes falling shut—as though he were basking in it. He let his head fall back, exposing his throat to her.

“All right, she thought.

Was she going to use this against him? She was.

She had a hand on his ribs. She moved the other to his throat, laying her thumb along the edge of his clavicle, the Azkaban runes visible above her fingers. She didn’t squeeze, just felt the life moving through him there—the skin and tendon and artery, the breath and blood—all offered up to her now. She rolled her hips, squeezing him, and his fingertips dug into her flesh.

“You’ll be good?” she whispered, and he nodded quickly, his eyes still closed.

She moved her hand to his chest, putting her weight onto it, and he opened his eyes as she began to fuck him.



She was on his cock. He was inside her. And she felt so fucking good.

Godsdamn.

The way she’d grabbed him, put him in her mouth . . .

Then she’d put her thumb hard across the base of his throat. Like she might be about to crush his windpipe. Like she might be claiming him.

Now she was moving on top of him—she wasn’t going slow or gentle.

He was propped against the pillows, his stomach hard against her when she ground on him. Her hands were on his chest, his ribs, his shoulders, his scars.

She didn’t snatch her hand back when she felt the raised tissue that lashed across his left side. She didn’t stop and run her fingers along the lines and try to talk to him about them. She just put her weight on her palm, letting the heel of her hand dig into him, spread her fingers wider, shifted her hold on him,

He was straining to meet her, pulling her toward him, and she moved to straddle him, her weight on her hands as he grabbed her breasts through the lace and silk of her bra, rubbing his thumbs across her hard nipples.

He sat up straighter, moving her with him, and then her arms were around his neck, her hands in his hair, her clit grinding against his erection. He was making impatient noises as he kissed her, his hands on her breasts, his hips shifting toward her. Desperate for more of her.

Finally, he broke free of the kiss. "Let me use my mouth, love."

She was gulping in air and he was dragging his teeth across the corner of her jaw.

"Not if you're going to bite," she said, rolling her hips. Her eyes had fallen closed as she concentrated on the feeling of her clit rubbing against his cock. It felt like she could do this forever.

"Not even a little?" he said, his voice breathy. He was gently biting her chin.

"No biting," she murmured, absently running her hand up the short hair above the nape of his neck.

"No biting your *cunt*?" His teeth grazed her jaw. "I can still bite other places."

"What other places?" She made her own impatient noise. Godric, her cunt was throbbing.

"I can bite your tits," he said immediately.

"Yes, obviously," she sighed, pressing her clit harder against him.

"I can bite your inner thighs."

"No, that tickles."

"How do you know?" he asked, sounding extremely put out.

"I *know*," she said, smug, as she bore down.

"I'll bite hard enough it doesn't," he said, squeezing her breasts.

"Not so hard it marks."

"I don't leave marks." He sounded offended. "That's what jewelry is for."

"All right, then." Her knickers were soaked. She had soaked his trousers too, by now. They were both smeared in his blood.

"Face, neck, earlobes, arse," he said quickly.

"Hmm." She let her eyes drift open as she rolled her hips and found him staring at her. "I suppose."

His mouth was open, his eyes flitting between her eyes and her lips. "I'll be good, love. Let me use my mouth."

"After I've done what I want," she said.

The corners of his lips twitched as though he were too distracted to smile. He tilted his head up and kissed her, open-mouthed, sighing as she ground against him.

She pulled back and ran a finger between the waistband of his trousers and the warm skin of his stomach. "Take these off," she said.

He kissed her quick, and then he was dumping her off his lap, standing suddenly—looming tall above her on the bed—to strip off his trousers and pants, throwing them in a wad to the rug. She lay back, propped on her elbows, and watched his hard cock fall free of the fabric, and then he had his hand fisted around it, looking down at her as though unsure whether she wanted it.

"Give me that," she said, pushing up to her knees. She was kneeling before him but it felt like she was the one in charge. She knocked his hand away and grabbed hold of him, one hand on his thigh—she heard him make a noise in the back of his throat. She squeezed the shaft tightly, aggressively, as though she wanted to hurt him, and he inhaled sharply. She looked up at him and he was staring at her. His mouth was open—he wasn't breathing. The head of his cock was right there, so hard and wet and glistening with pre-come—it was irresistible, a shiny, pink toy she wanted to put in her mouth. She did—looking up as he whimpered. His lips were parted, his eyes locked on her. It was satisfying, to feel his solid, fleshy head pressing against the roof of her mouth. She took him deeper, swirling her tongue around him. He watched, mesmerized, as she tilted her head the other way, letting him fill her mouth as her tongue moved over him.

She pulled back, grazed her teeth down the slope of the head. "We didn't negotiate what I get to bite."

"Draco—" he said quickly, pulling back to look at her, his chest rising and falling. "When you're in our bed."

Our bed.

He read her face. "We agreed, love, every night. It's yours too now."

"Merlin, you think of everything in terms of possession." Her head was beginning to clear. The things he'd been saying to her . . .

"What man isn't possessive of his witch?" His voice took on an edge as his pale eyes scanned her face.

"Not a man you can trust."

"That's not true—"

"That is true. Your other men have been worthless." His tone was certain. "You don't trust any of them. If you did, you'd have gone to one of them before I could get you. If even one of them was worth a damn, I wouldn't have you now."

Godric, that hurt. She could feel herself flinch—she knew he'd seen it. His eyes were intent on her. He was right on top of her, his weight pinning her down. "That's ridiculous," she said. "Harry and Ron wanted to kill you, you know—"

"But you told them no because you knew they wouldn't do it."

"That's not why—"

"You told them no because you wanted to keep me and fuck me and tell me what to do—"

"Good Godric," she scoffed, trying to push him away. He was lean but he was strong; she couldn't budge him.

"You're the possessive one, love. Stop lying—"

"Get off me, Draco."

"So controlling—" Now he was grinning.

"I mean it."

"So bossy—" He winced as he pulled out and she rolled him off her.

"Get this bed cleaned up." She sat up. She was covered in blood and sweat, her throbbing cunt leaking blood and semen. "I'm taking a bath. I'll be back at eleven."

He propped himself up on his elbow beside her, one knee up. "Eleven—"

"That's our agreed start—"

"That's absurd. You're already here—"

"And I'm going to go take a bath—"

"Take it here, love—"

"I need my things—"

"Pip will get them—"

Godric. He was arguing with her naked, smeared in both their blood. Which he didn't seem to mind. At all. "We agreed to nights," she said, "not my entire evening—"

"Technically, night is between sunset and sunrise—"

"For our purposes, it's the seven-hour span we previously agreed to—"

"I don't think that was clear in our most recent negotiations—"

"Anyone would reasonably expect to default to the precedent already established—"

"I think anyone would *reasonably* expect the colloquial definition of night, which is the half of—"

"I'm not spending twelve hours with you—"

"It should really be more like sixteen, because the workday—"

"Is a meaningless metric in this case—"

"Is an extremely relevant metric in this case because you are exhausted after what has been a very long—"

"I'm not exhausted—"

"Then let's go again, love." He twisted toward her, putting his hand on her thigh while he licked the side of her breast now at his eye-level. "I want you."

She reflexively turned toward him to smack him and he licked her nipple, gazing up at her.

"In that case," she said. "I *am* exhausted."

"Then bathe here," he said. "What are you using to collect my blood? Ah, ah—" He was grabbing at her hand as she tried to hit him. "The blood you owe me."

"A menstrual cup," she snapped.

"Can I insert it?" he asked, eyebrows raised, looking hopeful.

"Absolutely not," she said, pushing up to climb off the bed.

He fell back onto the blood-soaked sheets, sighing. "Next time?"

"There will be no next time," she muttered, trying not to trip over her pile of clothes and shoes, blood running down the inside of her leg.

"There will be a next time," he murmured behind her.



Hermione had covered all three hoops with potions for cramps and contraception—she wasn't risking it at any point in her cycle—and then sat in a very hot bath, surrounded by ferns, under a dark stained-glass window. Her lips were swollen, her cunt sore, her body awash in conflicting sensation while her mind screamed, *What have you done?*

She had decided she would go after what she wanted. She had agreed to stop resisting. But everything had escalated much faster than she had expected. It wasn't just the sex, it was how he stared at her. The things he whispered in her ear. The way, the second he got one part of her, he pushed for more.

Your other men have been worthless. Her thoughts caught on this moment. He'd got her into a compromising position and insulted not her but every man she'd ever been with. He hadn't even pulled out of her body before he'd gone after her memories. *You don't trust any of them.* Would she ever think of another man without hearing Malfoy's voice?

She'd lost herself in her own body while he touched her. It had been a relief to bicker with him at the end, to come back to familiar ground. He'd sunk his teeth into her with those words and she'd remembered: *He was the vicious little beast.*

When she finally emerged, she found a pristine clean room and a washed Draco, shirtless, pacing as though he were about to send the elves after her. He'd bathed elsewhere just to keep her in his rooms.

He turned and looked her up and down. "What are you *wearing*?"

Did he think she'd asked Pip to bring her a negligee? "Sweatpants," she said icily. "T-shirt. As we've established, my period has started. I'm going to be comfortable."

He circled her—he actually circled her—looking her up and down. "All right," he said finally, decisively, as though it were up to him. He began to move her toward the bed, crowding her, his hands on her hips.

Hermione stepped away from him and stopped. "Do we need to negotiate terms?"

"What terms?" He looked nonplussed. "You're tired. We're going to bed."

"You can't just touch me," said Hermione, primly crossing her arms.

"I *did* just touch you. Everywhere."

"That doesn't mean you have blanket permission," said Hermione, exasperated.

He straightened, looking offended. "Well, I want blanket permission."

"Absolutely not," said Hermione. "I'm not going to wake up to you trying to fuck me in the arse."

Malfoy's mouth dropped open. "How many times—I just want to be able to put my hand on my *bonded wife*." He drifted closer, his voice lowering. "Did you really dislike it so much, love, when I was licking my own semen out of you?"

Hermione felt her face heat.

"Because I liked it quite a bit. Can I not put my hand on your hip now?" His head was ducked toward her, his gray eyes baleful.

"Oh, you do," he purred, turning his head to kiss her face. He'd dropped his right hand to her knickers. Blood-slick fingers slid under the waistband and found her clit. She gasped and then she was sighing, slumping against him even as her stomach tightened, pleasure radiating from his hands on her, his thumb still pushing his blood into her scar. Relief was seeping through her.

"Heal me, love," he whispered into her ear, "or I'll bleed out with my fingers inside you."

Hermione sucked in a breath and opened her eyes. Malfoy was making no attempt to stem the flow from his wrist as his hands moved over her, blood running down her arm. She accioed her wand and Malfoy slid a finger lower. Blood dripped onto her stomach. She began the spell, and he plunged his finger into her. She made a noise in the back of her throat, interrupting the *vulnera sanentur*. She began again, repeating it, and then he was lazily pumping his finger into her, the heel of his palm on her clit, as the puncture on his wrist sealed.

"Is it good, love?" His voice soft. "Don't lie to me."

"It's—it's good, Draco."

She didn't know why she said it. She just didn't want to call him *Malfoy*—Malfoy, her old antagonist—when he was touching her like this.

She felt his heart beat faster through her back. "I like that," he whispered.

He had her wrapped up, his blood-streaked left hand already slipped inside the lace of her bra, fingertips of his right hand back on her clit.

"Can I use my mouth, love?"

"Are you about to pass out?"

"Probably . . . not."

She shuddered. Then she swept her hand across the rumpled sheets until she found the replenishing potion and pushed out of his arms, her skin going cold at the loss of his touch.

He fell back against the pillows stacked behind him, and she scrambled up onto her knees, turned awkwardly to look at him. Pale and spattered in blood. His eyes on her.

She was kneeling between his legs, one of his knees up, splaying wide as he reached out to grip her thighs, the bloody pads of his thumbs making light circles on her bare skin.

The lines of his cheekbones, his jaw were sharp as he gazed up at her, his head thrown back. His lips were parted, his eyes roving over her mouth.

"Could I have a kiss, then, love?" He looked up then, his cool gray eyes on hers, his mouth just open. He watched her, waiting, his expression impassive except for a tension around his eyes.

He looked, in that moment, beautiful and harmless—at her mercy. A lie, she knew. Draco Malfoy was not harmless.

She held up the potion bottle, and he sat up a little. He did not let go of her thighs. He opened his mouth, his eyes never leaving hers.

She unstoppered the bottle and carefully poured the contents onto his waiting tongue, strangely not tempted to choke him. He swallowed, holding her gaze. Still waiting.

She'd agreed not to deny herself to spite him.

She'd been looking at that mouth for months. She thought of his lips against her temple, him whispering *lovelas* as he held her to him. Him saying *I'm not sorry it happened* instead of all the things she'd been afraid he'd say. *I just want it to happen again.*

What did she want? She wanted to touch him.

She dropped the empty potion bottle onto the bedsheets beside them.

His eyes stayed on her face as she bent toward him, his eyelids lowering as he tracked her mouth nearing his. She reached out a hand and then the other, on either side of him, to steady herself, and his hands drifted to her ribs. Then her lips were on his and he was breathing into her, gently meeting her tongue with his. He tasted like the potion, sweet and oaky and medicinal. She was on her hands and knees, kissing him.

Then his jaw shifted, opening their mouths wider, and he was kissing her hungrily. His hand slid up to palm her breast. She was tingling, buzzing all over.

"Because I've already told you the truth about what I do on the black market." His gaze was unwavering.

"And I believe you," she said. She was breathing shallowly. She was telling the truth too.

He took a breath, blinking. Then he sat forward again and reached out a hand. "Let me see your arm."

Her stomach roiled. She didn't want to see it. She didn't want him to see it. It was inevitable that he saw it.

She held out her arm, pulled at her sleeve, the fabric catching before it came free. When it did, her forearm was a mess, the scar red and cracked, the skin swollen, black tendrils of poison working up her veins.

"This is what I'm talking about," hissed Malfoy, grabbing hold of her. "You cannot be trusted! Godsdammit." He cast a cooling charm, seamlessly continuing to lecture her. "I have to keep you near me so I can monitor this *myself*. Now I have to fix this!"

He stood, muttering profanities, so close to her now they could have been dancing, the heat and anger rolling off him. She could smell cloves and citrus and the sick odor of her own arm. And then he was tugging her toward his rooms.

"What is the *point* of you having a healing mastery—" He kept up a steady stream of recriminations as he hustled her along, his hands on her.

She let him—suddenly all she could think of was the relief that had swept through her at the touch of his blood, her core warming at just the promise of it.

He marched her through the doors to his suite, past his sitting room, down the hall, into his bedroom. The Black magic was thrumming; she could feel his personal magic in the room. Then she was stood next to his enormous bed and he was aggressively stripping her, his lips pressed tight, his hands fast and sure as he unzipped the back of her dress, worked the fabric off her shoulders, pulled her arms from the long sleeves, shucked it all down, over her hips. He'd extracted her wand from its pocket and tossed it onto the bed. She'd barely had the chance to protest before he was chucking his chin, saying, "Get in. I'm right behind you." He was unbuttoning his collar, his rings glinting. He pulled the shirt off in three large motions, throwing it to the rug.

He was all lean muscle and white-on-white scar tissue, his pale skin nearly glowing in the lamplight, the Dark Mark a flashing glimpse of black as his arm moved. "Go," he said, and Hermione realized she had been frozen, staring at him.

She stepped out of her heels and turned. Godric, he was going to be watching her arse as she climbed into the bed, nearly naked in her bra and knickers and jewelry. Then he was all over her, in only his trousers, bundling her into him as he pushed back the coverlet and sat behind her, his arms around her, his legs hemming her in.

He accioed the bloodletting ring, the replenishing potion—he'd had them nearby. How long had he been waiting for her to ask?

Then he'd opened his wrist and laid it across hers and was dragging his blood down her forearm. Her head fell back against him, her bare shoulders against his hot skin, her eyes closing as the relief washed through her, warmth pooling low in her belly.

He was working his blood into her skin, murmuring ridiculous things into her hair. "You vicious, untrustworthy witch. You tell *me* not to lie and then you are the shadiest little beast, hiding this from me. I'm blackmailing half the Wizengamot while my *own wife* keeps secrets from me. They think *I'm* the one they have to watch out for. You make me mental, darling. You're not to keep things from me, love. You can lie to your useless friends but not to me. You have to tell me everything. I can't take care of you if I don't know. I can't do what needs to be done if I don't know. You have to tell me so I know what to do. You have to tell me what you like. I know you liked what I did in the study, though, didn't you? You were so wet, love. You were dripping down my hand. You tasted so good. Did you like two fingers better than one? Do you want me to try three?"

She couldn't help it—she whimpered.

Godric, he was such a manipulator. "Just because you're randy doesn't mean I gave up all bodily autonomy."

He lifted his chin. "Let's negotiate terms, then. I'll go first." His manner was bright and businesslike, none of the anger or resentment Hermione had braced for. He reached for a curl. He twisted it around his finger. "I'm giving up all bodily autonomy. You have blanket permission to touch me. You never need ask or apologize."

Hermione opened her mouth—

He looked from the curl to her, his eyes boring into her. "Please *don't* ask or apologize."

"Malfoy, that's not—"

"I'm your husband, love. I'm meant for your use." He tilted his head. "Don't insult me by thinking I can't handle it."

He gazed at her as though he were entirely serious.

Hermione took a deep breath.

She exhaled. "You . . . have to ask before you touch me. And stop if I say no. I'm allowed to change my mind."

He unspooled the curl. "Of course, love. You know I take direction."

"I'm not obliged to be here before eleven or past six. You won't order me around when I'm here. I'll wear what I like."

"Yes, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, seemingly without qualm. He shifted closer. He smelled like citrus and cloves, the blood washed away. She could see his pulse in his throat, the line of his collarbone, the scar tissue slashing across his heart. She had touched him everywhere too. "You left our bed before I could tell you, darling—I enjoyed being with you just now. Very much. Now I'd like to put my arm around you while we fall asleep. That's all. If I may?"

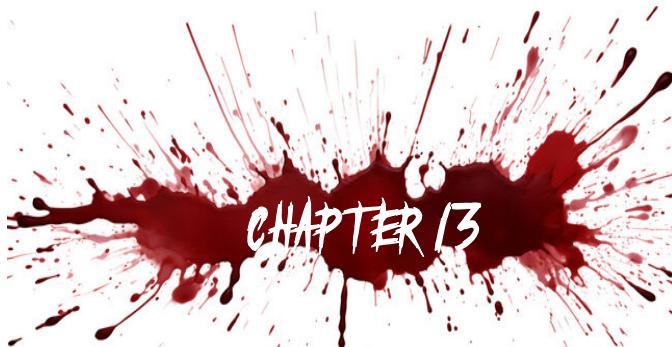
He raised his eyebrows and fixed her with an expression that suggested he was being eminently reasonable.

"Fine," she said, looking away, her heart beating too fast.

But of course that wasn't *all*. In bed, Malfoy put his arm around her and pulled her tight against him. She could feel his hot skin through the thin cotton of the T-shirt, his cock against her arse, his bony knee behind hers. He lifted his chin free of her hair, his whole body pressed to hers, and said, "Goodnight, love."

And then he did fall asleep—his arm heavy on her, his heartrate fast and then slow and steady—as though this was all he wanted.

Hermione had enjoyed it too. What the fuck had she got herself into?



FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2003

RAIDED! Potter Leads Ministry Raid on Malfoy Manor

MALFOY MANOR RAIDED: No Charges But Questions Remain for Former Death Eater

THE MALFOYS VS THE MINISTRY: MoM Raids Controversial Couple

WOLFSBANE POTION PROPOSAL PASSES: Inside Hermione Malfoy's Passion Project

Hermione made her way to Shacklebolt's office, trying not to feel like she was wearing a badge that read I FUCKED DRACO MALFOY LAST NIGHT.

She'd woken that morning to Malfoy's arm slung over her hip, one leg tangled with hers—he was on his stomach, his face mashed into a pillow, platinum hair fallen over his forehead. She'd moved to extract herself and he'd shifted, his hold tightening, the Dark Mark pressed against her.

"Draco," she'd hissed, kicking his leg away, "I have to go to work."

He'd pushed up onto his elbow and flopped onto his back. She had seen the teenage boy he'd been when he'd looked up at her. "Stay for breakfast," he'd said quietly. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

Well, she'd wanted to know. "I'll be back in twenty minutes," she'd said, and when she'd returned—menstrual blood collected and placed under a stasis charm, Hermione dressed for work—Malfoy had been lounging in shirtsleeves and trousers in the sitting area of the bedroom, by the fireplace, tea and breakfast trays waiting. His hair had been brushed back from his forehead, silver cufflinks in place—the Lord of the Manor once more.

She'd sat down as her cup filled with tea. "So," she'd said, "you are blackmailing six members of the Wizengamot."

Malfoy had smirked, and her chest and back had tingled all over, like something important was happening, like sometimes bad things happened and they couldn't be stopped. "And once I tell you the details, Mrs. Malfoy," he'd said, "*we* are blackmailing six members of the Wizengamot."

Now Hermione nodded to Shacklebolt's secretary.

She was expected.

She let Shacklebolt offer her tea and the obligatory excuses for not checking in on her sooner after the raid, congratulations on the passage of her proposal.

Finally, Hermione was able to set down her teacup and introduce the reason for their meeting. "I'd like to apply for a role in the Department of International Magical Cooperation," she told him.

"Well, Hermione," Shacklebolt frowned down at his desk as he moved a quill aside, "I'm sure International Magic would benefit from your attention, as smart and talented as you are. But I just don't know if we can bear to lose you in Magical Creatures. Your work there—"

She could feel the hard muscles of his arm as she held onto him, her fingertips digging in, instead of pushing him away. His lips grazing her temple as he murmured *lovely* and she pressed his hand against her, his fingers still inside her.

"Fine," she huffed, the back of her neck prickling.

"You'll use me when you're randy. Stop denying yourself to spite me." He sat back, his expression mulish.

"Fine." Said as though it didn't mean anything, as though she hadn't just agreed she'd fuck him.

His sucked in a breath, his jaw clenched. He'd seen an opening. "I want an heir." He looked up at her, his pale gray eyes locked on hers.

"Five years to focus on my career." Hermione refused to look away. "If I haven't avadaed you by then, I will consider it."

Malfoy's eyes went molten. He blinked, and Hermione realized he had not expected this concession. *She* had not expected it, until this afternoon in her office, when she'd written up her own fifteen-year plan.

"Subject to negotiations about how the child is brought up," she added.

It made no difference. His eyes roamed over her, his anger forgotten, his expression ravenous. Hermione could see the possibility become real to him. Was she willing to have a child with Draco Malfoy? She would decide in five years. For now, it met the timeline of what she wanted: career, child, climbing the ranks. Pansy Parkinson had been right about her.

"Until then," she said, "not a word more about it. I won't be pestered."

He nodded. "I'll be good," he murmured, and a chill went down Hermione's back.

His expression hardened. "But you will accept my help in the meantime. We will both be focused on your career."

"Only," said Hermione, her voice as hard, "if you tell me everything you do, and are honest about your goals."

"I *have* been honest, though you never believe it of me," he said. "My loyalty is to my family. That now means you. Lucius and I have discussed it. You will have House Malfoy behind you." He looked away, his jaw tight.

"So that I can be Lucius's puppet—"

"No," he spat, looking back to her, his face cruel. "My parents have lost the right to direct me. I have no *higher ideals*. There is no cause I will sacrifice *my* wife and child to. I will be loyal simply because I belong to you. I will advance you simply because you are mine to advance. That is my only goal."

He was angry again, a deeper hurt flashing across his face.

"And that's all you want," said Hermione warily.

"I want access." He swallowed. "You will not have emotional affairs. You will talk to me. You will not hide your needs from me. You will give me the chance to satisfy you." He looked sullen. "You will give me the chance to be honest with you."

"You will tell me the truth," said Hermione carefully, looking down at him, "and I will believe it is the truth." It was a huge concession for her. It was a mistake with a scorpion. But it was also the only way she would be able to move forward with Malfoy in anything but constant paranoia. Could she try it, as an experiment? "The second I catch you lying to me, that will be gone."

He nodded, a set expression on his face.

"Shacklebolt thinks Flint and Crabbe were about you fighting for status among the revivalists—"

He snorted, nearly rolling his eyes as he turned his head away.

"You've been seen visiting Slytherins with Death Eater ties—"

"Every Slytherin has Death Eater ties. I will never be free of these accusations—"

"The Auror Department's decided you were brewing the veritaserum for supremacists and Nott was in Knockturn to scare off other suppliers—"

"But you know better," he said, his face tilted up to her.

"I know better," she said, standing still, watching him, her chest and back beginning to buzz.



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2003

Hermione ate a light dinner in her study—she expected to be fighting soon, and she was not going to do it while her blood sugar crashed—and read the note she'd found there on NBM-monogrammed stationery: Narcissa congratulating her on passage of the wolfsbane potion proposal. She did not mention Malfoy or the raid on the Manor at all, only the good the measure would do for countless children. Narcissa would have made an excellent politician.

Then Hermione washed her hands, cleaned her teeth, and went looking for Malfoy.

She found him in their shared sitting room, not doing much to hide the fact that he was waiting for her. He stayed seated but tossed aside the book he'd been holding, the diamonds on his left hand catching the light. She strode over, still in her dress and heels. She didn't bother with niceties.

"How many members of the Wizengamot are you blackmailing?"

"Six," said Malfoy, looking up at her from the settee, his body open to her, hands resting lightly on his thighs.

"I want details," said Hermione. She was stood in front of him, nearly between his feet, her hands on her hips. She glanced down at his hands—the fine bones of his wrists, the prominent veins and knuckles, the long fingers—and away. She'd been watching those hands for weeks in her office—twisting candy wrappers, folding origami cranes, conjuring snails—before she'd felt the signet rings against her.

"And I want to recast the wards now that the entire Auror Department have gone," said Malfoy. He looked tense but did nothing to stop her from looming over him. "You still owe me blood."

"In a week," said Hermione. "I'm about to start collecting. Now spill."

"I want something in exchange."

"Of course you do," said Hermione. She sighed, but she'd expected this. She raised her eyebrows.

Malfoy came out swinging. "You have no administrative or social duties at the Manor. You go about your days unencumbered. I want your nights. I want my wife in my bed." His jaw flexed. "Every night."

"One night a week."

"Every night."

"Three nights."

"Every night."

"Four nights."

"*Every night,*" he growled.

Hermione's heart rate spiked. "I won't be obliged to have sex with you. That's already been agreed."

"I'm not a *rapist*," sneered Malfoy. "I won't *force* myself on you—"

"You already have, in the study—"

"Don't you *dare* lie about that," he said, sitting forward. "The Black magic barely even stung me. And I know you have the wandless skills to put me on the floor."

"Yes, I know how much you value my work in Magical Creatures," Hermione said evenly. "And I think the diplomatic experience I've gained there will serve me well in International Magic. I feel I'm ready for a new challenge."

"Of course, of course," said Shacklebolt, looking unhappy. "Forgive me, Hermione, but I have to ask: Does this new interest in international affairs have anything to do with Malfoy LTD's focus on foreign imports and exports?"

Hermione stiffened, her chin lifting. She was offended, and she'd never been much of an actress. She knew it was written across her face. "You may see me as a pawn, Minister, but I can assure you Malfoy knows better than to try to direct me."

"Yes, of course, of course." Shacklebolt nodded but his placating tone only irritated her further. "Now, I'm sure I don't need to remind you of this but, given the sensitivity of the information passing through the department and the potential to influence world events, the type of appointment you're seeking requires Wizengamot approval—not a simple majority, but two-thirds of the chamber. Most often, this is a formality—bit of a rubber stamp on a roster of new hires, that sort of thing. But, well, there are rump factions within the Wizengamot which may try to block you."

"Anyone you're thinking of in particular?" Hermione asked, careful not to cross her arms defensively.

"I'm sure you know as well as—" Shacklebolt paused and assessed her. "Hermione, if I were to give you names, those people wouldn't be receiving a visit from Draco Malfoy, would they?"

"Of course not," said Hermione, unable to summon the surprised laugh that might sell this better than her closed expression. "You've said it yourself: Malfoy would never defend me to Death Eaters."



When she got back to her office, Malfoy was lounging in her guest chair, wearing black and dark green, surrounded by conjured snakes.

Francesco's eyes shifted to her, his men distinctly nervous.

She strode in, placing a single fingertip on Malfoy's shoulder as she skirted him, stepping over two snakes to reach her own chair.

"Malfoy," she said crisply, "be good."

He looked to her, grinning. Godric, his face was an I FUCKED HERMIONE GRANGER LAST NIGHT badge.

"Yes, Mrs. Malfoy." He promptly vanished the snakes. Then he jutted his chin toward Francesco, drawling, "Excellent work there, Puff."

Her secretary glanced at her with an expression more terrified than it had been before. "Thank you?" he squeaked.

Hermione watched as the young man fixed his eyes firmly on the file in front of him.

She felt Malfoy's foot line up against hers under her desk and turned to him. "I have a job for you," she said. "We'll discuss it later."

He raised an eyebrow, smug, as he spun his wand between his ringed fingers.

A knock and her office door was opening to a familiar face—why did it feel like something private had been interrupted when Francesco was also in the room?

"Malfoy?"

"Potter." He was using his poshest voice, his arm hooked over the back of the chair as he turned toward Harry. It pulled his shirt tight across his chest. "Of course you're in the habit of barging in—"

Harry snorted. "I work here, Malfoy. I'd think you'd want to keep your distance so soon after—"

"The Auror Department harassed an innocent lord and lady at home?"

"Yes, Malfoy," said Harry dryly. "Innocent is always the word that springs to mind with you."

"All right, enough," said Hermione.

"And the lady has spoken," said Malfoy. He leapt to his feet. "I'll see you tonight, darling." Then he leaned over her desk and pecked her on the cheek before she could respond.

He swept out of her office, smirking over his shoulder at Harry.

"What's that about, then?" asked Harry, looking perturbed as his eyes lingered on the doorway Malfoy had just disappeared through.

"How should I know?" said Hermione. "No one tells me anything around here."

Harry groaned and ran his hands through his disheveled hair as he dropped into the chair Malfoy had vacated. "Hermione, you know—"

"I know, I know—" She waved it away.



She had intended to make Malfoy wait until eleven. He was a habitual line-stepper, and she'd established terrible precedents the night before that she now needed to walk back. But that left her ruminating in her rooms, antsy to get his opinion on her exchange with Shacklebolt. She checked the shared sitting room (three times) but he wasn't there. He was going to make her come to him, wasn't he? She held out until almost ten. (All right, 9:38 p.m.)

He didn't look as smug as he had in her office. He was sat on the bed, a book beside him, conjuring tulips. A vase full of the flowers already dominated what she took to be her bedside table, the petals starkly white in the darkly furnished room. He was shirtless again—she eyed the now-familiar scars and Mark, the lock of platinum hair fallen over his forehead.

He eyed her stomach, the awful sweatpants. "Do you have everything you need? We can brew—"

"It's fine, Malfoy." The cramps potion mostly worked.

"Draco," he said quietly as he watched her climb onto the bed.

He tossed a tulip aside and held out his hand, nodding toward her forearm. "May I?"

She settled beside him and offered it over, and he shifted closer, his left hand cradling her arm while his right hooked inside so he could run his thumb up the healthy pink skin, over the scar. "Tell me about your meeting with the Minister?"

"So, he was clearly unhappy," said Hermione, talking a little too fast now that she could unleash her thoughts. "Said he couldn't afford to lose me in *Magical Creatures*."

Malfoy made a satisfied sound—he'd predicted this when she'd told him her plans over breakfast. His side was warm against her. He hadn't let go of her arm.

"Accused you of putting me up to it to run interference for Malfoy LTD."

"The cheek!" He laughed bitterly.

"He warned me I'll need Wizengamot approval and the purists may block me."

Malfoy was stroking her inner arm, heat seeping off his bare chest. "And that's where I come in? Give me a list."

He sounded *so* pleased.

"You can guess who'll be on it. But now Shacklebolt's comment has me worried that the *progressives* will block me if they think I've been co-opted by you."

"That's a problem that solves itself, dear, if you keep hexing me at Ministry balls—"

Her head whipped toward him. "Then I'm glad we're agreed as to that course of action," she said, but he only laughed.

"You can keep roughing me up in public, Mrs. Malfoy, if you don't stop when we get home." His eyes were playing over her face.

Hermione took a deep breath, the back of her neck prickling, and looked away—to his hands on her arm, the prominent knuckles and veins, the muscles moving with his thumb. She swallowed. "So I'll

intensity—the insanity—of that reality was over, it had been hard (very, very hard) to adjust to a new reality of everyday life. Ron had wanted to get married and have babies immediately and also to party at every opportunity and take on no responsibility for anything ever again—and hadn't been able to recognize the contradiction, much less reconcile it. Hermione had thought she would just achieve, achieve, achieve her way forward but Ron didn't want to live in the muggle world while she went to university and she found, to her surprise, that even being on the uni grounds made her feel like she would implode and take everyone with her. She had frantically gone through the motions and then stoically gone through the motions until she'd finally gotten to a place where she could feel once again that she did deeply care about what she was doing.

But she wasn't sure the others had ever really understood what it meant for her to deeply care about what she did. For so much of the wizarding world, family was everything—avenging it, continuing it, just existing within it gave meaning to her friends' lives. But Hermione had no family. She couldn't avenge the parents she herself had erased. She had only herself. She had only what she did.

And it was a bit of a joke to them, wasn't it? Swotty Hermione and her pet causes—what a bore. They took for granted that she would work it out, whatever it was. Didn't she always?

I know I've joked around with him. Ginny had thought she'd work it out with Malfoy because he was fit and wanted to fuck her. Harry and Ron thought she could make him so sick of her that he'd do anything to get away. (Cheers, mates.) But he wasn't trying to get away, was he? And now a little reminder of who he really was and Ginny wanted her to take him seriously. But that owl had flown.

There had been a moment in the pub when Hermione should have pulled up her sleeve and shown Ginny the scar, explained how she had somehow ended up on the side of Draco Malfoy just when everyone else had decided it was time for her to turn him in. But Hermione hadn't done that. Maybe she was over-adrenalized and under-slept and tired of giving presentations to people who had already decided how to vote. Or maybe she was the one who didn't want to listen to reason when she wasn't going to do what everyone else wanted.

Don't let him get in the way of you getting what you want.

Hermione tapped the swan quill against the piece of parchment and thought about what she wanted, and whether she was going to let Shacklebolt or Harry or Ron or Ginny or Malfoy or the Wizengamot or the Ministry or anyone else get in her way.

I'm not sorry, she thought. *I'm not sorry. I'm not sorry. I'm not sorry.*

The abomination miaowed and Draco fed it another piece of wild boar. The elves liked to hunt on the Manor grounds—he saw them, sometimes, when he was flying.

“Why didn’t you kill any aurors for me?” cooed Draco. “I know you’re capable of it.”

He held out his fingers so the animal would clean them with its scratchy tongue. It was purring loudly, its claws out.

“You’re holding back? Just like her?”

The flat-faced beast started to bite, its sharp teeth pleasant until the pain became too much.

“Yes, just like her.”

The fire flashed green and Pansy stepped out, raising her hands as she did. Her Manolos clicked on the stone hearth.

“Don’t shoot,” she drawled. “Are they gone?”

Draco jerked his chin in greeting. “Just after dawn.”

“Oh, that’s not bad,” said Pansy airily, setting the unregistered wand on the side table and dropping onto the cushion next to him. She smoothed out her checked McQueen skirt.

“Thought Robards was going to have kittens when he couldn’t find anything,” said Draco, glancing over at her, and they both sniggered. For a second, they were back in the common room in the Hogwarts dungeons, the lake lapping outside.

“Maybe Granger isn’t entirely terrible after all,” said Pansy, slouching back against the velvet, her tone faux begrudging.

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Speaking of which . . . how’s the wedding planning?”

“Oh, it’s brilliant, Draco.” Pansy sighed happily. “Narcissa is so clever at this sort of thing.” A sad smile as she looked at him then, his lost wedding going unspoken. “Do you want to hear all about my dress robes?”

“No.”

“I’m thinking modern traditional for the bond and then *minidress* for the reception—”

“*I’m thinking*,” said Draco, “you should have it at the chateau.”

“Oh?” said Pansy, cocking an eyebrow.

Draco pet the beast, fussing with the fur around its ears. “Your mother is less likely to crash if it’s not at Parkinson Manor, and I’m sure Longbottom doesn’t want too many people poking around his property.”

Pansy tilted her head, considering.

“And it might be good for us all to be out of the country on the same day.”

Pansy started to laugh. “Oh,” she said dryly.

“Tell Longbottom I want to meet. No wands, no owls.”

“Nothing traceable—I get it.” She looked over, watching Draco’s hands. She wrinkled her nose. “You’re really taken with that thing.”

“Don’t be daft, Pans,” he sneered, feeding the kneazle demon another piece of boar. “We’re obviously mortal enemies.”



Hermione threw away a handful of candy wrappers Malfoy had left on her desk, tied in knots by his nimble fingers while he read her reports, and then sat tapping one of the swan quills against a blank piece of parchment.

Fighting the war with Ron and Harry had been a kind of suicide pact based on love and belief—not a desire to die but a surrender to the reality that it could happen, that it might have to happen. Experiencing that with another person was what had driven her and Ron together, and when the

maintain my relationships among progressives and you’ll . . . take care of your side. You’re already in contact with Burke, Rowle, Travers—”

In contact with—blackmailing.

“I’ll need to speak to Selwyn as well.” He released her to fuss with the bedding. “You’ll have the Nott and Parkinson reps.”

“I think Flint is probably a lost cause.”

He snorted, smirking at her—a horrible inside joke.

“What about Avery?”

His face hardened. “Avery is a concern. I’ve talked to him—”

“Which has the Ministry convinced you’re a revivalist—”

“That will be news to the revivalists,” he said darkly. “I’ve only been telling him House Malfoy wants him to support Malfoy measures—”

“And then he voted *against*—”

“Yes, *dear*. He’s not impressed by my being sat in the stands while his lot plans to take back the Ministry.” He started to nox lights. “Shacklebolt is woefully unprepared to put down this movement if he thinks he can wait for intermarriage to have an effect. He’s only motivating purists to act before more of their scions are bonded into undesirable bloodlines. Avery doesn’t see a reason to compromise with people he’s about to overthrow.”

“How many reps does Avery have with him?” asked Hermione.

“More than Shacklebolt thinks,” said Malfoy wryly.

Hermione frowned, contemplating this. “It’s a two-thirds vote. Setting aside the prospect of armed insurrection and a Third Wizarding War . . . we’re not blackmailing enough people.”

A wide smile broke across Malfoy’s face and he tilted his head to gaze at her fondly, his hand moving to cover his heart. “And they say the perfect witch doesn’t exist.”

“Malfoy!” She swatted angrily at him. “I’m not saying I *want* to blackmail people. I’m only saying I don’t have the votes!”

But he was still grinning as he noxed the last light, and then his arm was around her and he was tugging her down to lie spooned against him, his body pressed to hers. Did he think one *may* I covered everything?

“I’ll get you your votes,” he said, low and seductive, amusement in his voice.

“Ugh,” she groaned, inadvertently settling into him. “How am I having this conversation?”

He was laughing against her. “Because you’re a vicious, controlling, power-hungry—”

“Good Godric.” She sighed heavily, and he cinched her closer as she did. The heat radiating off him, the pressure of his arm, felt comforting against her cramping stomach.

“When’s the vote?” he asked.

“In a fortnight,” she said.

“All right, love. I’ll have it sorted.”

She mulled the position she found herself in. With Malfoy refusing to court redemption, neither side of the political divide actually wanted to see her work with him. (Shacklebolt wasn’t keen on common ground when it looked like *him* influencing *her*, was he?) So maybe they wouldn’t see her work with him. Maybe the Malfoys’ all-too-public turn as the Ministry’s most ill-suited match would allow them to work both sides separately.

“Goodnight, love,” he said into her hair.

She could smell citrus and cloves and her own shampoo. “Goodnight, Malfoy.”

“Draco,” he said quietly.

She could feel him breathing, his chest rising and falling against her. She could feel his heartbeat through her back. He’d distracted her. She would sound like a scolding house prefect if she reminded him now that he couldn’t just touch her.



SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2003—FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2003

Draco Malfoy turned out to be an extremely needy bedmate. He did not stay on his side of the bed. He flung his arm across her. He threw his leg over hers. He spooned aggressively. He toyed with her hair. If she turned toward him in the night, he scooped her up, her cheek against his scarred chest, his pointy chin on the crown of her head. When she elbowed him away, she woke later with his fingers around her wrist, his temple against her shoulder, his foot pressed to hers. When she complained, he claimed she was crowding him, stealing pillows, hogging the bedclothes.

"I'm merely defending my space against *enravishment*, dear," he said, his platinum hair spread across her pillow.

"You're not even on your side of the bed," Hermione pointed out.

"I thought this *was* my side of the bed," he said, guileless. "Are you saying *both* sides of the bed are yours?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all. *This* is my side."

"*This* is your side of our bed?" He raised his eyebrows. "You're admitting it?"

"Draco . ." she said, drawing out the vowels.

His pale eyes lit up, sweeping over her face. A smile tugged at his mouth—open, waiting to laugh, to kiss, to bite.

"You're ridiculous," she finished.

He huffed out a laugh, his eyes dropping to her lips. "Say that again, love. *Slower.*"



That first Saturday, when she woke, he whispered, "Stay for breakfast. We can have it in the library."

She still hadn't seen the library. She had been avoiding the manor she lived in. The manor Harry and Ron had now seen more of than her. The manor she would be warding with her blood in a week. She did want to see the library.

She spent hours drinking tea and wandering the stacks with him that day, sunlight streaming in through the tall, arched windows, the dark shelves crammed with old, obscure, and valuable texts under protective spells. He showed her his favorites, and she watched as he forgot himself for small moments: smiling at the cover of a wizarding children's classic, his fingertips lightly tracing the illustrations in a seminal work on charms.

His fingertips ran along her arms, across her hips, as he subtly guided her through the aisles. His hand rested on the small of her back as he pulled down a book for her. He stood close behind her, reading over her shoulder. He caged her in as he reached around her.

That night in bed, he pulled her to him and nestled his pointy nose in the crook of her neck, his lips resting against her skin.



That Monday evening, Hermione got home from the Ministry to find her dressing room empty except for her keepsakes. She turned on her heel and marched down her hallway, through the shared sitting room, and into Malfoy's suite. As she neared the bedroom, she could hear him murmuring to someone.

"Showing off with Flint and then the bookstore because he has a thing for you." Ginny shook her head. "But now Harry says he's best mates with that knob Avery and there are crazy rumors coming out of Knockturn. Just the things *you've* told me—Merlin, Vance Crabbe's *tongue*?"

"Two months ago, you told me maiming was his love language!" shrieked Hermione.

"That was before he was casting on you at Ministry balls!"

"I told you he was mental, and you said *give him a chance!*"

"I didn't think he could still be a purist, the way he stares at you! And he's fit—in that albino ferret way." She waved a dismissive hand. "But Harry says they think he's brewing veritaserum for the supremacists—"

No, he just sells that to the mob, thought Hermione, sighing internally.

"—and who knows what else. And if they'd found something—"

"Then I could have been appearing before the Wizengamot in a cage this morning when Robards decided to charge me too!"

"What? No!" Ginny scoffed. "No one would believe you had anything to do with what *Malfoy* gets up to."

"Ginny, I'm the Lady of the Manor! How am I supposed to prove controlled potions or dark artefacts aren't mine when I literally own the property they're searching? Everyone can know they're Malfoy's, but if the Wizengamot decides to go after me—"

"Why would the Wizengamot go after you?"

Because her shady-as-fuck husband ran around intimidating its members on her behalf and they wanted revenge? Or would his blackmail schemes prevent that? Hermione didn't know! She didn't know *what* Malfoy was doing behind her back. She only knew that, sitting in Shacklebolt's office, she'd had to choose a side—and she hadn't chosen Shacklebolt's. Ginny was on the side of her husband and brother, who Hermione had just consigned to a wild goose chase by warning Malfoy—but Hermione wasn't *not* on their side. She just didn't want to tell them that she hadn't grassed on Malfoy's illegal potions because she was busy trading bedroom favors for his blood, and those illegal potions might have helped him blackmail some Death Eaters into voting for her measure right after she'd let him fingerbang her against his study shelves. *Godric, what was she doing?* "They've always hated me."

"Shacklebolt would step in!"

"He didn't step in when I appealed the match! He's the reason I'm married to Malfoy!"

"Then you could demand veritaserum!"

"I am *not* allowing the Wizengamot to use veritaserum on me," she said, glaring.

"All right, all right," said Ginny, staring into her glass. She looked up. "So, what—now you're Malfoy's human shield?"

Hermione sighed. "I suppose that's why he added me to all the vaults and holdings."

Ginny grimaced.

But when the aurors had come, he'd been the one to shield her.

Malfoy heavy against her, his teeth on her neck, his hand gripping her breast. You'll have to take control, love. Stop playing the victim."

She told Ginny she had to get back to the Ministry.



Draco lounged on the settee in his study, his stocking feet on the low table in front of him, the orange demon on his stomach.

"Unlike me, beast, our mistress will be happy to learn you survived," murmured Draco, stroking its head.

Hermione took Francesco to an early celebratory lunch at the Leaky, telling him she couldn't have done it without all his help. He was her private employee, but she wanted him to learn that government work, for all its tedium, did have pay offs. That it was worth it, trying to make the world better. He was bubbly and enthusiastic, and she was glad Malfoy wasn't there to intimidate him. (She'd have to have another talk with Malfoy.)

But what was *she* learning about government work and who else Malfoy had been intimidating?

Ron had scoffed when she'd said killing Malfoy would be a waste but she'd been right about him. He was smart. Observant. Analytical. Creative. He remembered everything. He was, when he wanted to be, a better networker than she was. She (ugh) enjoyed working with him, even if he was highly irritating. He challenged her—forced her to justify her arguments, made her consider other angles, drew conclusions she hadn't seen—even if he was (of course) always wrong. He could also (she wouldn't admit this to his face) be funny, and sometimes she secretly agreed with him about the stuffed shirts at the Ministry. In fact, they didn't always disagree entirely when they fought about novels and interoffice politics. Increasingly, his insults and complaints sounded like . . . compliments.

"Oh ho—Boot dares to suggest you curtail pixie mitigation efforts in this shoddy memo he's written. He has no idea what he's just unleashed. You're going to rip him to shreds, darling."

"Awfully condescending this Unspeakables request for more detail. Don't they know you're a terror in the library? No, the Ministry's is insufficient for you—use the Manor's."

"Ach, this draft legislation from Finch-Fletchley is unspeakably stupid. How can a witch like you breathe the same air as these idiots? Just incendio that."

The wolfsbane potion proposal was better because of the work he'd done while pretending he only visited her office to annoy her. And now it seemed it had only passed because of the work he'd done outside her office.

She remembered his proprietary hand on her hip, the way he reached over to smooth her hair back from her face. *I won't be married to someone who can't get her initiatives enacted.*

Godric, he was such a prat.

"Godric, is that prat back in Azkaban?"

Hermione whipped around to see a familiar ginger nearing her table.

"Helga's humps, is that Ginny Potter?" whispered Francesco.

"We'll get you an autograph," said Hermione dryly. She turned to the younger woman in Harpies trackies. "No, Ginny, your husband did not arrest my husband."

"Well, when you put it that way," said Ginny, pulling a face, "too bad, eh?"

Hermione got Ginny to sign an autograph for Francesco and then gave him the afternoon off. She could already tell the rest of the workday would be a write-off, even before Ginny took the seat across from her.

"Did Harry send you to talk to me?" she asked Ginny, unsure what answer she wanted to hear.

"What? Godric, no. But I'm glad I ran into you," said Ginny, looking troubled as she absently ran her finger along the rim of her glass of lemonade. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It's just—I can't believe Harry or Ron didn't warn me."

"C'mon, Hermione—they don't know until the last second on raids, the Ministry's so afraid of leaks. Even I didn't find out where Harry had gone until this morning."

"But he had to know they were looking into Malfoy—"

"When aren't they looking into Malfoy?" said Ginny with raised eyebrows. "That wizard is shady as fuck, Hermione. Look, I know I've joked around with him, but I guess I thought he was just a rich git hiding at home now—"

Hermione raised her own eyebrows.

"No one had seen him in years when you were matched! I thought he'd gone back to just being a twat—"

Hermione opened her mouth—

She stalked into the room, her robes swinging around her calves. There was Malfoy, in shirtsleeves and trousers, his shoes discarded on the rug beside his bed, reclined against the pillows stacked atop his coverlet, with Crookshanks on his chest.

He looked up, his face tilted toward the cat's, his fingertips poised on either side of the animal's head.

"What is going on here?" demanded Hermione. "What are you doing to my cat?"

"We're just talking," said Malfoy quickly. "Home from work?"

She watched, aghast, as Crookshanks butted Malfoy's hand with his head.

*"It's an emotional affair," said Malfoy, haughty. "The beast loves *me* now."*

Hermione stormed over and pulled Crookshanks from him, holding the wriggling cat to her breast. *"Crookshanks is an excellent judge of character, so I know that's not true. Now, where are my clothes?"*

"The dressing room, obviously." He chuckled his chin toward his own. "Get changed, dear. Let's have dinner."

Hermione stared at him, then shook her hair back from her face. *"This is not what I agreed to,"* she muttered, walking away.

But she did have dinner with him, in the lesser dining room, while he quizzed her on everything she knew about recent initiatives coming out of International Magic, reaching under the table to pull her chair closer to his.

In bed, he curled around her, his fingertips tracing patterns on her thigh.



Hermione woke to find her toiletries and the potion bottle holding her blood relocated to Malfoy's en suite. After a fight in which he resorted to reminding her that he was Pip's favorite and she would move Hermione's clothes and effects back into his suite as often as he asked, Hermione got ready for work in his rooms.

She emerged from the dressing room to find him reading the paper in front of the fireplace, breakfast trays waiting.

"Have some toast, love," he said, not looking up.

"It's long past six," she said. "I'm going in."

He lowered one side of the paper to peer at her with raised eyebrows. *"You'll force me to tell the elves you chose that putrid cafeteria over their lovingly prepared—"*

*"Malfoy." This was dirty pool. She couldn't afford to be on Pip's bad side. "You're not meant to be blackmailing *me*."*

He went back to his paper, all feigned disinterest. *"I'm a villain, love."*

She ate two pieces of toast and some fruit while he read the headlines out loud to her. The Ministry cafeteria was putrid, it was true.



He was reading the morning *Prophet* with Crookshanks on his lap. Hermione watched them through narrowed eyes as she ate her toast.

"You should start scheduling lunch dates with everyone you know in International Magic," he said.

"I know Cormac McLaggen in International Magic," said Hermione.

*"Malfoy's lip curled. "You should start scheduling lunch dates with everyone you *don't* know in International Magic. Time to make new friends and influence different people."*

Hermione woke with a start. Something had—ow! *Goddammit*. Draco's heel had connected with her shin. He thrashed about when—She reached out and placed her hand flat on his back. He stilled immediately. He thrashed about when he had nightmares. As long as she touched him, he stopped.

She moved closer so she could sleep without extending her arm, her palm on the warm skin between his shoulder blades. He stirred and reached back, finding her arm and pulling it around him.

Hermione chewed her toast and watched, disgusted, as Crookshanks purred on Malfoy's lap. Maybe everything Ron had ever said about Crooks was harsh but fair.

"You should use your credentials in Magical Creatures to pitch the *Prophet* a series of op-eds on creature issues with international implications," said Malfoy.

Hermione looked up from his thighs, still frowning. The collar of his shirt was unbuttoned—now she was staring at this throat.

"Readers—including those in the Wizengamot—will start to think of you as an authority on international affairs as well."

She finally met his eyes. "The *Prophet* hates me. They won't do me that kind of favor."

"Offer them an interview in exchange," said Malfoy, loading his toast with marmalade with quick, decisive movements. "A rare sit-down with the Golden Girl—"

"They'll only want to ask me about you—"

"Which is your opportunity to reassure the progressives that you hate me and my politics," said Malfoy, widening his eyes as though she were slow.

"Hmm," said Hermione, her expression thoughtful. "That does have the virtue of being true."

That Friday evening, Malfoy found her in the library, taking a break from writing op-eds. She was curled up on one of the green leather sofas near the fire, a stack of the bookstore's advance copies of the next season's new releases on the low table in front of her. She had started on the first, a literary novel with rapturous early praise, when Malfoy threw himself down next to her and leaned forward to sift through the bound galleys. She watched his shirt pull tight across his back, his biceps.

He was sitting closer than he needed to on the large sofa, his thigh nearly touching her stocking feet.

He made his selection and kicked his shoes off onto the rug, putting his feet on the coffee table as he sat back.

"Malfoy," she said, "that's a muggle romance novel."

He looked over at her, an eyebrow raised. "And you think I am sufficiently romantic? I require no further instruction?"

Hermione opened and closed her mouth. "Have at it," she said finally.

She watched out of the corner of her eye as he settled in and began to turn the pages at speed, occasionally flipping back as though to check something. She knew from sharing her office with him that he was a fast reader, and he was now reading diligently as though the book were indeed coursework.

Draco strode into the tight space, his chin high, his face closed, and let everyone in the dimly lit room see him walk to a small table at the back, where Theo waited, all elbows and knees in tweed and cashmere, flipping a muggle butterfly knife open and closed.

Theo lifted his chin in greeting as Draco dropped into the chair next to him. "Granger get her proposal passed?"

"She did," said Draco. "Have any trouble?"

"No. The Plant King has some new toys." The blade spun around Theo's fingers, flashing in and out of its handle. "I would, ah, prefer it, though, if no one came to the Manor."

Draco did not want to go to Nott Manor. It was an extremely dark place, and the current state of disrepair would be unpredictable. Draco did not trust Theo to remember everything he had there—or, worse, not to know exactly what he had there.

"Agreed," said Draco, conjuring his own teacup and pouring from the teapot Theo hadn't touched. "What have you been hearing?"

"Listen, mate, I think Flint was behind the tip-off," Theo said, scanning the room.

Draco looked at him sharply. "You do."

"There are rumors he's been asking around. And I reckon these black-market brokers sing like Fwoopers. You lean on them in the slightest and they try to cut you in on it."

"Makes sense," said Draco, stirring in sugar.

"Let's just say I know who I won't be using next time I need to sell veritaserum or buy witch parts. And the potioneers are no better. Most of the wizards on Leech's list are minor players, but half of them are selling out Alastair Avery and his revivalist mates—"

"Why didn't he just ask me directly?" Draco looked to Theo.

"Maybe he was going to—"

"But I wasn't as receptive as he'd have liked—"

"Or he was giving you each a layer of plausible deniability. Can't give the pensieve a memory you don't have."

"Considerate," said Draco, nodding. "I thought most of his number were in Argentina, though. They're focused on her from there?"

Theo shook his head. "I'm hearing talk of some sort of revivalist reunion coming up here. Major recruitment push."

Draco snorted. "Does Avery seriously think he'll be the next Dark Lord?"

Theo's expression was diffident. "Bit overdressed for the job, since he still has a nose. But if he took apart any member of the Golden Trio, he'd be succeeding where the last one rather spectacularly failed."

"And Flint is no doubt part of this group."

"No doubt," agreed Theo.

"Trying to get me out of the way and give him his revenge." Draco took a sip of tea, made a face. Why did he bother in Knockturn?

"Or remind you where your loyalties lie when the Ministry annoys you." Theo shrugged. "Surely Flint knows you can make your way out of a raid."

"Oh, they've reminded me," said Draco snidely.

Theo began to grin, flipping the knife open and closed.

Draco glimpsed the tea house patrons who'd been watching them turn quickly away when they saw Theo's full smile. Then he was smiling too, starting to laugh.

been counting votes, not crossing Ts. *Then they don't pass anything you propose and nothing happens.* What was the point of all her hard work if it never got passed? Her fighting the good fight didn't help Greyback's child victims if she didn't win.

Hermione looked to Malfoy as Avery kicked off the voice vote with a nay. Malfoy cocked his head, a set, businesslike expression on his face as he penciled a notation onto a small piece of parchment in his hand.

An unexpected aye from Burke. A few fence-sitters falling her way. Higgs, shamelessly. Some votes she knew she had. The Malfoy, Nott, and Parkinson reps—her own little bloc. Then murmurs of surprise as Rowle and Travers voted in favor. Malfoy did not look surprised. He regarded the men with bored indifference. But Hermione saw Higgs and Burke glancing over at him, and soon others were too. Hermione watched with them as Malfoy noted every nay, his eyes on the members' faces. Her chest was tight, the coffee sour in her stomach.

And then Warrington was announcing the ayes had it, narrowly, and Hermione's proposal had passed. Hermione was holding her breath. Her heart was racing with caffeine and adrenaline and too little sleep, her stomach sick with it. Cheers from the measure's supporters, a flurry of quick-quotes quills in the press section. Hermione reflexively breathed out a laugh, smiling too widely in the too-bright room. What had just happened?

Francesco was at her elbow, eager to carry her papers for her, congratulating her.

Hermione looked up and found Malfoy's gray eyes. His eyebrows raised almost imperceptibly and then the haughty expression was back. He looked like Lucius as he stood and turned, his carriage somehow both languid and full of tension, to make his way out of the chamber. Hermione's back and chest were tingling, buzzing, the nape of her neck prickling.

Then she was out in the wide hallway, a gaggle of press closing in, other Ministry workers stopping to clap her on the shoulder and shake her hand.

"You did it?" said Patil, a real smile on her face.

"Oh, Padma, thank you for being here!" Warmth flooded Hermione at the thought of her old classmate, with no stake in the measure, coming to support her.

Padma gave her a hug, and Hermione closed her eyes as she squeezed the other woman. She did have friends at the Ministry. She did love her work here.

She pulled back, opening her eyes, and saw the unmistakable flash of Malfoy's platinum hair as he walked briskly down the hall, away from the scrum surrounding her.

His work here done, thought Hermione.

She was holding her breath again.

"*Hermione! Hermione!*"

"Mrs. Malfoy!" called a reporter from the *Prophet*, one of Skeeter's minions. "What can you tell us about reports that your home was raided early this morning after the Ministry received evidence your husband is dealing in illegal dark arts?"

"I have no comment on Draco Malfoy," said Hermione. "I'll remind you that the Ministry forced me to marry him against my will, after the Wizengamot denied my appeal. Our antipathy for each other is well documented. Nothing has changed."



Draco met Theo at the tea house in Knockturn Alley. Theo was a known associate—he was not giving the Ministry new information by meeting with him. But he *was* letting everyone in Knockturn know that the raid had failed—he hadn't even been held for questioning.

Hermione turned back to her novel, waiting for him to begin complaining that the plot was unrealistic, the characters insipid.

Hermione had discovered he could not read muggle fantasy—he was too irritated by the books' inaccurate magic systems, which he wanted to critique in detail. He had a better grasp of muggle technology than Hermione had expected but found most muggle science fiction boring or confusing. Thrillers that relied on guns were distasteful to him. No, what Malfoy loved were seafaring adventure stories—they spoke to the shipping magnate in him, she supposed—and women's fiction: multigenerational sagas, historical novels full of drawing room politics, stories about families or marriages gone astray but redeemed in the end. They no doubt reminded him of listening to Lucius and Narcissa gossip over dinner. Of course purebloods thought anything involving inheritances, illegitimate children, or who snubbed whom at tea was vitally important.

"I don't think that's possible," he murmured.

Hermione glanced over as he cocked his head, frowning. His shoulders were twitching as though he were . . . Oh. Mentally working out a position.

Hermione startled as he casually took hold of her foot, his eyes still on the page. His cufflinks were out, his sleeves rolled to below the Mark. She knew exactly where it was under the fabric. His thumb dug into her arch and she made a noise in the back of her throat. *Godric.*

He turned a page with his thumb, continuing to rub her foot absent-mindedly, the diamonds in the brooch band glinting.

Hermione gave up on concentrating on her novel.

Malfoy now had the book on his leg so he could more easily turn pages one-handed, his head bent over the text. His jaw flexed. His Azkaban tattoo was on the other side of his neck. Without it, he looked like the young aristocrat at home.

She pressed her other foot against the muscle of his thigh and he switched to that arch. She sighed.

"She must be double-jointed," he muttered.

Hermione huffed a surprised laugh.

He looked over. "Darling—"

"Oh no—"

"Shall we just find out—"

"*What* have you been reading?"

"Well," he said with a meaningful look, and then he flipped back several pages. "First I say, 'Get on your knees for me' and then—"

"Excuse me?" Hermione pushed up off the arm of the sofa. "How about *you* get on *your* knees?"

Malfoy immediately dropped his feet from the coffee table and slid off the sofa, turning as he did to face her.

Merlin help her, he looked appealing on his knees, his hair fallen over his forehead, his shirt unbuttoned at the throat.

He held the open book out to her. "You're reading the man's lines, then, love. Next you say, 'Show me how well you can take me, baby.'" He looked up at her as he kissed her knee through her lounge pants.

Hermione snorted and took the book from him. "Godric. You better never say that to me. It's just so—"

"Hmm, yes, chauvinistic." Malfoy had hold of her ankle and was pulling her leg toward him. He tugged at the loungewear. "We'll need these off."

She could smack him with the book and tell him no. She didn't. Sex with him had been . . . good. (All right—better than anyone else.) He'd been clinging to her in bed all week without pushing her for more, his hands reaching for her, his body warm and firm against her, his fingers in her hair. Now her period was over (not that he cared).

He was rolling the wool socks down her ankles as she skimmed ahead. The novel's female lead did appear to be highly flexible.

Malfoy's hands were sliding under her bum. She lifted her hips and felt his fingers hook her waistband, and then he was stripping her. She kicked off a pantleg while she turned the page.

The male love interest was painfully well-endowed and—

Oh—Malfoy had yanked her hips toward him and now his hot mouth was on her.

Hermione closed her eyes, the book still in her hands, as sensation swept through her.

"Merlin," said Malfoy, "if I'd known in school I'd get to eat your cunt while you read—"

And then his tongue was on her clit and she was clasping the book to her chest, her head fallen back.

His hands were on her inner thighs, pushing them back, opening her up, and then her heels were on his shoulder, his back, and his tongue was delving into her.

He lifted his mouth off her. "Go on, love." He licked back up to her clit.

"Show me how well you can take me, Draco," she said, her voice breathier than she liked.



Twenty minutes later, Hermione felt like she was taking too long.

"It's all right," she sighed out. "We can—"

"You're rushing me," he said. "Stop."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to be here," he said, looking up at her. He licked her slowly. "Do you not want to be here?"

"It's only . . . we're in the library—"

"Your library—"

"I feel like . . . like we're going to be caught," she admitted.

"It's your house—you can't be caught," he said reasonably.

"It's not—"

"It is. It's yours now. And there's no one here to walk in on us." He was kissing her inner thigh, looking up at her.

"The elves—"

"Lived through the summer I turned thirteen. I wanked twelve times a day—"

"Draco—"

"On average—"

"Draco—"

"Rounded down."

She heaved an exasperated sigh, trying not to laugh.

"It's not as bad now. Unless I've just been talking to you—"

She opened her mouth—

"And you've scolded me—"

"Draco—"

"Like that." He grinned. "I like that bossy swot voice you do—"

"I do not—"

"Turns me on. Then I can't help myself—"

"I am never scolding you again—"

"You are right now." He was grinning, biting his lip like he was thirteen. "I'll just keep acting up—"

"You will. You're terrible—"

"Let's start over, love. I rushed you too." He was climbing onto the sofa, onto her as she sat up. He had her pressed up against the arm. "I should have kissed you first."

And then he was kissing her, tugging off her jumper, her T-shirt. His nimble fingers were unclasping her bra as his tongue, tasting of her, lapped at hers.

"How is this slowing down? You've got me naked in the library."

wasn't. And they were *so disturbed*—he couldn't stop laughing about it. *That* wasn't what they wanted, was it? When he was rude to her—when he jerked her arm and sneered at her—they all got prissy little looks on their bitchy little faces, but they didn't step in. Oh, no—that was fine. But that she might have control over him—no, that bothered them. *They* wanted control. They wanted him fighting her, her fighting him—both of them distracted, weakened. They didn't like the idea that she had the power to bend his magic, his money, his violence to her will. They hadn't meant to give her a *weapon*.

If he dropped to his knees in the middle of the Ministry atrium for her, it would scare them more than if he duelled Shacklebolt. They didn't know what she would tell him to do. They didn't know what he was whispering in her ear. If he never knew which one of them would take charge, how could anyone else?

Her moving on top of him, her hands on his scarred body, her face lowering to his, her hair tenting around him, blocking out everything but her, her lips brushing his ear, her voice whispering, "You're going to crawl for me, aren't you?"

He came all over his stomach.

He lay in his bed, panting. He needed to get cleaned up. He needed to tell Pip the elves could come back from the chateau, where they'd taken the contraband Theo and Pansy hadn't cleared out. He needed to check in with Theo.

First, he had to remind some members of the Wizengamot that he wasn't in Azkaban.



Hermione was near the center of the chamber, fortified only by a dry croissant from the Ministry's terrible cafeteria and too much coffee from the machine in her office. She was under-slept and over-adrenalized—the world felt a little too bright, her skull slightly too tight—but nothing would stop her from presenting this measure she'd worked so hard on. Shacklebolt had yet to visit her—she didn't much want to see him. Harry and Ron hadn't come by—she knew they were busy with their jobs. She was going to do her job now.

"What's he doing—"

"He's free? I'd heard—"

"Didn't they—"

Malfoy was here.

She looked up. He was in black—as black as the stone walls, the benches—his hair and rings flashing in the light, his face all hard angles as he lifted his pointy chin to look down his nose at the gathered press and spectators on his way to a seat on the front row of the gallery. The Azkaban tattoo he made no attempt to hide was stark against his white skin.

Had he been back in these chambers since he was in a cage here? She did not think so.

She watched as he swept into his seat, his face blank as knots of people whispered and stole glances, some openly staring.

Then his gaze found hers and his chin lowered as his pale eyes bore into hers, flickered over her mouth, the sapphire necklace at her clavicle. He licked his lips. Hermione took a deep breath and looked away. The back of her neck was prickling, the scar on her arm on fire. The Black ring she couldn't take off glittered in the light as though in answer.

Francesco was here with her papers—a security blanket. She was prepared; she wouldn't need them. She thanked him and he scurried to find a seat behind Malfoy, out of his line of sight. Malfoy ignored him, scanning the Wizengamot members with a critical expression on his face.

Then the hearing began and she presented the proposal, parried questions—she *was* prepared, it went quickly. Sitting down after, she felt she'd done well. But her speech wouldn't change any minds, would it? The votes would be cast along ideological lines, influenced by political alliances and business interests, the decisions made long before she'd opened her mouth. And she wasn't sure she had the support, despite the good job she'd done. *Your imbecile colleagues succeed because they know how to scratch a back.* She should have

to the Head Auror. "I hope no one has influenced the timing of this investigation in an attempt to interfere with Mrs. Malfoy's work."

"Mr. Malfoy, I can assure you that that is an unfounded and unwelcome accusation," ground out Robards. He looked alert and frustrated after a long night.

"And I can assure you that House Malfoy is used to being a target in others' political machinations," said Malfoy with open animosity, as though he were not part of a notoriously corrupt political dynasty himself.

If Hermione had been on speaking terms with Harry and Ron at the moment, they would have laughed at Malfoy's undefeated ability to play bully and victim simultaneously.

Malfoy murmuring "I want to be good for you" while he braced her against the books, pushing her knickers aside. Whispering "Did you tell him I'm your pet?" while he bit her. Yes, Malfoy was a pet that bit.

"That's enough, Malfoy."

Malfoy's head whipped around, his mouth opening as though to retort. Then he went still and smirked. "Yes, ma'am," he said, overtly eyeing her mouth, his lips parted. He turned back to Robards, his expression smugly pleased.

Hermione realized she was gazing up at him—he was still so close—and looked away, only to see the female aurors exchange glances.

"Right," said Robards, looking thoroughly done with them both. Then he pressed the tip of his wand to his throat, sending his amplified voice out across the Manor. "All right, team. Wrap up and be out in ten."

He reached into his inner pocket. "Your wands," he said, holding out his hand with them, and Hermione could not help the way her heart leapt.



He'd wanked—twice—after she'd left him on his knees in his study. He couldn't wait to be licking her off his fingers again. The noises she'd made, squirming on his hand—Salazar, he wanted her whimpering and writhing on his cock. He wanted to fuck himself into her. He wanted to eat her up.

Her hand in his hair, wrenching his head back—*Yes, yes, look at me. Pay attention to me. Hurt me.* He was fisting himself now, again, remembering it. Screaming at her—*don't discount me, don't discard me, you can't be rid of me*—and her eyes widening as she took him in. She'd warned him—she didn't want rid of him. She hated him but she wasn't done with him yet. Her hand squeezing his arm, her hips thrusting toward him as he pawed at her, bit like an animal. She hated him but she liked what he did for her. She liked his hand on her clit, his fingers inside her. He hummed with pleasure, tightening his grip.

She liked the bookstore, too. She was playing games, refusing to admit it, but he knew. Even his name on it wouldn't be enough to ruin it for her. Soon she'd stop noticing. She'd accept it, start to expect it. He wanted to have her own signet ring made. He wanted to see her wearing it, sealing her contracts with it without a second thought. On his lap, behind his desk. His hard cock inside her, slowing thrusting into her while she worked. His hands roaming over her hips, her clit, a hard pinch to her nipple when she got off-task. He shivered, stroking himself faster.

That's enough, Malfoy.

He liked it when she couldn't ignore him any longer, when she gave up pretending she didn't care what he did.

Merlin, the look on Shacklebolt's face, on Robards's face, when she bossed him around and he took it. She wasn't meant to claim him like that. He wasn't meant to enjoy it.

He was huffing out a breathy laugh, remembering it, the pleasure from his grip on his cock mixing with an angry warmth spreading from his chest. She'd give him an order and he'd smirk and part of them thought he was playing her and she was too naïve to see it. But the larger part of them was afraid he

He was still fully clothed, his bent knee between her legs. She was nude on his green leather sofa. If this were Hogwarts, she would be expecting his friends to burst in now.

"Your library. Your tits are perfect, love. I want to see them." He leaned forward, his left hand wedged next to her hip to brace him.

Hermione was trying to roll her eyes but she was distracted by his thumb moving across her nipple, his mouth at her throat.

"They're not perfect—the left one is larger."

"I'm mad for asymmetry," he murmured, sucking on her earlobe, pinching her nipple.

He kept kissing her neck, toying with her nipple, pinching, tugging at it. It was hard and sensitive, his breath warm and soft. The chill in the room made the heat seeping off his body, through the fine cotton of his shirt, irresistible. She wanted to press close, pull him on top of her. He kept enough space between them to keep his hand at her breast, pinching and teasing the hard bud of her nipple. It was so sensitive—oversensitive now. She sighed and shimmed her shoulders, trying to shake him off.

"Do the other one," she said. He pinched her nipple harder, and she made a breathy noise. He shifted his weight to his right hand and lowered his head to suck on her nipple—her shivering when he licked it first—as his free hand began pinching and teasing the other side.

Her cunt was throbbing. She wanted to rush him. To tell him never mind that, just fuck her. He wasn't even undressed yet. Still wearing his crisp white shirt, dark trousers, the rings he never took off. She was naked in this room she should not be naked in, wearing only a diamond and sapphire ring, exposed except for his body covering hers.

His tongue was circling her nipple. He pushed back, lowering his head to bite the swell of tender flesh below. He moved his mouth to her other breast and began to lick and suck. Hermione was breathing harder, starting to feel lightheaded. His tongue was relentless. He sucked her nipple harder. He was licking and gently biting. His hand was at her waist. Hermione sucked in air, trying to clear her head. He blew on the wet nipple and she shivered, wriggling with the chill running down her back. He was pulling at her nipple, tugging on it. Then he was kissing her, his hand at her clit. Her cunt ached, engorged with blood, pulsing with her heartbeat. She was going to die if he didn't fuck her. He wasn't even undressed.

He kissed her, his thumb on her clit, until she was squirming. "Draco—" she said.

"Tell me what to do and I'll do it," he said, his mouth against hers.

"Get back on your knees," she said, breathless.

"Immediately, dear."

Then he was sliding off the sofa, pulling her toward him, and then his hot mouth was back on her cunt, her clit slick and swollen.

"You taste good, love," he murmured against her. He wasn't kissing lightly—he was aggressively tonguing her, as if he wanted it all. She'd given up on telling herself that he wasn't attracted to her, that he was only randy and she was available. He was still fully clothed, his tongue hard and flat on her clit, his cock untouched. He looked up and she reached down and fisted his hair, holding him to her, and his eyes fell closed as she pressed into his mouth and the hard bones of his face, not relenting until she came.



SATURDAY OCTOBER 4, 2003

She and Malfoy were stood over a lodestone set along a ley line in the center of Narcissa Malfoy's extensive rose gardens, Malfoy's breath visible in the cold air as he went over the wards with her one more time.

Malfoy had first demonstrated the spells right after breakfast. They were primarily well-known protective enchantments, the phrases familiar—protego maxima, fianto duri, repello inimicum, salvio

hexia, repello muggletum—but Black- and Malfoy-specific language had been layered in, and there were a few bits of tricky wandwork.

Watching Malfoy model the motions, Hermione had felt mostly intellectual curiosity—it was exciting, satisfying, to learn something new, to see and hear the ways in which these classic enchantments had been modified by previous generations and then parse the underlying spell structure that allowed it. Malfoy took the wards too seriously to be a prat about teaching her—he was precise and patient, watching her closely when he wasn't focused on his own movements. When she mastered a section, he would straighten minutely, his eyes roaming over her, his mouth soft—pleased, as though this proved her investment in House Malfoy. Or maybe he just liked watching her.

But here, outside, with Malfoy Manor looming over her, Hermione felt a heaviness in her chest, a prickling sensation down the back of her neck along with the day's chill. She rolled her shoulders, trying to release the tension in them so that she could cast effectively. There had been moments, reciting these sequences memorized long ago, when Malfoy had paused almost imperceptibly—and she'd known he was omitting the words to do with blood purity. What was she doing, warding this place that had wanted, at its heart, to kill her? Could she really believe that, in doing this, she was taking ownership? (*It's your house—you can't be caught*. But she had been caught here.) Could she believe that Malfoy Manor could be changed from what it had been? (Ron's voice, coming back to her: *You think you can redeem Drago Malfoy?*)

Malfoy seemed to think it was that simple. He omitted the words without commentary. He taught her the wards without sneering. He gathered up the bloodletting ring, blood replenishing potion, and the potion bottle of her blood, holding the last to the pale winter light to study it before slipping it into his pocket. He ribbed her energetically but without animosity about her refusal to get on a broom.

"How did I get the only witch in the world who won't fly?"

"We can cast from anywhere, Malfoy. We don't even need to be in a central location," she'd told him.

"Pure laziness. We'll cast from the lodestone and then from each compass point on the grounds. It's traditional."

She'd raised an eyebrow. It was also traditional at Malfoy Manor to be a horrible bigot.

"I like to cover all three hoops," he'd amended. "Preferably on a broom."

"I'll be on foot."

"I'll bring lunch, then." He seemed perfectly content with the idea of walking miles across his property with her in the freezing cold.

Now he passed her the potion bottle and slid on the bloodletting ring. He reached over, his fingers white and skeletal in the cold, and worked up her coat and shirt sleeves. The scar was a red-streaked pink, not yet cracked or festering. He opened his left wrist and then he was spreading his jarringly warm blood along the scar, rubbing it in with his right hand while he allowed his blood to run down his left onto the lodestone.

Hermione remembered him the night before, wiping his wet muzzle across his forearm as he climbed onto the sofa to fuck her after licking her come out of her. He had a potioneer's matter-of-factness about blood and fluids, a fuckboy's appetite for them. He had stripped down, pushed his cock into her, and fucked her hard for only a few minutes before he'd pulled out and dropped down to lick her cunt again.

Now he extracted his wand from his pocket and healed himself while she splashed her menstrual blood across her right hand and the lodestone. There it was, the Malfoy Manor lodestone marked by her muggleborn blood. She stoppered the bottle and slid it into her bag, pulled her wand. She and Malfoy cast together, their bloodied hands on their wands. His eyes met hers as their words and motions synched, heat waves of energy moving out from them. The Black magic thrummed through her along with her own. The coiled tension he carried with him seemed to smooth out into a grounded calm. He was truly at home here.

They finished and he looked to her—he didn't speak, but she could tell he was pleased. He eyed her with a sort of satisfaction she wasn't used to seeing from him—not smug, not sexual, but like . . . Godric, she just didn't know. Like he felt more at home with her too now. Like these traditions were so important

I'm on your side, thought Hermione, staring at Shacklebolt, *but you're not on mine*.

Shacklebolt saw her as his good little soldier, a useful tool who could be discarded with a lecture instead of thanks. But Hermione was tired of being told how good and smart and reliable she was only for her kind-of mentors to be offended when she was an actual person with ideas and ambitions of her own. Everyone loved a strong, capable, take-charge witch—so long as she stuck to doing their scut work.

Hermione felt the pain and disappointment hardening her heart like a physical pressure in her chest. In that moment, she didn't give a single solitary fuck whether Malfoy cut out the tongue of every Death Eater in town while Nott burned the black-market brokers to the ground.

She'd told Shacklebolt she had nothing more to give him. She'd gone back to the Manor and told Malfoy about the raid. She'd let him lose control and fuck her against the shelves while he made the kinds of promises the Ministry wouldn't make.

I'm not giving you up.

I want to be good for you.

Put me to use.

And now she sat on that green settee in the dark, rehearsing her presentation in her head. Because she would be giving it tomorrow—later today now—after Robards failed to find enough to arrest the husband she'd never asked for and was now bound to for life.



Hermione woke at dawn, weak sunlight filtering in through the sitting room's leaded windows. She was warm, her neck hurt, the scar on her arm crackled and burned. Someone was talking. Someone's heart was beating—her head was on Malfoy's chest, his arm around her back, holding her while she slept against him.

Oh, Godric.

The aurors were in the room—Robards was in the room. He was addressing Malfoy while Malfoy sat on the settee like the godsdamn Lord of the Manor with his witch huddled under his arm, his hand proprietarily on her hip.

"I see," he drawled in response to whatever Robards had just said, as though Robards were an underling delivering a report Malfoy had ordered.

He must have felt her heart rate speed up, her breathing shift. "Darling," his voice lowered toward her, "Robards and his team are finishing up."

Hermione took a deep breath and sat up, blinking—Merlin, was there any way to look dignified doing this? His arm was still wound around her—he didn't move his hand from her hip. It forced her to lean into him. They looked entirely too cozy: a woman draped on the man who'd had her gasping and shivering against him twelve hours earlier. A Death Eater's wife, able to sleep with his Dark Mark pressed against her side.

"Mrs. Malfoy," said Robards, "you'll soon be able to return to your rooms."

"The office," said Hermione, nonsensically, as though it were important he be corrected. "I'm going in early."

"My wife will be addressing the Wizengamot this morning," said Malfoy archly, finally taking back his arm as she pushed upright, her hand on his torso, the enormous diamond and sapphire ring on display. She could feel the raised lines of the sectumsempra scars through the fine fabric of his shirt. He drummed his ringed fingers on the arm of the settee. "She is the Ministry sponsor for an important piece of legislation. So. The sooner you wrap up this wild goose chase, the better."

Hermione shook her hair out of her eyes to see the sour expression on Robards's face, the stony glare on Malfoy's. Malfoy looked to her sharply, then reached over to smooth a curl back from her temple, his expression serious as his pale eyes moved over her face—a show of husbandly concern. He turned back

"I can't believe we didn't find anything," said Ron, helping himself to the last of the potatoes as Susan patted his arm sympathetically. "Someone had to have tipped him off."

"Lots of revivalist chatter lately," said Harry darkly.

"He has been seen schmoozing the snakes in Wiz Admin," said Arthur.

"Mione, c'mon, what's he do all day? Why's he always in your office?"

"Maybe he just likes my company," sniffed Hermione, letting them decide whether it was a joke. "Maybe he can't stay away from our scintillating conversations about draft legislation and muggle novels."

Ron laughed. "Can you imagine? Malfoy reading muggle books. No, really, what's he do?"

"Eats my sweets and looks for information to blackmail people with," said Hermione, deadpan.

"I knew it," said Ron, and they were all laughing again.

Hermione imagined bringing Malfoy to dinner at the Burrow. Would he softly stroke the inside of her wrist under the table and tease her about romance novels? No, he would act a prat. The last time she'd let him mingle with her friends, he'd bought a bookstore to show them up. (Merlin, was that his version of feeding her ham?) The Malfoys and Weasleys had too much bad blood between them for the Burrow to be common ground. And the entire Auror Department had already decided Malfoy was a revivalist. What was her proof he wasn't—he'd *said* he wasn't on his way into her pants? She'd sound a right idiot explaining that one. He'd greeted them at the floo with his Dark Mark on display and then popped straight off to Avery Manor.

Now he said he intended to pass information to Neville.

Hermione's brow had wrinkled as she'd tried to condense all her questions into words. "What's Neville—"

"Think about which memories you want to have for the pensieve," he'd said, quick, and Hermione's mouth had snapped shut.

That made it real.

Neville Longbottom running mercenaries. She would have said, no, she couldn't believe that. Except maybe she could.

Neville had run the D.A., defied Voldemort, killed Nagini. After the Battle of Hogwarts, he'd shied away from the tabloid accolades, but he was still sometimes—in the broadsheets, late at night in pubs when people told war stories—referred to as the Sword of Gryffindor. He now moved through the world with the preternatural calm of a man who had seen things and knew he could survive.

So maybe Hermione could very well believe that Neville had kept running his own D.A. Her war criminal husband who trafficked in secrets certainly did.

"Don't fret, love," he'd told her. "If Longbottom thinks I've crossed him, Pansy will happily help him to poison me."

"I'm growing fond of Pansy," she'd said. "She's quite sensible."

But nothing about this was sensible, was it? Now she wanted to drag Harry and Ron from the dinner table and tell them everything—but doubts were creeping in.

Hermione had, in the past, been accused of being overeager to share what she knew with the class. And now this felt like a situation in which everyone had *made sure* not to know, and she would be stepping in if she played Little Miss Know It All. Neville was doing his friends in the Auror Department a favor by making sure they didn't have to aid and abet what sounded like *extremely* illegal activity. Maybe Harry and Ron didn't know. Or maybe Harry and Ron were being careful not to look in any direction that would force them to decide between their sworn duty and their old comrades in arms. Maybe it wasn't merely, as Malfoy thought, that Harry and Ron were busy playing house.

"Shut it, everyone," said Ginny, drawing Hermione from her thoughts. She'd dropped into the chair beside Harry that she'd left to talk to Susan, and now she took his hand. "We have an announcement."

Hermione pictured Ginny sipping lemonade at the Leaky and she knew.

Ginny knocked Harry's shoulder with hers and smiled at him. He was grinning, his hair disheveled, the sleeves of his jumper pushed up, still somehow the boy Hermione had met at eleven. He turned to the table, and he said it.

"We're pregnant!" Harry was smiling his widest smile, his knuckles white between Ginny's.

Hermione felt her eyes water, the back of her throat ache as a wave of emotion hit her. Harry would finally have the family he'd always wanted. He looked desperately happy. He looked terrified.

The table erupted, everyone jumping up to hug Harry and Ginny. Harry was being buffeted to and fro, grinning, as Arthur and George both clapped him on the back.

Hermione pressed her lips together, swallowing hard, her eyes wide. She wasn't going to burst into tears. She smiled her widest smile, too, her eyes swimming.

She hadn't always understood it, how obsessed Harry was with Ron's family. She understood it a bit better now, now that she'd lost her parents, now that she and Ron were long over, now that she was alone in the world. It wasn't what she wanted—Ron's family wasn't her family; they'd been ready to swallow her right up, and it had always been a little too much for her—but she understood it now. Harry would never be alone again. His child with Ginny would never be alone.



That night Hermione washed the smells of the Burrow out of her hair and then sat mostly submerged in Malfoy's clawfoot tub, the room full of thick, dripping candles and ferns and the white tulips that seemed to follow her around the Manor. The door creaked open and Malfoy looked in, then stepped in and leaned against the jamb. His shirt was open at the collar, his cuffs rolled to below the Mark, showing the bones of his wrists. "All right, love?" he asked.

"Shoo," she said firmly.

He ducked his head. "Yes, Mrs. Malfoy." His eyes flickered over her and then he left, pulling the door closed behind him.

She carefully dried her curls and came to bed in an old, oversized T-shirt.

He watched her silently, shirtless, still holding the novel he had been reading.

She climbed onto the bed, and he set the book aside. "What's the matter, love?" he said quietly, before she could lie down.

She took a breath, looked away.

"Don't keep things from me," he said, his voice taking on an edge.

She looked to him, to the worry starting to harden on his pointy face. His jaw flexed. The things he had told her that morning—what was he afraid she'd done? She could still be Shacklebolt's spy, couldn't she.

"Harry and Ginny are having a baby," she blurted out.

Confusion and pain flashed across his eyes, and then he blinked, clearing his expression. "Good for them," he said.

"And I'm happy for them—" Adrenaline coursed through Hermione, making her stomach roil. He'd just told her not to keep things from him, but he didn't want to hear *this*. "But it makes me miss my parents. Because now Harry has a whole family and I—"

"Only have me," said Malfoy flatly.

She stared at him, her eyes wide. "That—that wasn't—I wasn't going to say that."

He looked at her, his eyes dead. "But that's why you're sad."

"Draco." She took his hand, and he didn't resist. He looked down at her fingers intertwined with his while she spoke. "During the war, I obliterated my parents. Their names, my name, their memories of me—I erased it all, to keep them safe. Now they're alive and well and perfectly happy not knowing I exist. I can portkey to Australia and *watch* them be happy not knowing I exist. They're right there, and I can't get them back. I—I went too far. I . . . I would be sad no matter who I was married to."

He looked up at her then, his head bowed over their hands, and just as quickly looked back down. "You didn't go too far." He glanced at her and then away. "You saved them."

She looked at him carefully. Her heart was suddenly racing, heavy in her chest. "Draco, what are you . . ."

He held her gaze this time. "They were targets, love. You were brave to save them."

She stared at him. Her chest, her back, the nape of her neck—it was all tingling, prickling. "Did *you*—"

"No." He shook his head quickly. "No. But I saw the lists." He was studying their hands again. His long bony fingers between hers.

"How *could* you—"

He took a deep breath, sighed it out as he lifted his head to meet her eyes. "You know how, love. I did what I thought I had to do."

His face was solemn, resigned.

She stared at him, and he didn't look away.

I did what I thought I had to do. She had done. But why had it cost her so much, when she'd been on the right side?

Three months ago, she would have flung his hand away. Now her heart was a black hole that swallowed everything. It swallowed her hope, her anger—it swallowed everything but the pain. What was the point, even, in being angry with him? She had sacrificed her parents. His parents had sacrificed him. *I did what I thought I had to do.* He had done the wrong thing. She had done the right thing. And here they still were.

"I can go to another room," he said. Three months ago, she knew, he would have sneered at her.

She sighed, trying to breathe out the pressure in her chest. "Lie down, Draco. If you go to another room, you'll just have nightmares."

"I don't—"

"You kick."

"I don't—"

"You *do*. You're terrible. Just come here," she said.

He pulled her down with him, his head against her chest, his arms around her.

Then she was lying with her hand in his hair, their legs tangled. His hair was soft; his heart was beating fast and hard. He smelled like citrus and cloves and soap.

She closed her eyes and sighed, running her fingers through his hair. She fisted a handful and pulled. He breathed into her.

She was tired of remembering that moment of being acted upon. She wanted to be the one acting.

Well. She had someone to act on.

She pushed him back, pushing up onto her arm. He was wincing with the rejection, his brow furrowed. She ran her fingertip inside the waistband of his pants, along the warm skin of his stomach. "I want these off," she said. "If you say a word, I'll silencio you."

He looked up at her, his eyes wide, his mouth unmoving. Then he was stripping, his face set, his eyes wary as he watched her. His was already half hard.

He sucked in a deep breath as he lay back beside her, his chin jutting up, exposing his throat. She took hold of him and his breath caught. He was hard in her hand. She squeezed, running her thumb along the ridge of the head, and he took a tremulous breath, gazing up at her.

She threw her elbow across his scarred abs, leaning down to take his cock into her mouth, her back to him. This wasn't a show for him. There would be no eye contact. No coy little kisses as she looked up at him.

Her jaw clicked as she opened wider to take him in, her tongue moving around him.

His fingertips ghosted along her spine, light and tentative. She was leaning on his stomach; she could feel him breathing harder.

She took him in a rhythm, her tongue moving over him, pulling up to lave the head, his fingers now splayed across her lower back.

She shifted to take him deeper, his hand sliding lower.

"Avery was behind the black-market inquiries. Nott asked the brokers nicely and they confessed." He'd been fussing with his tea. He'd raised his eyebrows back at her. "I don't want you going near him—"

"Meanwhile, you're cozying up—"

"I'm getting close to find his weak spots—"

"You'll be helping to recruit—"

"My being there doesn't change anyone's views—it only gives me a window onto what they are." His voice had turned sardonic. "I'm a show pony, dear. They trot me out and see who applauds. If they curse me for lowering my wand, all the better."

She'd exhaled heavily, watching him. Everything about him had been sharp and on edge. *He's unhappy*, she'd thought.

"It's only until I get it sorted." His jaw had flexed. He'd been frowning as his gaze dropped to the floor. "I need to talk to Longbottom."

"To get your veritas serum back? I'll have you know, I think it's unfair of you to dump your contraband on Neville to hold just because he's too nice to say no."

Malfoy had laughed darkly, looking up at her then. "My dear, naïve wife. Do you truly have no inkling what Longbottom traffics in? Who he supplies?"

"What are you on about?" she'd said, irritated. "He supplies the Hogwarts herbology department with plants. He guest lectures."

"Yes, he does those things. When he's not extracting exotic plant toxins or arming mercenaries." He'd turned to face her more fully. "He's got kill squads rooting out Death Eaters all over Europe—and now South America."

"*What?*" Hermione had been at a loss. "How does he—*What mercenaries?*"

"Ex-D.A., ex-Order, private contractors." Malfoy had shrugged. "Longbottom has money, connections, and a war hero's credentials. It hasn't been hard for him to put out feelers, gather intelligence, and build an operation."

"What money?" she'd protested. "He used reparations to buy a nursery—"

"And then he cornered the market on extremely rare, dangerous, and deadly plants." Malfoy had eyed her consternation with amusement. "Between the Ministry, the obscure potions market, the black market, muggle pharmaceutical companies, the muggle intelligence agencies, and muggle crime firms, he can select his buyers and name his prices. And now he'll have the Parkinson vaults."

"And Pansy—"

"Is in love. Very sweet, isn't it?"

"But . . . do Harry and Ron know this?" Did everyone know but her?

"If they have an appetite for it, they'll have found him. It's a small underground. But I don't believe so." Malfoy had regarded her over the edge of his teacup. He'd settled back in his chair, watching her. "They're too busy playing house."

"How do you know this—"

"Because, darling, I'm a convicted war criminal who understands political leverage—or, as you term it, blackmail and extortion."

She'd given him an exasperated look.

"People tell me things." His pale gray eyes had been intent on her. "Because they are trying to recruit me or because they are trying to pay me off or because I make them. Who do you think told Longbottom to look to Argentina?"

"And you told him because . . ." Hermione had narrowed her eyes. "Are you afraid of Neville?"

Malfoy had arched an eyebrow. "Yes."

Godric.

"Godric, that potions lab he has—" said Harry.

"I'll have to hear more about this—" said Arthur.

"Granger, I can come use it, right?" said George.

"You're here," he'd whispered as he thrust into her after waking her in the night, the aftershocks from his mouth still rippling through her, his hair wild from her hands, his body heavy on hers. And maybe she was thinking the same.

Terry Boot's birthday dinner had been loud and boozy, and Hermione had made a good showing. She'd had her little breakdown, and then she'd slept it off, put up her hair and put on her party lipstick and left Malfoy and Crookshanks in bed—one sleeping with his brow furrowed, the other glowering from his pillow. She'd smiled wide when she got to Terry's flat. Told her amusing work stories and laughed along with everyone else. But as eleven o'clock had neared, she'd found herself increasingly distracted.

If it had been the early days of their marriage and Malfoy had given her a curfew, Hermione would have been gleefully turning into a pumpkin. Now she imagined him waiting shirtless with that mournful look on his face, the coverlet scattered with conjured tulips. But she wasn't going to run home like she wasn't allowed out.

She'd returned to the Manor at 11:42 pm. He would be snippy and peevish, start a fight. Then he'd pull her to him in bed, his body warm and solid against her, and she'd let him.

But he wasn't there. The rooms felt too big and empty—she wasn't used to being in them without him. She'd undressed, washed her face, cleaned her teeth, listening for him the whole time. The bedsheets felt crisp and cold without him pestering her. It was hard to fall asleep.

Then—the strangest thing—she'd woken to him hovering over her, kissing her face as though she'd been the one missing and he had finally found her.

She'd only realized later that morning that he hadn't expected her to come back.

Hermione's chest had felt tight. Not coming back . . . hadn't occurred to her. She'd been expected at dinner and then she'd been expected at the Manor. Yes, she'd lost the plot, but then she'd found it and got on with it. Which felt right to her, but this suggested it wasn't. When Hermione wasn't being accused of overthinking, she was occasionally accused of the opposite—of mistaking a stiff upper lip for good mental hygiene.

She supposed she could have gone home with Harry and Ginny to Grimmauld Place, ruined their evening. Could have come to the Burrow a day early, got an earful of *Why Draco Malfoy Is the Worst*. Could have gone to a hotel so she didn't have to hear it. She tried to imagine this, spending a night alone in an unfamiliar room. What would that do? Eventually she'd have to return to the manor where she lived.

Hermione should have talked faster, fought harder, so that she didn't live at Malfoy Manor at all. But, honestly, what difference did it make? She could raze Malfoy Manor to the cursed earth beneath it and it wouldn't change a goddamn thing. Hermione carried the harm with her. It didn't go away. She'd tried talking to someone—several someones—and it didn't work. Frankly, it was maddening, explaining herself over and over to people who were always ten steps behind. It made her feel like she would never, ever be heard.

Draco Malfoy wasn't going to change. She wasn't going to redeem him. But, right now, he felt like the one person she could let see the scar. He'd been there when it happened to her. And now he was here with her, not looking away from it. She didn't have to spare his feelings. She didn't have to explain.

So when she'd got back from Terry Boot's birthday dinner and he wasn't there, it had felt like he'd told her not to hide her needs and then she'd lost control in front of him and he hadn't liked it after all. He didn't want to be around her—that's how it felt. Then he'd come back and kissed her so softly, like he wasn't disgusted by how pathetic she'd been, like he was relieved to have her there. She'd turned to him and he'd kissed her body hungrily, desperately, as though he couldn't get enough of her. She wasn't going to explain how that felt to anyone—not even herself.

That morning, over breakfast, he'd told her where he'd been. *Godric*. His idea of handling Avery was to get in bed with him? Who would be the bigger fool—Malfoy for thinking that wouldn't get her killed, or her for believing that wasn't his goal?

She'd sucked in a breath and looked at him with her eyebrows raised.

She had him in deep when she got a good grip on his bollocks—she felt him take a quick breath—and stopped moving. She angled her head so that he was between her molars. And then she slowly bit down. He went stock still. His cock was rock hard between her teeth. She kept the pressure firm and even. She bit down hard and held him there.

A false release, another bite. Another. His fingertips flexed once against her. He wasn't breathing.

Finally, she opened wider, releasing him. He jolted as she swirled her tongue around him, a breathy noise escaping the back of his throat as he thrust reflexively into her mouth. She took him deep again, working up speed. He squirmed underneath her. She didn't let go of him.

And then he had fisted the fabric of her shirt and was yanking on it—she pulled back and he gasped and shuddered but didn't come. He hadn't wanted to come in her mouth—or he hadn't wanted to do it without warning her. He was blinking, breathing hard, his head tilted back, when she turned toward him, facing him as she pushed up and stood over him—his hand immediately moving to his cock to grip its base—stripping off the shirt and her knickers.

She dropped down and straddled him on her knees, knocking away his hand, his hard, wet cock bobbing against her clit. He looked so hopeless and beautiful, his lips parted, mouth open, watching her. She leaned forward, bracing herself above him, and he tilted his chin up, making his mouth available to her. She kissed his lips.

"You're a good boy," she murmured. "You're doing a good job."

A quick intake of air as he lifted up to kiss her, his mouth hungry for her. His hand was in her hair. He tasted of toothpaste and the pre-come on her tongue.

She kissed him breathless and then pulled away, reaching for his cock. She whispered the lubrication charms herself as she lowered her cunt onto him. Impatient little thrusts from him as she shifted her hips to take him in. He was breathing shallowly, his eyes lowered to watch his cock disappear inside her.

She leaned forward and he propped himself up on his elbows, kissing her while she ground her clit on him, his abs hard against her. She took her time, stifling the urge to wonder if it was good for him too. He kissed her greedily, sloppily, his hands on her thighs.

She fucked him until she had got what she wanted, her hands hard on him as she climaxed, and then she let him grab her hips and hold her still above him, thrusting up into her with desperate purpose until he released with a formless noise. He whimpered and panted and whined and grunted, kissed her face and smoothed back her hair, but didn't say a word.



CHAPTER 15

MONDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2003

Draco was sat, in trousers and a crisp shirt, shined shoes and silver cufflinks, on the green brocade chaise in his dressing room, drinking tea and openly watching her dress for work. Hermione stepped into a pair of lacy knickers, the Persian rug dense and prickly under her feet. He must have anticipated she wouldn't eat breakfast with him. She'd bathed again after last night, and now she was running late.

People get territorial. Granger, you have no idea.

"Am I going to find Theo Nott waiting for me in the Ministry atrium?" asked Hermione, plucking a bra from the lingerie drawer in the black wardrobe.

Draco looked up from her bare breasts, her nipples hard in the chilly morning air, with his brow furrowed, his expression pained. "Must you speak to me of other men *now*? He is who you're thinking of when you're undressed?"

She turned to him, her hands on her hips, and he made a plaintive noise as his gaze flickered between her breasts and her eyes. "I'm thinking of *Theo* because you haven't told me everything. I had to hear you crucioed Flint from him." She put on the bra.

"And now you punish me," said Draco morosely. He cast a wandless multicorfs and her underthings turned Slytherin green.

"You know I don't have to punish you if you're good," said Hermione matter-of-factly, with no doubt in her mind that Draco enjoyed this. She had moved to the dresses she wore to the Ministry.

"Wear the blue, darling. It's nice with your eyes."

Hermione looked to him with her eyebrows raised, waiting.

He began to brief her on his escalating conflict with Flint, and Hermione put on the blue dress. She had the same dress in three colors; she didn't care which color she wore today.

"I think you're safe at the Ministry, but I don't like you being alone in the Alley when I'm inviting people to test me."

Hermione hummed noncommittally. She had decided she was going to let Draco do this. She was going to keep her end of the bargain and believe him until she caught him in a lie. She was going to allow Harry to be an expectant father instead of a tireless fighter in a forever war. She was going to trust that Neville knew what he was doing.

Did she care whether Voldemort's biggest fans got a fair hearing? No, she did not. They weren't planning to give her parents one.

Draco set his teacup and saucer on the chaise and stood to button the back of the dress. She could do it, but she let him. She felt his nimble fingers at the nape of her neck as she held her hair over her shoulder.

"Did Nott annoy you, dear?" he asked, quieter. "I think it's good for him to get out of his manor."

"It was a pleasant afternoon at the bookstore," she said truthfully as he reached for a necklace.

"Yes, *Theo* was nice enough to spend the afternoon looking at books with me," said Hermione, watching Cho and Nott try not to eye each other up and down. "But I'm off to dinner now. Without him."

"Right," said Nott, snapping to. "I'll just see Granger to the floo, make sure she gets off safe. If, erm, if you'll be here a few minutes, Cho—"

"Go on," said Cho. "I don't know how long I'll be here but—it was good seeing you, Hermione!"

"Yes," said Hermione. It seemed like years since she'd seen Cho. "We should grab a cuppa."

And then Nott was hustling her toward the Leaky as fast as he could while pretending not to.

"*Theo*," said Hermione. "I can see myself to the floo if you want to get back to—"

"No, no," said Nott. "Draco will avada me if anything happens to you when I had one job. He really will, Granger."

And then he was pushing her through the door of the Leaky, his hand at her back, and watching her intently as she threw the floo powder and said, "The Burrow."

Hermione stepped into the green flames, picturing Theo Nott turning and sprinting back to Granger & Malfoy and Cho Chang.



"And then he threatened to sue if we killed Hermione's cat! Just straight taking the piss!" said Harry, his eyes bright, his elbows on the table.

It was the usual chaotic Sunday dinner at the Burrow. George currently had tea lights levitating in a rotating halo above Angelina's head. "One will go dark every time she's annoyed with me," he explained. "It's an early detection system."

Angelina threw a roll at him but the lights stayed on as he caught it with a wink.

"Does everyone have something to drink?" called Molly.

"Molly, sit down," said Angelina.

"Maybe Malfoy likes Crookshanks," said Hermione, breaking her new resolution not to gossip about him with Harry and Ron.

"Malfoy?" said Harry, skeptical.

"Crookshanks?" said Ron, incredulous. "Mione, that cat is a menace. He never did anything but scratch and bite me."

"Tell Crooks to watch out, Hermione. Malfoy's going to turn him into potion ingredients," said Ginny, looking up from the separate conversation she'd been having with Susan as Susan pulled a face.

Hermione huffed out a laugh. She wouldn't tell them she'd recently caught Malfoy whispering nonsense to Crookshanks while he fed Crooks ham and Crooks nipped him. It would sound like she was defending him.

She wouldn't tell them, either, about the way he'd looked at her after they'd cast the wards. The way he'd followed her into the drawing room. The way he'd slowly stepped to her and held her without speaking. Those were moments . . . Well. Those were moments she wasn't putting up for group discussion.

Hermione had always thought of Malfoy as a coward but there was a way in which he didn't run from what he'd done. He remained in the wizarding world. He didn't cover his Azkaban runes. He bore the Mark unadulterated. He didn't break eye contact when she told him about her healing mastery. He didn't turn his back when she froze. He didn't try to jolly her out of it, didn't try to divert her. He didn't make it about him—telling her how bad he felt until she absolved him or sneering until she lashed out and hurt him. He just stayed with her and didn't look away.

"Good Godric! Are we back at Hogwarts? I can't walk the halls alone or the Slytherins will jump me?"
"Tell me about it. The Puffs were the worst, eh?" He seemed to shudder. "Brutal when they ganged up on you."

Hermione turned to stare at him. "The *Puffs*? What did you do to hack off the Puffs?"

"Hm?" Nott looked surprised to be drawn out of his reverie. "Oh, I suppose I got myself shagged by some of the wrong—Well, it doesn't matter. People get territorial!" He smiled blandly at her.

"You don't say." Hermione's look was pointed.

The smile dropped from Nott's face so suddenly it sent a chill down Hermione's back, but his voice was easy. "Granger, you have *no idea*. Sending me is Draco giving you space."

"Don't you have your own match to annoy?" she asked nastily.

"Exempted," said Nott briskly. "The Ministry thinks I'm mentally unstable."

"But they made me marry *Malfoy* after he'd been to Azkaban?" The outrage this sparked felt neat and clean, and Hermione clung to it amid the muddy unease.

"That's what Draco said!" said Nott, smiling happily. "You two are just alike!"

Hermione glared at him. "We could not be more dis—"

"Smart, competitive, *intense*—" he said, raising his eyebrows at her expression. "*Fueled by anger*—"

"All right, all right," she said, shaking her head.

Nott casually took an extra step to block the path of a passerby veering too close. "Draco says you're transferring to International Magic—"

"Malfoy talks about me?"

"When hasn't he?" Nott laughed.

"What?" Hermione looked sharply over at him, but nothing in his manner said he was taking the piss.

"Top of the class, Harry Potter's best girl, the first muggleborn witch he'd ever met—" Nott glanced over at her, a naughty grin on his face. "You think Draco wasn't a *little* obsessed?"

"What?"

"Oh, we're here!"

And then Nott was opening the door, holding it for her, ushering her in with his hand at the small of her back. *These fucking Slytherins . . .*

"Hermione!" called the bookstore manager. "You're back—And you brought your solicitor?"

"Henry!" sang out Nott from behind her. "Just spending some personal time with my favorite client! What's good in new releases?"

Hermione watched, bemused, as Nott glad-handed his way through the booksellers, picking up whatever they recommended to nod sagely over the flap copy and ask detailed questions.

She pursed her lips. Maybe Malfoy wasn't the only Slytherin who hadn't had a chance to contribute . . .

Four hours later, Nott was sprawled over an armchair, drinking tea and nearing the end of a novel, when Hermione informed him that she was going to dinner at the Burrow and he could see her to the floo and then fuck off.

"Right!" said Nott, unfolding himself from the chair to gather his purchases, seemingly with no animosity for the afternoon he'd spent there while she went through publishers' catalogues with the staff. She wondered if he was going home to Nott Manor to eat dinner alone. She considered that Draco was probably eating dinner alone at Malfoy Manor. Why was she thinking about this?

She turned to see Cho Chang approaching, beginning to wave, just as Nott straightened to his full height, his books in hand.

"Oh," said Nott, before she could greet the Ravenclaw. "Cho. You're here."

He sounded . . . nervous? Hermione glanced back at him. His eyes were locked on Cho.

She heard Ginny's voice in her head: *He let Cho tie him up—*

Cho looked between them. "Hiya, Hermione. Theo. You two are here . . . together?"

"Yes," said Nott quickly. "Granger and I are friends now. Married to my mate and all."

Cho raised her eyebrows. Of course she'd seen the headlines.

"I've got this all wrong," he muttered as she held her hair and he fastened the goblin-wrought links around her neck, his fingers warm on her skin. "You should be in gold, not silver. We need to visit the vaults."

"He seemed surprised to see Cho," said Hermione, and she felt Draco pause. She released her hair and turned toward him. They were standing close together now. He smelled like citrus and cloves and tea.

"Theo saw Chang?" he said, his face tense. He straightened the necklace, his fingertips on her clavicle.

"She's back from Muggle London. Ginny said last night she talked to her at the Ministry reception. Apparently, she married a muggle after the war, some kind of athlete. She was always so sporty—"

Draco snorted. He'd settled his hands on her hips. "Sporty? She was a damned good flyer. Half the Slytherin team fancied her."

"Oh?" said Hermione, her eyebrow raised. (Why? She most definitely didn't want to quiz him on his Hogwarts conquests.)

Draco smiled, watching her face. "Wouldn't cast a tempus for me, love. Only had eyes for Diggory and then the Chosen One. Then we all had to watch Potter miss the snitch with her."

"She wasn't over Cedric!" said Hermione, offended on both Harry's and Cho's accounts.

"Just Theo's type," said Draco wearily. "He loves to be cried on. But she never stayed for long. She'd use him for a safe shag and then move on. Gutted him every time."

He let Cho tie him up.

She thought about tying Draco up. Securing his wrists while he gave her that helpless stare she'd seen last night, his lips parted.

She hardly needed to, though, did she? She only had to tell him to get on his knees, and he did. Threaten him with a silencio, and he did not speak. Bat away his hands, and he did not touch. A good boy.

She rather liked him being able to use his hands, though. Most times, she didn't even mind all the nonsense he whispered while he did.

She'd unconsciously placed her hand on his abdomen, hard and warm under the thin cotton of his shirt. She was looking at his beautiful mouth.

She blinked and said, "Well, she's divorced and working in Games and Sports now. She and Ginny had a lot to catch up on."

Draco frowned.

"And Nott may have doubled back to see her at the bookstore after he dropped me at the floo."

"Oh, bollocks," said Draco, throwing back his head. "He needs to stick with Charlie."

Hermione found herself stroking his stomach with her thumb, suppressing a smile.

"Listen," she said, and he looked at her. "Tell Nott to apply to Mysteries. He's going to waste, doing your little chores."

"My little chores," repeated Draco, amused. "Yes, Mrs. Malfoy." He was smiling fondly as he watched her mouth.

"And invite George over."

He met her eyes, surprised. "George Weasley?"

"He heard about your potions lab from Harry and Ron, and he wants to use it. Maybe you can brew something *legal* with him for the store, since you're out of the veritaserum business."

Draco didn't fight a wicked grin. "Yes, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Good," she said decisively, these items checked off her mental to-do list.

"Am I?" he murmured, staring at her mouth. "Now that I've agreed to your little chores, have I been good enough for a kiss?"

"Draco," she said solemnly, her eyebrows raised. "I'm wearing Slytherin green knickers."

"So you're saying I've been *very* good," he purred. He was grinning, his fingers tightening on her waist.

"I don't think that's what I'm saying at all."

She was shaking her head but he was lowering his mouth to hers and she was lifting her chin, her lips parted, her eyes falling closed. His tongue tasted like sugar and tea, and his hands gripped her hard enough that she could still feel them on her when she left for the Ministry.



Longbottom had been an irresistibly easy target when they were at school—disheveled, distressed, and readily reduced to tears. But now Longbottom was taller than Draco and broader at the shoulder, and he exuded a quiet calm that Draco knew Pansy found soothing but that he found extremely menacing. Because he knew Longbottom was a killer, and the man clearly had no qualms about it. (Pansy clearly had no qualms about it either, but that was Pansy.) He'd also been able to fuck Pansy into serenity—something Draco had never once accomplished and didn't know was possible.

Draco had been groomed by killers who were insane, theatrical, insecure—killers who enjoyed rape and torture. He'd been to prison. He'd been to boarding school. His senses were finely attuned to power and threat. Longbottom was far from the scariest person Draco had known, but he might prove among the more dangerous. He was discrete and willing to wait. He didn't rush in and make himself known. He would not burn himself out or give himself away. He would simply accomplish his goals.

The revivalists, as far as Draco could tell, were still oblivious to Longbottom as anything other than a niche arms dealer. The old guard were still running things—still obsessed with who everyone's father had been, too sexist to pay attention to what Pansy did with her money and connections, too blinkered to see that the Sword of Gryffindor could also be a butcher. But Draco had spent enough time in Narcissa's rose gardens to know that people who grew things killed anything that encroached on what they wanted to live.

Draco met Longbottom mid-morning in a park in Muggle London, on the pea gravel path by a pond dotted with lily pads and waterfowl. He noted Pansy's effect—the black bespoke suit, muggle watch, Parkinson cufflinks. Longbottom moved as though well-muscled, comfortable in his own skin. He did not wear a signet ring—his nails unmanicured, his hands scarred by the plants he worked with.

"Malfoy," he said, his voice mild.

"Longbottom."

Longbottom waited. They were stood side by side, ostensibly gazing at the pond.

Draco nodded. "Right. Alastair Avery and his revivalists have become bothersome to me. If you are interested, I will supply information, funding—whatever you need."

"Intriguing," said Longbottom, watching the swans. "But I won't be used as a cat's paw to assassinate your rivals." He looked over at Draco, his eyes sharp.

"Understood," said Draco quickly, his shoulders now tilted toward the other man as he assessed his reaction. He would not have long to make his case. "But that is not the situation. I no longer have any allegiance to purist ideologies. If anything, I would like to prevent Avery from selling my father on any more lost causes. No, it's my wife's career I wish to advance—"

"And you think, once you have advanced Hermione, she will promote Malfoy interests?" said Longbottom darkly.

"Merlin, no," laughed Draco. "You went to school with her. You know it's impossible to tell her what to do." He cocked a sardonic eyebrow at Longbottom. "No, at the end of the day, I'm but a simple Slytherin: ambitious, pragmatic." He watched the squabbling ducks. "With my own future gone, my ambition now belongs to my wife. Avery is an obstacle in her path—one that will become an existential threat if his movement has its way."

"And does Avery understand you to be in conflict?"

He heaved a shuddering sigh, sick with relief.

He could smell her, could feel her magic, could sense the warmth emanating from where she lay curled on her side of the bed. He was suddenly freezing, chilled through like he was back in Azkaban.

He shed his clothes as quickly as he could, leaving them strewn on the rug as he crossed to his side of the bed and slid into the sheets, and then he was on her—lined up behind her, his arm pulling her against him as tightly as he could get her, his chin over her shoulder as he breathed her in. He was so cold, and she was so warm. She smelled like ink and shampoo and some kind of skin cream.

A disgruntled noise as she woke. "Malfoy?" Her voice tired, weak.

"Draco, dear. It's Draco," he murmured, kissing her ear.

"Draco . . ." Yes, she was turning toward him. Half-asleep. "You reek."

"Do I, dear?" He kissed her face, light pecks. His hand roving over her stomach. He couldn't stop himself. She was so soft and warm. She wasn't pushing him away yet.

She was nearly on her back now, her shoulder digging into his chest as she turned to look up at him with half-lidded eyes. "Like firewhisky and cigarettes and . . . dark magic. Where have you been?"

"I'll tell you in the morning, love. I'm back now." She wasn't pushing him away? He carefully placed a kiss on her lips.

She didn't hit him.

He let his hand roam over her hip, down her thigh. He shouldn't. He couldn't stop.

Her eyes fell closed as she sighed. "Did you do something terrible, Draco?"

He shivered. "Don't I always, love?"

He kissed her again and her mouth opened and then they were kissing, really kissing, as she rolled toward him and his hands moved all over her. He was on top of her, kissing her, kissing her throat, pushing her shirt up. He was working his way down her, and then he was pulling off her pyjamas, her knickers, he was kissing her thighs, and then his face was buried in her cunt, where he might finally get warm enough.



Hermione stepped out of the floo into the shouting and cooking smells of the Leaky early afternoon rush and was surprised to see Theo Nott, in velvet and tweed and a muggle gold watch, push up from a chair near the hearth. She looked up at him as he elbowed past the knots of people stood in his path and fell into step with her.

"Granger," he said, looking down with a smile, his thickly lashed eyes sparkling, his hair perfectly mussed.

"Nott," she said warily.

He reached a long arm past her and caught the door, holding it open for her as she stepped through. Then he was back beside her as they entered the crowded Alley, hands in his pockets.

"Where are we headed today?" he asked, bending toward her to be heard.

"I'm going to the bookstore," said Hermione testily.

"Brilliant!" Nott was all smiles as he straightened. "They'll be happy to see me again."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, thinking back to Malfoy's furtive looks at breakfast. "Nott, if Malfoy has sent you to keep tabs on me—"

"Not you, love!" Nott flapped a hand to his chest, as though to emphasize how heartfelt this protest was. "It's just that he *may* have crucioed Flint last night—Did he tell you? No?—and *now*—"

"Nott! Whatever Malfoy has *failed to mention*—" She lowered her voice as she noticed nearby heads turning at her husband's name. "I can protect myself—"

"I know, I know, love! It's not *you*." His hand was at her back as she stepped off the curb. "It's just poor form for Draco to let Flint think you're on your own—"

This was . . . true. Draco had seen from Voldemort what begging got you—more torture. And he knew exactly how much the Order hated him. The beatings when he was arrested and then again when he was interrogated would have cleared up any misconceptions he had there. He'd gone to trial expecting a life sentence and had not sought the mercy he knew wasn't coming. He'd spent his time in the cage starving, cold, sleep-deprived, and in pain—his injuries intentionally poorly healed—and what he had felt, well, it certainly wasn't remorse. Fear, anger, resentment—yes. He hated everything he had done. He hated everyone who had made him do it. He hated everyone who judged him for it now. He'd sneered at the Gryffindors while they defended him, stared at his hands while his mother pled his case. He'd cycled endlessly between furious and frightened and relieved and numb when his sentence was handed down. It had been exhausting, nearly unbearable. It was meant to be over, and he still wasn't sure he could bear it.

And, once he was sentenced, no one wanted to hear from Draco Malfoy. Draco had read some fanciful accounts of the apology tour he'd supposedly conducted upon his release, and none of it was true. He'd gathered the muggles had some quaint ideas about rehabilitation that had made their way to *Witch Weekly's* more romantic writers, but he'd penned no letters, made no grand statements, expressed no regrets. He'd simply been dumped into his ruined home, with a mother well-bred enough to sob only behind closed doors, and moldered there.

Now he sneered at Avery. "Do I need to pull up my sleeve and show you the Mark Voldemort gave me like you're one of the fourteen-year-olds you have in the foyer? We love a child soldier, don't we?"

Avery waved him off with a sour expression. "Are you here to join the movement or criticize it?"

"So thin-skinned?" said Draco. "I'm here to ally with you, Avery. You will have the Noble House of Malfoy on your side. And, in exchange, you will help to strengthen House Malfoy's position for our mutual benefit. To start, we want Mrs. Malfoy in International Magic. You'll have to vote her in."

Draco sat back and drank his firewhisky, waiting for Avery to make the decision he knew he would make.



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2003

It was past two before Draco got back to the Manor. He stepped out of the main floo, the hard leather soles of his boots scraping against the hearth stone before he reached the rug, and walked quietly through the cold, dark halls. Scanning doors and windows, reaching out for any flickers from the wards. He passed the drawing room, the dining room.

He thought of all the boys at Avery Manor.

He thought of his wife screaming on the floor.

He thought of his younger self stood in that room.

He climbed the stairs, past the sleeping paintings. More halls, more bad memories. He was glad his mother was not here. Maybe his wife wasn't the only one who didn't want to see her right now.

He slipped inside the doors to their suites, cut across the shared sitting room to his doors. A spike of fear, as he opened them, that she wouldn't be there.

Of course she wouldn't.

She was at Potter's now. The Weasley shack. A hotel in Muggle London. Wouldn't she rather be anywhere than here? He'd been lying to himself, telling himself she could get past the past. Tonight had been a reminder: No one ever got past the past.

He dropped his cloak as he walked down his hallway, stepped out of his shoes. Could he—yes, he felt traces of her magic. Remnants from the past week?

Was she here? He crept down the hall in stocking feet.

Yes.

"Avery believes House Malfoy is using my wife as an asset within the Ministry," said Draco. "I am assisting in his recruitment efforts in exchange for his lot voting her way. Now I plan to hex them in the back before they can betray her."

"Yes," said Longbottom, "a simple Slytherin. And you expect me to help—why?"

Draco paused, a sigh escaping him. "Because we were both just boys, and I've seen the boys Avery is recruiting now—that *I'll* be helping to recruit now. They think it was all very *glamorous*." His face had twisted into a sneer. He looked out at the murky pond. "The revivalist movement can never be allowed to get off the ground. Shacklebolt has underestimated the depth of this rot. He doesn't have the tools to dig it out. It's down to people who will do what has to be done." He took a deep breath, exhaled it out. "You're good at what you do, Longbottom. And I'm good at being a cowardly traitor." His voice was bitter.

"So you will tell me where and when, and I will have people standing by for a controlled burn."

"Yes." Draco nodded. Yes, this was what he wanted. He wanted the revivalist movement gone.

"And what have you told Hermione?"

"That I'll sort out Avery with you, if you'll agree," said Draco. He turned to Longbottom, letting the defenses fall from his face. "I tell her the truth."

"Then that would be a first."

Draco froze, a chill running down his back at the bite in Longbottom's words.

Longbottom's face was stony. "I know how you treated Pansy."

Draco was holding his breath. He had forgotten himself with the wrong man.

He lifted his chin. He would have to face this. He would have to tell the truth. It wasn't hard to find in this case, only to say. He looked at Longbottom's sharp eyes, his set jaw. Draco would have to say it. "I behaved badly. I hurt Pansy in ways she didn't deserve. She has been better to me than I deserve." He was blinking. He swallowed. The pressure in his throat was choking him.

Longbottom's expression was neutral, his anger already hidden away. "Tell that to Pansy, not me."

"I will." Draco nodded, looked at the pea gravel under his feet. He didn't want to revisit that past. But the past wasn't past, was it? Not for any of them. "It's different now. I don't treat my wife that way. She has my loyalty, Longbottom."

"And what has Hermione done to get it?" asked Longbottom quietly.

Draco looked up, meeting his eyes. The calmness there was punishing, demanding. Draco would have to tell the truth about this, too. He took a breath, his jaw shifting. "She looks at me like I'm a real person," he said, miserable. Then he looked away.

He could feel Longbottom studying him, his eyes lingering on his face. "All right," he said eventually. "All right."



Draco went home and wrote Pansy a letter. A letter so she couldn't wave him off when he started to speak. So she could reread it as many times as she wanted. So Longbottom would have proof he'd kept his word. So he didn't have to face her. He was still a coward after all.



The fire flashed green and Theo stepped from the floo to find Draco slouched on the settee, listlessly paging through a potions journal, the rest of the afternoon post in a pile on the low table before him. Draco looked up.

"What's the matter, then?" he said, seeing Theo's face. He patted the cushion beside him.

Theo threw himself down with a sigh.

"Is this about Chang?" Draco raised an eyebrow as he set the journal aside.

Theo slowly slumped until his head was on Draco's shoulder, the rest of him a tangle of arms and knees. "She's already matched to Wood," he said, his voice glum.

"Poor little slut," said Draco kindly.

"That I am," murmured Theo.

"What's wrong with Charlie, then?" asked Draco.

"I fancy him," said Theo softly. "And he's nice to me."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Draco.

They sat that way for a while, their heads together, their breathing synchronizing.

Finally, Draco spoke. "Mrs. Malfoy says you're to apply for a position in Mysteries. Apparently, I'm letting you go to waste."

Theo huffed a weak laugh. "Do you think this is how Potter and Weaselbee felt?"

Draco nodded slowly. "Except stupider and less attractive. Financially destitute. Infrequently bathed—"

"C'mon, Potter was cute," said Theo.

Draco groaned. "Not this again."

"He was," said Theo, and Draco shouldered him off.

"If you fancy an unmade bed—"

Theo let his head loll against the back of the settee, smirking at Draco's long-suffering expression.

"Don't tell me now you—"

"No," laughed Theo. "When would I have done? Weasley was all over him."

"If only they'd worked out how to suck each other's cocks and left the rest of us in peace," muttered Draco. "He's finally knocked up the Weaselette, by the way. They'll have a litter."

"And just how competitive is Granger?" asked Theo slyly.

Draco snorted. "Not *that* competitive. She came home from the announcement dinner proper gutted to be stuck with me."

"Poor little slut," said Theo, smiling sadly.

"I asked her for an heir week before last." Draco looked over at him. "Now I'm under a five-year ban."

Theo burst out laughing. "Oh, mate—"

"We were in negotiations!" said Draco defensively. "They're ongoing."

"So you've got a pureblood marriage after all."

"Hardly. If it were Astoria, I'd only have to buy another holiday villa. I had to agree to tell her the truth just to get her into bed."

Theo grimaced. "So you've told her you're in love with her?"

"I'm not—" Draco's face twisted up. "That's not—" He stared at Theo.

Theo raised his eyebrows.

"That's not . . . Is *that* what this is?" Draco looked furious, his jaw flexing. "No. Fuck."

Theo shrugged, suppressing a smile.

"I'm not telling her that." Draco shook his head, his face grim. "No, I'm not saying that."



Theo was in Charlie's bed when the door to the cottage opened and Charlie pushed through in work clothes and heavy boots.

Theo had his shirt open and his cock out—it could have been awkward.

each other as he passed. He looked down his nose at them, the corner of his mouth twitching into the barest hint of a sneer. He had underestimated his appeal.

The men were congregated in a snooker and cards room in the back of the manor. Draco stepped inside, past the boys lingering against the walls, and saw familiar Slytherin faces among the wizards stood in clusters by the gaming tables. Here were the players—older, better dressed, in conservatively cut robes and heirloom jewelry. Snake tie pins and goblin-wrought rings. They shook hands and clapped one another on the back, leaned in to share confidences and trade friendly insults.

Draco drew immediately and hit Marcus Flint with a cruciatus curse.

The unregistered wand fought him for only a second before it crackled to life, the strength of his magic overpowering its objections.

Red lightning and Flint collapsed with an ear-shattering scream, writhing on the ground as his body broke and re broke in a cascading avalanche of pain.

Wizards jumped back with shouts, drinks spilling. Wands raised and then half-lowered when they saw Draco. Confused, angry stares. Querulous demands.

Draco kept his wand extended, holding Flint there.

Avery was hurrying toward him.

Draco looked to the boys watching open-mouthed and trembling as Flint wailed and convulsed. The younger ones had probably never seen it before. They'd never been crucioed by Voldemort. By Bella. By the Carrows. They'd never watched their classmates be tortured and carved up on their drawing room floor. It had just been a story to them.

"The trick, gentlemen," Draco called out, "is to really *feel* the hate." He smiled nastily. "And I do."

Avery was nearly to him.

Draco lowered his wand, releasing Flint.

"Avery," he said loudly. "I owed Marcus that one. Now let's talk next steps, shall we?"

Avery hustled Draco into a back office, waving to the other men in a manner meant to convey that everything was fine. But Draco could hear the nervous chatter, had seen Pucey kneeling on the rug by Flint's side. The boys were spreading the word: Draco Malfoy was back, and he was dangerous.

"Really, Draco," said Avery, handing him a tumbler of firewhisky as they took their respective seats on either side of Avery's desk. Draco eyed the Death Eater paraphernalia behind glass in the curio cabinet to Avery's rear as he worked his cufflink back into his shirtsleeve. He wondered how Avery Manor would fare in a raid. "We're trying to avoid that kind of infighting this time."

"Marcus sent the Ministry to my *estate*," said Draco. "Do you have any idea what the aurors would have found if my witch hadn't tipped me off?"

"The mudblood," said Avery, surprised.

"My wife," said Draco, with a cock of his head and a tight-lipped, facetious smile that could imply censure for either Avery or Shacklebolt. "I keep telling you, Avery, that Lucius wants our own asset inside the Ministry."

"She's loyal to you." Avery's expression was skeptical as he leaned back in his chair. "Does she know you're here tonight?"

"Of course not," said Draco. "She thinks I'm redeemable."

"She *thinks* you're her pet," said Avery snidely.

"And I like to be stroked and fed treats," drawled Draco, letting his eyes go dead as he held Avery's gaze. "You can lecture me about who keeps my bed warm when you've felt the chill of Azkaban for longer than a visit. For now, Lucius has his asset and our compliance with Shacklebolt's Act helps to obscure my true aims."

"Which are?" asked Avery sharply.

"The same as yours, I'd warrant," said Draco. "To remove the Minister and restore my house to power. Peacefully or . . . otherwise."

"And the Dark Lord's ideals?"

Draco snorted. "You have to ask? I've never renounced them."



SATURDAY OCTOBER 4, 2003

His wife was still gone when he threw the floo powder and stepped into the fireplace. Now Draco stepped out into the entrance hall of Avery Manor, wiping soot from the shoulder of his cloak while he scanned his surroundings. Typical for a pureblood manor—smaller than his own but showily furnished with peacock feathers and too much silver. And, tonight, milling underlings. The decision-makers would be further inside.

A human majordomo quickly separated himself from a group of men and stepped to Draco. "Sir—" His wand was drawn but still at his side. "This is a private gathering."

Draco flung back his cloak, briskly removed a cufflink, and pulled up his sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark. "Tell your masters Draco Malfoy is here."

The man had stiffened at first sight of the Mark. Now he turned and nodded to a wide-eyed teenage boy, who darted away.

Draco pocketed his cufflink and followed down a hallway lined by gossiping portraits and young lackeys trading glances. The next door was manned by an older teen and Draco flashed the Dark Mark with a perfunctory crispness, the boy giving him a sharp, nervous nod, his eyes sweeping to the Azkaban runes.

Draco—
Voldemort—
Azkaban—
Malfoy—

He could hear the whispers spreading.

Draco strode through a series of doorways wearing Death Eater black, his hair and signet rings catching the lamplight, his chin held high.

Vance Crabbe might say he'd proved a disappointment to his father's generation, but, seeing the boys here tonight, Draco knew in an instant that his legend had only grown and twisted in the Slytherin common room in his time away from society. The pureblood prince who had lived with Voldemort, who had taken the Mark by the Dark Lord's hand, who had attempted to kill his own headmaster, who had survived Azkaban—with Voldemort's death, he had become the last and youngest of a cohort that could never be recreated, a cohort that sounded impossibly hardcore to a new purist youth raised on war stories and outlawed propaganda. For every Gryffindor who believed his reluctance had been exaggerated at his trial, Draco now understood, there was a Slytherin who insisted it had been.

Reading these boys' faces, Draco knew he could have his own revivalist youth fan club, a little army of child soldiers to bully and boss around like he was back at school. A few of the older boys may have even been firsties his seventh year. They watched him with shy smiles and thrust-out chests, elbowing

"Oh, are you here?" said Charlie. He let the door fall shut behind him and walked over, though the arched doorway, to stand over Theo. His eyes played over Theo's hand on his cock, and he began to wrench off his boots.

Theo looked up at him. Bit his lip. Let him watch. Charlie snorted a laugh and pulled off his jumper. He climbed on top of Theo, all rangy muscle, the burn scar showing above the neckline of his henley, and Theo let himself slide down, let his hands drift up, let Charlie push his wrists to the pillow. His skin was cool from outdoors, his curls windblown.

"I have a watch just like that," he said, nodding to the left of Theo's head.

"Yeah?" Theo's lips were open. He was gazing up, watching Charlie's freckled face. Would Charlie hit him now? Throw him out?

"Haven't seen it in a while." He was smiling faintly.

"You should keep better track of your things," said Theo lightly.

Charlie shrugged, shifting so he was on his side beside Theo, head propped on his hand. Theo turned his face to him, and Charlie's free hand dropped to Theo's cock, taking firm hold of it. "Things have a way of coming and going until they're ready to be found. I'm not fussed."

Theo sucked in a breath as Charlie's thumb rubbed across the head of his cock, slick with pre-come. "The person who gave it to you won't be cross you lost it?"

Charlie grinned, raised his hand to lick his thumb. "I don't really care what other people think about what I do with my things."

"Right," said Theo, his gaze flicking between Charlie's mouth and his eyes. He was breathing shallowly. Why did he feel confused? "What if . . ." He looked at Charlie's parted lips, his hazel eyes. "What if people think your things aren't right for you?"

Charlie's grin didn't falter. "I don't really care what other people think at all."

Charlie leaned in and kissed Theo while he reached down and stroked Theo's cock. Theo shivered with pleasure. Why did he feel light-headed? But, then, why did he feel anything he felt? Theo didn't always know. It was easier to tell what other people wanted than what he wanted. Other people told you, if you paid attention. Theo always knew what Draco wanted to hear, what would make Pansy laugh, when a girl would like a loverboy, when it was time to get mean. If he paid attention to his own body, it told him that safety was a trap, that pain meant someone cared, that it was better if people couldn't tell his truths from his lies, that people only wanted him if they could use him, that he had to leave before he got left. Was this why he had fallen for Charlie—because Charlie felt like safety that wouldn't trap him?

All Theo knew was, right now, it felt like Charlie wanted him, and Theo wanted that more than anything. He closed his eyes and sank into the moment, Charlie's warm tongue, rough hand. Charlie breathing into him, the pillow soft behind his head. Charlie smelled like straw and animals and cold wind and smoke.

"Hey," said Charlie, pulling back, and Theo opened his eyes. Charlie's thumb moved over the head of his cock. "You want to do this and then go play with fire?"

Suddenly Theo was grinning, his heart soaring. Had anyone ever said something so enticing? "Do I." He was laughing, almost giggling, as he reached for Charlie's belt.

Charlie nodded, a knowing smile on his face. "Yeah you do."



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2003 - WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2003

HERMIONE MALFOY MOVES TO INTERNATIONAL MAGIC
DRACO'S DEATH-EATER TIES REVIVED?: Questions Dog Malfoy Heir
UNRECONCILABLE: Hermione Malfoy Disavows Husband Draco's Politics
PURITY POLITICS: Is There a Place for Both Sides in the Post-War Political Landscape?

WEASLEYS' WIZARD WHEEZES ANNOUNCES NEW ANGEL INVESTOR
GOLDEN GIRL IN GOLD: Hermione Malfoy in This Season's Hottest Jewelry Trend
PARKBOTTOM: Pansy Parkinson Plans the Poshest Pureblood Wedding of the Year
A photograph in The Daily Prophet: Draco Malfoy leaving Azkaban, his cloak billowing behind him as he walks to the apparition point under overcast skies. His head is ducked, his eyes scanning over sharp cheekbones. He looks to his left, his prison runes flashing, and seems to smirk before he twists away.



A photograph in Witch Weekly: Draco Malfoy ushering Hermione Malfoy into Gringotts, the pale skin of his hand stark against her dark robes as he grips her upper arm.



His blood dripped into the hot bathwater as she leaned back against him and he drug his wrist down her inner arm.



A photograph in The Daily Prophet: Hermione Malfoy entering the Wizengamot chamber in expensive black robes, gold and diamonds visible at her throat and earlobes. Her face tenses as she turns, her mouth forming the words "no comment."



Hermione walked into the office on level five to find it full of pink tulips, Draco sat in her guest chair, spinning his wand between ringed fingers. He looked up at her, smirking.

"Congratulations, darling. I hope that door locks."



"Something in the post for you," said Draco, holding out an envelope monogrammed with NBM, his expression guarded.

Hermione came to stand beside his chair, resting her bum on the edge of his desk. His long, bony fingers were at her knee as he watched her open it. She was braced for some sort of scolding but found only well wishes for her time in International Magic.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and slid the stationery back into its envelope.

"What did she say?" asked Draco, his eyes darting between her face and her hands.

Theo slept hard for a few hours and then jerked awake, the alcohol burned off. It was still dark. Charlie was still breathing deep and steady, his arm heavy on Theo. Theo fished his pointy dragonskin shoes out of the bedding, picked up his jacket from the chair, and slipped out of the cottage before Charlie's alarm could sound.

He left the brooch where it was on the bedside table.

He walked toward the portkey point, his hands in his pockets, the gold watch that Charlie hadn't seen in the dark still on his wrist.

He passed the goat pen and stopped, leaned over the fence. "Tell the dragons I belong," he whispered to the rustling animals.

that's what he got for playing thug with Draco. Draco dragging him back in because the Malfoys could never stay away—and he couldn't stay away from Draco.

A Weasley wouldn't want to be associated with the man this witch thought he was. Was that why Charlie hadn't written? But wouldn't he have sent the brooch back in the post, then? Maybe he'd sold it, used the gold to rescue another dragon. (Well, cheers to that—Theo wouldn't mind at all.) Maybe he'd given it away—to some Romanian witch Theo didn't know about. Maybe the brooch had fallen to the floor and Charlie had got up the next morning and kicked it under the bed on his way to not giving a second thought to Theo. (*Charlie kissing him, his work-rough hand warm on Theo's side, their legs tangled.* Theo had given it a second thought and a third and a fourth and a fifth . . .) Maybe Charlie had just kept it because Theo was a thief.

Theo walked to the end of the Alley and there was a stall there, selling portkeys, and Theo had the grand idea to go find out.

He'd bought one of the portkeys and enchanted it with the destination he'd memorized when he'd heard Charlie say it. And now he was here, ready to find out what would happen.

Theo stepped away from the door and scanned the dark rooms around him with a fence's eye. It was all, Theo supposed, what people who didn't grow up in manors meant when they described homes as homey. Worthless, unless it was yours.

Theo left his suit jacket on a chair and moved silently through the arched doorway, toward the bed he knew was in the shadows. Would Charlie have that Romanian witch with him? Another man? Would there be a fight? Would he hurt someone? Or would Charlie just kick him out.

Let's find out.

He looked at the beside table, squinting in the low light. There—the faintest glint. The brooch, right where he'd left it. What did it mean?

He looked to the bed.

Charlie didn't have a witch with him. There wasn't another man. Just Charlie, his loose curls wild across his pillow.

Theo lifted the edge of the quilt and climbed into Charlie's bed, shoes and all.

"Hiya, sweetheart," murmured Charlie. He smelled like cold wind and soap and himself, like he'd bathed right before bed. "The dragons let you reach the wards, hmm?"

"Why? Do they eat strangers?" asked Theo, speaking quietly in the near dark, lying on his side to face Charlie on his.

"All the time," said Charlie. Theo could hear his smile more than see it.

"Maybe they've smelled me on you," said Theo. "Maybe they know I belong."

"Even I can smell the witch on you," said Charlie. "You don't belong with her?"

"No," said Theo quickly. "I don't belong to anyone. I don't have anywhere to be."

"So you came to Romania," said Charlie.

"It was on my way home," said Theo. He reached out for Charlie under the quilt and found bare skin—his hip. "I can make myself useful."

Charlie hummed, considering.

Theo was breathing shallowly, willing Charlie to say he could stay. To say he could suck Charlie's cock and make Charlie happy with him.

"Face the other way," said Charlie.

Theo followed orders, kicking off his shoes under the covers, waiting for Charlie to complain that he had on too many clothes.

Charlie put his arm around him and pulled him tight against him. "It's late, sweetheart," he said near Theo's ear. "You can be useless."

Theo felt a pang of disquiet—then why would Charlie want him here?

But Charlie's arm was warm and muscular and held him firmly; his breathing was calm and even. Theo sank into the mattress and into Charlie, and Charlie pulled him even closer and didn't complain about anything.

"That's between me and Narcissa," said Hermione archly, stealing a glance at the line of his throat, his open collar.

"Is it about me?" asked Draco, the absolute narcissist.

Hermione coolly looked him up and down. "My lips are sealed," she said.

He nearly gasped in outrage. Then he was standing, grabbing the backs of her thighs, hitching her up onto the desk. "We'll see about that," he growled.

She was pressing her lips together, trying not to laugh, as he leaned in.



A photograph in Wizarding World News: Malfoy and Nott, recognizable by their hair though the collars of their overcoats are turned up, their backs to the camera as they crowd a tight doorway. Nott's hand raises to Malfoy's shoulder blade, his signet ring visible, and Draco looks over his shoulder, his eyes sharp and distrustful, before he opens the door and they slip inside.



Hermione followed the sound of laughter—loud, boyish—deeper into the dungeons lab to find Draco, Theo, and George streaked purple, one of the cauldrons showing all the signs of having recently boiled over. George was making notations on a piece of parchment, a wild grin on his face, rakish with his missing ear, while Draco and Theo jostled and elbowed each other, slipping on the wet stone floor, Theo trying to mop up the workspace while Draco salvaged unsoaked ingredients. Draco hiccupped for two days afterwards, refusing to reveal what they'd been working on.



A photograph in The Daily Prophet: Malfoy and Pucey exiting a late-night private club known to cater to purebloods, wearing conservatively cut robes and Slytherin tie pins. Pucey looks to either side but Malfoy stares down the cameraman, his lip curled. His mouth forms the words "fuck you." He draws his wand as the photo goes dark.



He was propped up on his elbow, the early morning light making the edges of his rumpled white-blond hair glow like a halo as he leaned down to kiss her. "Beautiful," he murmured against her lips, his fingers sliding across her stomach. "My beautiful, beautiful wife."



Draco pulled her onto his lap, behind his desk. "Let me go through the shell corporations with you, darling," he said as he flipped open a ledger, his hand squeezing her thigh through the thin wool of her skirt.



Draco slouched in the dark, smoky game room and took a drag off the muggle cigarette—the purebloods, such predictable hypocrites, obsessed with their muggle novelties. The others were debating the imaginary social order they'd establish once they'd purged the government and top industrial posts of undesirables, and he was back where he didn't want to be, listening to this tedious bullshit. He was meant to be convincing them he was a stalwart, but he could barely be bothered. The true believers who hated him for lowering his wand would never be won over, and the rest wanted his name and money enough to overlook his disgruntlement.

Draco sipped his firewhisky and considered letting himself get drunk and surly. What he really wanted to do was go home and fuck his wife. He tuned out the others, remembering leaning against the wardrobe that morning, asking who she was meeting with that day and then trailing his fingertips along her breasts until her nipples hardened while she answered. "Malcolm MacDougal hates Lucius," he'd told her. "Entwhistle has a gambling problem, which lobbyists know to exploit. Sallow talks a progressive game but donates to purist causes." She'd nodded, taking this in, while he ran his thumbs over her peaked nipples. Then he'd sent her to work with a chaste kiss on the cheek.

He'd discovered he could be the one to keep her busy. Arguing, bargaining, bringing her new information, aggressively engaging with her ideas—if he kept her intellectually entertained, he could touch her almost as much as he wanted. If he pleased her, she would let him stroke and kiss and gently bite. If he excited her, he could be fingerfucking her before the disagreement was over. The more he touched her, the more responsive she got.

But when she was bored by him, she became irritated with him, and then she brushed his hands away. A sigh of fond annoyance or enraged exasperation was acceptable; a sigh because she had begun to find him and his arguments tiresome—that was *not*. She would be sighing *loudly* if she were here now. Draco smirked, imagining the look of disgust on her face as she tore apart these purist fantasies on a logistical basis alone.

"I'm sure you're happy to hear it, Malfoy," said Grantham Montague—Graham's father.

"How's that?" said Draco, who hadn't the slightest idea what Montague had been saying.

"You'll be able to get that mudblood out of your house," said Montague with a chuckle.

Draco exhaled, cigarette smoke wreathing his head. "And why would I want to do that?" he drawled, dead-eyed.

Laughter—some nervous, some knowing—as the other men exchanged glances.



Draco was in Avery's ballroom, in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, dueling with the child soldiers. Draco limited himself to stinging hexes, venomous snakes, and icy water, but otherwise didn't hold back. It scared away the less certain boys and, unfortunately, endeared him to the bolder ones.



Charlie's wards were child's play to break. Theo was drunk and he was in within minutes, his stomach still twisting from the portkey. He slipped into the warm cottage and locked the door properly behind him. If Charlie was expecting anyone tonight, too bad—they'd never get through Theo's spellwork. But it was late—two hours later in Romania. If Charlie were expecting anyone, they were already here—locked in with Theo now. And they'd probably be quite cross about that. Theo laughed to himself—this felt like a bad idea and a really grand idea at the same time. *Let's find out.*

An hour ago, he'd been drinking absinthe in an underground fight club when he'd felt a hand on his shoulder and then a witch had dropped into his lap. "I know who you are," she'd said.

"Ooh, is it trivia night?" asked Theo. "I know who I am too, so we're tied. What's the capital of Egypt?"

"We could go to yours," she said coyly.

"Not even close, love. It's Cairo."

Her arm was wrapped around his shoulders, her hand on his chest. She smelled strongly of patchouli. A bit on the nose, Theo thought. It was used in lust, money, and fertility spells. If he fell asleep next to her, he'd wake up missing a lock of hair and, nine months later, she'd be suing him for half his estate. Which might be for the best! She might not think so when she saw the Manor, though.

Why hadn't Charlie written him at the Manor? You didn't have to be a grifter to work out that Theo Nott lived in Nott Manor. Charlie could let him know he'd left several thousand galleons' worth of emeralds on a bedside table.

"I've heard *terrible* things about you." The witch leaned in, dark curls around her face—a passing resemblance to Bellatrix. He let her kiss him, her tongue cool like she'd been eating ice lollies.

"All true," he said.

"Really?" She was squirming on his lap, trying to get him hard. His hands had found her hip and her knee. "I heard you and Draco Malfoy are auctioning off parts of the Golden Girl."

"And you thought, 'That could be me,'" said Theo, smiling blandly.

"I heard the Ministry didn't match you because you murdered your last intended."

"And you want to be next," said Theo, curious who he was meant to have married.

She pressed herself to him, her full breasts against his chest, her plush arse on his thigh. "You wouldn't hurt me," she cooed.

Theo shrugged, his fingers playing over the tender skin of her inner knee. "Accidents happen."

Her hand moved toward his belt, her voice gone sultry. "I heard you met Voldemort when he was at Malfoy Manor. I heard you saw Nagini eat undesirables and touched Malfoy's Dark Mark. I heard a new dark lord is coming and—"

"And you reckon I can get you an invite to the orgy?" asked Theo, letting all the good will drop from his face. "You reckon a Death Eater will make a great father?"

She giggled, not nearly as nervous as she should be. "Nothing so serious! What I reckoned was we'd fuck in the toilets."

Theo pulled back and studied her, his eyes heavy-lidded. "How could I say no to that?"

She grinned.

He jerked his chin for her to get up. "Give me a minute, love. I've got to see a man about a fight."

She pouted, but she took the seat next to his and said, "I'll be right here."

Theo nodded. Then he stood, shot the rest of the absinthe, and walked away.

Outside, he breathed in the damp air—clean and cool compared to the club, but all he could smell was absinthe and patchouli. Lamplight gleamed on slick cobblestone and the ambient light from the city beyond created a haze at the horizon—the night both dark and light.

Theo walked down the street, his hands in his pockets. He liked being out late, drunk under the liminal sky, when everything felt fake. Like this witch, thinking he was his father. A laugh, that. Hilarious. But

His wife's arm linked through his, her hand on his bicep as she leans in to whisper gossip in his ear. Now she's laughing at his response, a mischievous glint to her eye as he smirks. She tugs him down—a quick, impulsive kiss. And then they're greeting the hosts. "Of course we're here," she says. "Draco and I wouldn't miss it."

If he'd been married to Astoria, he'd be attending soirees weekly with her on his arm. He'd be—Salazar—drinking pre-dinner firewhisky with Pucey and Flint this very moment, while Tori and Daph sipped champagne and made Yule plans. Draco felt a pang of nostalgia and shame and anger.

He reached out, ran a finger along the animal's tail. It seemed to sneer at him before it got up and walked away, leapt off the bed.

He sighed.

He wanted to be drunk—horribly, horribly drunk.

He could *feel* the firewhisky hitting him, its warmth spreading through him. So many Slytherin parties—it was like muscle memory. He could feel himself stood smirking, taking the piss with these mates he didn't like overmuch, watching the witches on the settee. Safe and exciting at the same time. He'd make everyone laugh. He'd drink too much. There'd be a fight, a shag, some stupid trouble that wouldn't matter in the morning. He could *feel* how easy and automatic and satisfying it had all once been. And he missed it. Missed being that young and idiotic. Missed thinking it was fun. Now he couldn't even enjoy the memories—tainted as they were by everything that came after, by everything he understood now.

He was angry with the shame of it. Angry at how cheated he felt.

He didn't want to be drinking with Pucey and Flint. Didn't want to be kissing up to Daph so she'd tell Tori to put up with him. Merlin, he really didn't. But he still sometimes missed the life he'd thought he'd have. The life Voldemort had taken from him even before he'd lost the war.

Because if Voldemort had won, Draco would be drinking firewhisky with Pucey and Flint right now, but after he, what? Exterminated a village of muggles? Tortured Ministry functionaries? Held his wife down and carved into her arm? Jockeying for position because one of them would be fed to the snake. Competing to be the one to crucio the other. It would never have been the simple pureblood life Draco was supposed to have in a different world where Voldemort didn't come back.

The future Draco felt cheated out of was a fantasy—but one that had been right in front of him for so much of his childhood. Shameful, to feel so childish now about losing it. Shameful when he knew, looking at his wife's face, at his wife's arm, that it had all been based on bigotry.

He'd had a different fantasy today: warding the Manor with her, making it theirs. He'd told her last night the house was hers. But of course that room would always be Bella's. Of course his home would always still be Voldemort's. His wife would never be happy here. He should give up—take her to France, buy her a new house. Why did he so childishly cling to his childhood home?

He felt hopeless and defeated but he still angrily, selfishly wanted it to be his again. He wanted her to share it with him like he'd imagined his wife would when he was younger.

It's their annual Yule party and he's stood beside her, greeting guests on their way into the Manor's ballroom. She's in Gryffindor red and his gold and diamonds, her hair loose and wild, and she's smiling and happy—the most beautiful woman there. He's holding their little boy—Draco will put him to bed soon, but he gets to make an appearance.

"Be good," he tells the boy, "and we'll go flying tomorrow."

Her head whips toward them. "Oh no—"

"We'll be safe, Mummy!" says his perfect little boy, and Draco smirks at her scowl.

"You've coached him," she accuses.

"I'm going to coach his quidditch team," he tells her. "He'll be a brilliant Slytherin seeker, you'll see."

A dangerous fantasy. He was making himself sick with it. He was making her sick because of it.

Draco did have someplace to be tonight. Someplace he hadn't told her about yet. He felt his low mood darkening. He would tell her. He just . . . didn't want to. She wouldn't like it. She wouldn't trust him. But it had to be done. And he could feel that old pull. The inevitability of what had to be done.

Draco walked through the open door of his wife's office to see her secretary gone home for the evening and Cormac McLaggen leaning over her at her desk, his hand on her shoulder, her expression tense.

"McLaggen," Draco snarled as he advanced on the larger man, "get your hand off my wife before I open your skull."

McLaggen startled, his hand falling from her shoulder as he took a step back.

"Cormac," she said dryly, "you remember Draco Malfoy."

"Malfoy," said McLaggen, lifting his chin. "Just sharing my latest legislation with Hermione." His gaze traveled over Draco's neck. "I didn't realize you were out of Azkaban."

"I'll be going back now that I've caught you pawing at her," said Draco, moving into McLaggen's space.

"Malfoy?" Her tone was chiding. "I have to work here. You're not allowed to dismember my colleagues."

"But I really *want to*, dear." His eyes hadn't left McLaggen's.

"No," she said, but McLaggen was already stepping around Draco, making his way to the door with some speed.

Draco turned to watch him leave, his hand finding the back of her chair as he replaced McLaggen next to her.

He glanced down. "All right, love?"

She didn't look up. "I can't hear you when you loom over me."

He hesitated, a grin breaking across his face. Then he dropped to one knee beside her. He leaned on his elbow and ran a fingertip along her thigh. He looked up at her. "All right, love?"

She reached over and smoothed a platinum lock back from his forehead. "How was your day?"

He smirked up at her. "It's only just started."

Her fingers moved gently through his hair. "Are you going to be good for me?"

"Please, love. I'll be so good."



"Look at me, darling," he said quietly, sat on the edge of the dressing room chaise, gazing down at her.

She looked up obediently—Salazar, it was a fantasy come to life—her big brown eyes, her pale pink lips around his cock. He loved it, but he also kind of hated it.

He twisted her hair up off her neck as her tongue circled him, tilting his head for a better view of his jewelry on her. The pleasure from her warm, wet mouth was rippling through him but he wanted to keep control for a little longer.

"I was right, dear," he murmured. "The gold brings out the flecks in your eyes."

She looked up at him, taking his cock deeper. His heart was beating hard. He was breathing shallowly, his lips parted.

It was mesmerizing, seeing her like this. How many times had he imagined this back in school? His hand in her curls while—

She looked up at him—

No, he couldn't do it.

"Come here, love," he said, dropping her hair and reaching for her. "You can't be on your knees."



She had him on the green leather sofa in the library. He was panting though he wasn't doing any of the work. She was dipping her head down to kiss his neck. Yes—no. She was kissing low, near his collarbone, but she was working her way up—on the right side. She shouldn't be there. He needed her to touch his scars; he needed her to allow the Mark to touch her. (Shameful, he would never admit it aloud, but true.) The Azkaban runes, though—her mouth shouldn't be on them.

"Don't," he said. He was breathing hard. "Stop," he said.

She didn't stop.



A photograph in The Daily Prophet: Malfoy, Graham Montague, and Miles Bletchley in a private box at a Falcons match with several conservative members of the Wizengamot. The others gesture with their cigars, in animated conversation, but Malfoy watches the sky, a mixture of disgust and wistfulness washing across his face as he smokes a cigarette.



"Why hasn't Nott come in?" asked Avery.

"He doesn't play well with others," said Draco, arranging his cards.

"I thought that's all he *did* do," scoffed Graham, glancing at his father. "Nott's a deviant."

"His father was a good man," said Grantham wistfully.

"You've got that backwards," said Draco sharply, looking up. "The man was a sadist."

"And Junior isn't? He's terrorized Knockturn—"

"You've never had a *hobby*?"

"What are you playing at, Malfoy?" said Avery. "Word is you shook the cage before you unlatched the door. We were working with those brokers—"

"Which Nott had to get out of the *brokers*," snapped Draco. "I don't appreciate my social inferiors taking an interest in my household."

Grantham: "Well, now that you know we're involved—"

"Maybe you didn't hear what I just said," said Draco.

Graham: "Fuck you, Malfoy. Your household is a fucking mudblood—"

"Son," said Avery, "a good faith gesture from you would go a long way at the moment. Give us something we can use and rein in Nott—"

"I thought I made this clear from the start, Avery." Draco had sat forward abruptly, his voice gone steely. "You won't find me to be the team player Lucius was. Malfoy Manor will *not* house troops. My mother's *not* to be involved. The witch I'm keeping is off limits to anyone but *me*. And so is Nott. You're getting me and my sparkling personality. My home life *won't* be disrupted this time round."

"Nott's part of your *home life*?" sneered Graham.

"Yes," said Draco.

"You need to get your priorities in order," growled the elder Montague.

Draco threw down his cards. "Right now my priority is doing whatever the fuck I please in my own fucking house. Would you like to know what Voldemort taught me while he was squatting there?"

"Enlighten me," said Grantham Montague with a sour tilt to his head.

"It turns out, Montague, that everyone bleeds the same when a half-blood is feeding them to a snake," said Draco, "and the unforgiveables are *easy* when you're surrounded by imbeciles." And then he crucioed Graham.

She looked at the floor where it met the wall, her head tilted away, her body frozen as he moved to face her. From the corner of her eye, she saw him unclasp his cloak and let it fall to his feet.

She was looking at the floor where it met the wall, her head tilted away, and she could not move. He stepped to her, slow and steady.

She was looking at the floor where it met the wall, her head tilted away, and the tension in her neck felt uncomfortable, unnatural, but she could not move.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. She knew if she pushed him away, if she hit him, he would let her. But she could not move.

He took a deep breath, his chest rising against her, and held her harder as he exhaled.

She leaned her head against his hard collarbone, and he cinched her tighter to him. She closed her eyes and breathed against him.

He stood there with her for a long time.

"Let's have a lie-down, love," he said then, his head against hers.

She nodded and he apparated them to the bedroom. Then he was taking off his shirt and stripping her down to her knickers and urging her into the bed and pulling her to him under the bedclothes. She was lying with her head on his warm chest, her hand splayed over the scars on his left side, his hand on her shoulder as he held her to him, his bare skin against hers. "Just rest, love," he said, smoothing back her hair, breathing in sync with her.



Draco woke to only the flat-faced demon in bed with him, the fire burned down. His wife had left him. Some dreadful dinner party—a birthday gathering for Terry Boot. She'd told him earlier in the day. Had she gone to it? Or was she just gone?

He could check the *avenseguim* on the ring. Maybe he was afraid to.

Seeing his wife's face in the drawing room. The way her whole body locked up in the hall outside. Fucking hell.

Of course she hadn't shown him the scar until he'd forced her.

He rolled over in the cold sheets, listless. It was wrong that he'd been the one to comfort her, but he missed the feeling of her body against him.

It had been such a good day before that. He'd had his Lady Malfoy. Sex in the library the night before and then she'd made her claim on the Manor. He'd teased her about not flying, but he'd liked walking the grounds with her. He'd been able to point out his favorite places, already planning to take her back to spend time (fucking) at them when the weather was warmer. (The sex—holy fuck, he wanted more. Could she say she was indifferent to it? She kissed back, she fucked back—she was as aggressive as he was, when she forgot herself.) He'd kept wanting to take her hand.

But today was the end of that, wasn't it? She'd been too broken to push him away, to strike him like he deserved. But now she'd remember it was him. She'd turn a cold shoulder. She wouldn't touch him again.

She'd—

Fuck—had she already portkeyed to America, Australia, some other place as far from him as she could get? She could run, dare the Ministry to chase her down and snap her wand—

That tore it—Draco scrambled for his wand and cast the homunculus.

She was still in the city. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes and slowly exhaled. He wouldn't go find her. He'd leave her be for once.

Maybe she'd only gone to the dinner party. Draco slumped back against the pillows, the abomination eying him with disdain. He hadn't been invited and wouldn't have wanted to go. (Would he have?)

She looked over and he was watching her, his face suddenly the baleful blank it had been so much of sixth year when she'd stolen looks at him in the Great Hall, in class. He wouldn't argue with her. He wouldn't stop it from happening. (No, he wouldn't, would he?)

He nodded toward the doors. "They're not locked."

Her eyes roamed over his face; she looked him up and down. It was a bad moment. He looked ill, shut down inside. His head ducked, his eyes on her. Like time had not passed. She felt her lip starting to curl into a sneer, the pressure growing in her chest.

She turned away, quick.

Her hand on a doorknob. A last look back at him. He hadn't hung back, like she had expected. He had stepped forward.

She turned back to the door. She opened it and, silently, he followed her through.

Dark except for . . . moonlight. The ceiling was enchanted. The chandelier gone, replaced by a moon, waxing gibbous. The room was full of . . . flowers. Moonflowers, jasmine, gardenias. An indoor night garden of glossy green leaves and white blooms, heavily charmed. A slate path leading to velvet settees, a silver tea service.

Hermione took it in and then looked to him, her movement quick, twitchy, as though she might catch him out.

He was gazing at her, his expression still blank but somehow calmer. Had he expected she would start screaming immediately? Could he still hear her screaming?

"Narcissa is the only one who comes in here," he said. "I bought the plants from Longbottom."

She looked at him a moment longer, then turned back to the garden path. She walked it slowly, to the center of the room, the leather soles of his boots scraping softly behind her. Through the ghost ferns, she could see the fireplace still along the wall, candles clustered around a stopped clock on its mantle. The leaded windows showed a night sky like the ceiling instead of afternoon sun. Ivy crept up the dark purple walls.

She picked out where she had been held down, but she could no longer see the floor through the greenery. She picked out where she thought he'd been stood. It was harder to orient than she had expected, the room distorted in recollection. She remembered it being larger; the layout wasn't quite right. Her memory was a mix of distinct moments and blurs. It was this room, but it wasn't. It had been her here, but it hadn't.

She didn't actually remember him—not while it was happening. Snatches before and after. She'd always known he'd watched and done nothing, but—but in that moment, it had been only Bellatrix and pain.

Sometimes she wasn't sure what she remembered. She would never pensieve it. She had refused to during Narcissa's and Malfoy's trials.

She looked around, her brow furrowing, her jaw tense. She was clenching her teeth. She could feel the headache.

Malfoy stood just behind her, silent. No excuses. No apologies. No pleas for forgiveness.

He had never made them—not even when he was on trial.

She didn't want to hear them now. There was nothing he could say that would change the past.

There was nothing she could do here now.

She looked around.

She had seen it.

She took a deep breath and nodded.

Then she was walking to the door.

Then she was stood outside, Malfoy quietly shutting the doors behind him.

She looked away, wouldn't meet his eyes. It felt like something was squirming inside her chest, like something was in the base of her throat.

She felt his hand, light but firm, on her back.

Grantham jolted forward, grabbing for his wand as his son screamed, his writhing body toppling his chair, Avery jerking back. "What's the matter with you, Malfoy—"

Draco broke the curse. "Oh, pardon me—is he *under your protection*?" he asked snidely. He sat back, his wand held ready to curse Grantham. "Leave my man be and I'll leave yours."

"Godsdammit, Malfoy—"

Draco looked to Avery. "I'm here to take power on a large scale, not engage in petty purity tests. I've done my time, and I'm not sacrificing *shit*. So quit whingeing about Nott and quit complaining because you can't get my witch's bathwater. I'm not done with her yet."



Parkinson slid her martini glass to the side and ran a black-lacquered fingernail down a page in her leather-bound wedding planner.

"I'll be in white and silver, of course. Longbottom will be in black with black forest green accents, with the boys in black forest green with black accents. Ginny Potter and Lovegood are standing for Longbottom—I'm putting you Gryffindors in gold and Lovegood in bronze. Bronze sounds horrid because it is, but I can't put a Ravenclaw in gold and I've found a lighter tone that coordinates—you'll see. Then forest green for their men and Nott's Weasleys—assuming they're still on, but Nott keeps portkeying to Romania, so. And that's it. Simple!"

"You're dressing the wedding party's dates?" asked Hermione, confused. She took a sip of the white wine Pansy had ordered for her.

Parkinson wrinkled her nose. "Obviously. And no one better *think* of mucking up my group photos with the wrong shoes."

Hermione huffed a laugh. And people thought *she* was bossy.

Hermione considered the possibility that she had Narcissa and Pansy to thank for the fact that Draco was a terrible prat who nonetheless not-so-secretly expected to be told what to do.

(Unlike Harry and Ron and Ginny, who not-so-secretly resented it.)

(*Not* that she was making comparisons.)

"Harry is wearing a green suit for you?"

"Forest green," said Pansy. "I've delegated that conversation to Longbottom."

"And Neville is all right with all this?" Hermione asked.

Pansy looked at her blankly. "I told him it's what I want."

"But what if he doesn't agree?" asked Hermione. She and Draco couldn't agree on whether Crookshanks was a cat.

Pansy shrugged. "Then we talk about it."

Hermione stared at her. She made it sound so simple.

Pansy made a notation. "I'll have the photographer do a few of you and Draco, since you didn't have a wedding portrait made—"

A wedding portrait. "Oh, that's—"

"And I can sell it to the society pages."

"Right," said Hermione. *These fucking Slytherins . . .*



Hermione was sat in Shacklebolt's office, the Minister saying, "Theodore Nott has applied to the Department of Mysteries and has listed you as a reference."

"Oh." She set down her teacup. "We traded top marks throughout school—he's quite bright. He's good with people, made a lot of close, personal connections at Hogwarts. And it's my understanding he distanced himself from his Death Eater peers during the war—"

"But never joined the Order," said Shacklebolt. "One of the reasons he did two years of house arrest—though it was primarily guilt by association, given what was going on in Nott Manor. Speaking of which—" He raised an eyebrow as he peered at Hermione over the top of the file in his hands. "His associates continue to be highly questionable. He's rumored to trade in rare and dark artefacts—"

"All the more reason to set him to retrieving them for Mysteries—"

"And to act as your husband's hatchet man. I've told you about the reports out of Knockturn."

Hermione pulled a face. "I only ever see them drinking firewhisky in the study."

Shacklebolt's expression was skeptical but he tucked his chin to his chest and paged through the file. "He has a history of mental instability." His mien had turned contemplative. "That doesn't preclude work as an Unspeakable. Preferred in some cases, actually."

"I think it would be a good idea to hire him," said Hermione. "In the spirit of reconciliation."



A photograph in Witch Weekly: Draco and Hermione Malfoy stepping out of Twilfitt and Tatting, with Theodore Nott just behind them. She looks back as Nott bends toward her attentively, his eyes fixed on her face, his smile growing wider. Malfoy, his arm around her waist, scans the Alley, his expression set, one corner of his mouth just beginning to quirk.



Draco got up from the chaise as she stepped out of her heels. "Tell me more about the committee meeting," he said.

While she spoke, he set his firewhisky glass on the wardrobe shelf behind her head and began unbuttoning her blouse.

He nodded, listening carefully. If she thought he wasn't paying attention, she would knock his hands away.



"Good boy," she murmured as a breathy whimper escaped him, his head thrown back against the hard lip of the cast iron bathtub, his fingertips digging into the wet skin over her ribs. She was moving on top of him, her hands on his shoulders, on the wall of the tub, while he whispered lubrication charms. Hot water, tinted pink by his blood, sloshed over the edge and the candlelight flickered.



He lay in bed with her, trailing his fingertips along her arm. She was nearly asleep. He was watching the Black ring sparkle in the lamplight. He should tell her. That he knew the ring hurt her. That she was safe

to him that he really did think they changed things. She thought of his insistence that, because her name had changed, she was a Malfoy. Words, intention, gestures—that was so much of magic. She knew that.

They set off for the westernmost point on the grounds. (The grounds, Hermione had learned, being distinct from the extended property and far from the totality of the Malfoy holdings.) The day was clear and gusty, the leaves changing color. The picnic lunch made by the kitchen elves was charmed featherlight and stowed in Hermione's extended bag. Malfoy was wearing boots and a heavy cloak, Hermione her muggle coat and trainers. They would circle counterclockwise and end in the north. As they walked, their breath clouding before them, he cheerfully pointed out the pond, the quidditch pitch, the graveyard, the hedge maze. He warned her away from the albino peacocks. (Unnecessarily—Hermione had already assumed they were evil.)

Seeing him here, focused but at ease, Hermione considered what it meant for him to have been brought up surrounded by magic, his magic an intrinsic part of him—a part he could not separate from his awareness of himself. He had always known about it, always assumed its presence. Merlin, the years in Azkaban without his wand must have been pure torture. (Hermione thought of him covered in Vance Crabbe's blood, wondering again if those years had in fact driven him insane.)

Malfoy's spellwork was elegant, intuitive, by turns delicate and aggressive. Hermione's casting was exact and powerful but rarer, sometimes workmanlike. Magic *made sense* to her, and she was a quick study. She was confident in her abilities, which had been tested and proved. But there were still moments, like these with Malfoy, when she was reminded that she had learned her magic late, and much of it out of a book.

She thought about how incredibly impressed by Malfoy she would have been if she'd met him at age eleven and he hadn't been a prejudiced git.

She tried to imagine growing up with magic, her world infused with it, and learning that some people didn't have it—didn't think it existed. How incomprehensible that must have been to young Draco Malfoy.



He scourgified his boots and her trainers and then they stepped inside, through the doors off the gardens. The hall was chilly but warm compared to outdoors. Hermione was cold and tired from walking but it was a satisfied tired—the casting had gone smoothly, the grounds were beautiful, she was beginning to put together a mental map of where she'd found herself, as strange and tentative as that still was.

He was happy—talkative, stealing glances at her when he wasn't outright staring, a smile playing across his lips. Was he remembering last night in the library? Him fucking her on the sofa, braced by one hand, her knee pressed back to her shoulder, him turning his head to kiss her calf. Him on his haunches, his thumb on her clit, thrusting into her with her leg held straight up against his chest, her hamstring stretching. After, he'd kissed her while the fire died down and then watched her pull on her clothes while she made excuses about finishing her op-ed. In bed, he'd pulled her to him, his arm tight around her. She'd completely failed to enforce the idea of permission. He'd wanted her nights, and he'd got them.

They were walking down the hall together, silence fallen over them, when she saw it: the double doors hidden behind a notice-me-not charm. This hall's entrance to the drawing room. She felt a flash of nausea.

They could pass by as though she hadn't seen it.

But she had.

She slowed. She stopped. His steps faltered beside her.

"I want to see it," she said, staring at the doors. It was a bad idea, she knew. She wouldn't feel closure. She wouldn't let go of the past. She would only look for the spot on the floor where she had been held down, for the place where he had stood and watched. It would hurt her. It would hurt . . . whatever it was they were.

A man was meant to take care of the witches in his household. Not knock them about, making demands like a child.

Then Lucius had made them all lackeys to Voldemort. Even now, Draco tried not to think about all the ways in which he'd learned his father was fallible.

Now Draco was seventeen again, angry because he was being made to do things he didn't want to do. Looking for a fight. Being rough with the witch who didn't want him. Acting like a child. Was she right? Had he done this to himself? Thinking it would be different this time. Thinking he'd be in control.

A fucking farce.

Marcus's fluttering pulse under his hand. His blood spraying into Draco's face.

There'd been a moment, in the pub, when it had felt like she would claim him. Flirting with him. *Don't loom, Malfoy.* Then she'd leaned her shoulder into him, started to take his side. *He's behaving, Ron. It's fine, Ron.* If he'd kept his mouth shut, it'd have been her idea to leave. *We'll just go. It's fine.*

But bloody *Weasley*—

(What the fuck was a sex doll? If the phrase was self-explanatory, that was disgusting.)

—thinking he had the right to say what she would *never* do.

It was true now. Five years for an heir and he'd barely made it a month. She'd move back into her rooms. He'd tell Pip to let her go.

It was his fault she'd ever been with the ginger cunt, wasn't it? He wasn't fit or smart or even nice. *Theo* was nice. The Weasel was just an insecure git. But Draco had opened the door and shoved him right through. Picking on her so Weaselbee could look the hero when he didn't call her names.

Well, Draco had played the villain again. It was the simplest thing. You took something obvious, that everyone knew, and said it out loud. Then everyone went mental, denying it.

Ron doesn't hate me. She'd left the rest unanswered, crossed her arms defensively.

He could see it, sometimes, that moment of animal panic when she was confronted with a truth she couldn't admit. Her brow would furrow, her words would catch, and then she'd blank it all out like an occlumens. Her chin would rise and she'd insist she didn't feel that way, didn't think that thing, didn't know what he was talking about. She'd double down, lash out like the vicious little beast she was. His vicious little beastie. He wanted her here. He wanted her to come back.

He'd told her to tell the press she hated him. They'd agreed she'd maintain her progressive ties. He'd thought it would feel like a private joke. Then she'd started touching him and it had stopped being funny. (*Were you hurt?* He was.) He'd got greedy and resentful. He wanted to have her and have her acknowledge him too. It was never enough—approval, affection, acknowledgment. It was never enough to fill the gaping hole at his center.

She'd never claim him now. She'd said it: *You broke my trust.*

It wasn't the ring she'd trusted—it'd been him. Every time he'd thrust into her, with his cock or his fingers or his tongue, she'd trusted him not to hurt her. Every time she'd slept, vulnerable, in his bed. Every time she'd stood naked in his dressing room. Why hadn't he understood? He'd thought he was being good so she would fuck him. He hadn't understood he was being good so she would trust him. He hadn't understood she could trust him.

Now that was gone.

Draco lay flat on his back, thrown across the bed, the orange abomination held to his chest.

How could he get it back?

No matter how much he'd fucked this up, it wasn't transactional for him. He thought maybe (*Were you hurt? Were you hurt? Were you hurt?*) it wasn't transactional for her either.

But it was too late.

How could he get it back? He couldn't. You didn't get trust back once you'd lost it. He couldn't redo it and get it right this time. Draco was the villain. He would always be the villain.



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2003

Charlie's alarm sounded and he flinched at it and sat up immediately—he was bizarrely eager to greet each new day. Theo didn't remove his arm from Charlie's waist but this passive protest did nothing to stop Charlie from shifting to collect his pants off the floor.

"Come do the morning feeding with me," he said, sitting at the edge of the mattress to tug them on.

Theo groaned and fell back against the pillow. It was still dark at this cursed hour, and cold. "No, I'm useless this early. Give the goats my regards." He pulled the quilt closer to make up for the loss of Charlie's body heat. "And tell that llama 'fuck you' from me to him, most sincerely."

Charlie grinned. He'd pulled on trousers and a jumper and was already buckling his belt. "I'll tell him. Are you going to be useless in an hour, when I'm back?"

"Are you going to be deliciously sweaty and unwashed?"

"Unwashed and stinking of goat—"

Theo was humming appreciatively, biting his lip. "I'm going to suck your cock and make you breakfast."

"Sweetheart," said Charlie, sitting on the bed and leaning over to kiss Theo, "only the goats will eat toast that burnt. Suck my cock and I'll make breakfast."

"Is that a double entendre?" asked Theo.

Charlie kissed him again. "You need more than jizz and tea for breakfast—"

"That's a perfectly good breakfast. My favorite breakfast—"

"Which is why you're too weak to do the morning feeding—"

"Maybe if you fed me more often—"

"I feed you every time you don't disappear."

Theo wanted to disappear now. Charlie wasn't looking at him—he was pulling on his boots. But his voice was still light and friendly. Theo said carefully, "I reckon you want me out of your hair."

Charlie turned to him. "You reckon I like waking to a cold bed and no morning shag?"

Theo raised his eyebrows. "Oh, it's a shag now, is it?"

"It is if you're still here. I'll shag you in the kitchen and make you breakfast." Charlie kissed him. "Or I'll just see you next time."

"Right," said Theo, his hand reaching out for Charlie as if by its own accord. "Are you going to St. Mungo's tonight?"

Charlie pulled back. "I certainly hope not. Do you have a feeling I am?"

"No, the gala. It's Samhain," said Theo, his fingers tugging at Charlie's jumper.

Charlie shrugged. "Didn't get an invite for that one."

Theo sat up suddenly, letting the quilt fall from his chest. It was freezing in the room without it, without Charlie's warmth. He wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist, squeezing him tight. "Come with me? Be my plus-one?"



Hermione stepped out of the floo, into the Ministry atrium—and a gaggle of reporters. How early had they got here? She turned toward the lifts and forced herself not to scurry.

"Hermione! Hermione! Why did Draco Malfoy draw on Harry Potter last night?"

"Hermione! How do you feel about saving Harry Potter's life?"

"Hermione! Mrs. Malfoy! Ron Weasley is saying your husband belongs in Azkaban—"

Hermione's head whipped around. "What?"

The press, smelling blood, hemmed her in.

"Ron Weasley is saying Draco Malfoy is an unrepentant blood supremacist who should have received a longer sentence."

Do you care to comment, Mrs. Malfoy?

Ron didn't know about Flint. Of course he didn't. She reoriented toward the lifts.

"Mrs. Malfoy! Mrs. Malfoy! Ron Weasley is saying you're unsafe in your marriage—"

"That's ridiculous," she huffed, throwing an elbow as she tried to push through the scrum. She needed to owl Ginny back.

"Mrs. Malfoy! Mrs. Malfoy! Are you living in fear of your husband?"

"I hate him," she clarified for the quick-quotes quills. "I'm not afraid of him." She kicked someone's ankle.

"Hermione! Mrs. Malfoy! What toll is living in fear taking on you?"

"I am perfectly capable of doing my job, if that's what you're implying," she snapped, glaring at Skeeter's junior associate as she punched the call button for the lift. Her office would be full of howlers.

"Hermione! Hermione! What's your comment on rumors that Ron and Susan are expecting?"

"Mrs. Malfoy! When can we expect your own pregnancy announcement?"

"Hermione! Over here, hon! Do you regret not marrying Ronald Weasley when you had the chance?"

Hermione's back straightened as she sucked in a breath. Then the lift doors parted and she stepped inside, refusing to turn around as the doors closed in the reporters' faces.



Hermione slammed into her office on level five and began incendiating howlers.

Hermione had received a hurricane's worth of hate mail when she and Ron broke up. "It was mutual" was now tattooed onto her synapses, because to admit the truth was to invite more rape and death threats. Women wrote to tell her they loved her, they really did, but they wanted to pop her in the face, punch her in the throat, push her off a cliff for not appreciating him the way they would have done. Over and over, she was told she needed to work with him—as though he were a job and she a shirking employee. He was a good man, so he should get what he wanted. What she wanted didn't matter.

What mattered was that everyone had already decided: Harry would marry Ginny, and Hermione would marry Ron, and the Golden Trio would stay together forever. She had let everyone down by not being an empty vessel they could pour their fantasies into, and they had let her know it. Hermione had been sent fan art depicting her bonded to Ron in the ceremony that had never taken place. She had received enchanted portraits of the ginger-haired children she hadn't given birth to. Ron and Susan's

"You broke my trust when you came home and hurt me! The Black magic stopped your heart because I was afraid!"

He hung his head. He wouldn't look her in the eye. He had no answer.

She wrenched her arm away from him. "I'm going to work, *Malfoy*. Get rid of that wand."

When she stalked out twenty minutes later, he was drinking tea by the fireplace, disheveled and morose in his open dressing gown, his chest and lip unhealed, a judgmental Crookshanks watching from his lap.



Were you hurt?

Were you hurt?

Were you hurt?

Were you hurt?

Draco replayed the moment over and over, when he'd told her he'd cut a man's throat and she'd touched him gently, forehead creased, eyes pained—worried for him. For *him*.

This was what Lucius and Narcissa had. This was what he wanted.

And he'd fucked it up. Fucked it up badly.

How had he already taken for granted what his life had recently become?

Hearing his wife, wearing nothing but Slytherin green underthings, mutter, "Who *hasn't* wanted to crucio Marcus Flint?" while pulling the dress he'd requested she wear from its hanger—he'd nearly dropped his teacup and said some very stupid things then. He'd told her the absolutely filthy predilections of certain sitting members of the Wizengamot and she'd only wrinkled her nose and asked for more detail. She hadn't even pretended to be cross about McLaggen. (Asking *are you going to be good for me?* while she pet him—*Merlin*. She knew what she did to him.) She'd started passing him draft legislation with implications for Malfoy LTD, had begun joining him in the lab (though she claimed *erroneously* that her replenishing potion was stronger than his).

He snogged her senseless in the library when he caught her deep in the stacks. He slept with her held against him in their bed. He took his time eating her perfect cunt on a Saturday morning and then took her to the bookstore, where he read Regency romances until it was time to take her home and eat her cunt again. And she let him—she sighed and squirmed and pulled his hair and kissed him back—because, as much as he also fucked her fast and hard, as much as he bit and grabbed and pinched, he didn't scare her. He didn't *hurt* her.

He wouldn't even tie her up—he'd been bluffing at the pub. So many of his school fantasies of her had been degrading and now he found he couldn't do it—not in the Manor, where it might remind her of being a prisoner, of being held down. He couldn't stand to have her on her knees, wouldn't take her from behind for fear she would feel forced and he wouldn't see it on her face—for fear she was imagining another man. *Look at me. Don't forget it's me.*

But she'd only ever agreed to transactional terms. She didn't call him endearments, didn't talk like a soppy schoolgirl with feelings for him, didn't spin little fantasies about their future. He got her off. He did what she liked. He did as he was told. And it worked. She did what he liked. She touched his face. She used his given name. She told him, sometimes, when he was being good. He'd thought he was being so good.

And then he'd hurt her.

He'd come home and made sure to hurt her.

He'd held her down—like he was Bella. (*Ach, he wanted to die.*)

He could still remember returning, shocked, from Goyle Manor when he was quite young. Telling Lucius he'd seen Greg's father slap Greg's mother, hit the wand out of her hand before she could hex him. "This is why the Goyles will never be more than lackeys," Lucius had sniffed. "Do you see? Weak."

He lifted his head, and the look on his face stopped her.

He leaned in closer to her—his lip split, his eyes tired, his voice soft. “How many times do you think my nose has been broken, love? How many ribs do you think I’ve had broken? Then they break your wand hand, and they don’t heal it right away. They break your wrist, and you think you’ll never cast right again. You go back to your cell and you hold your broken wrist all night, and if you’re lucky, your cell’s cold enough that it goes numb, but then you’re afraid you’ll never feel it again. Are you crying, love? It’s been a long time since I could make you cry.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Don’t cry, love. Everyone knows I deserved it.”

He was so close and he was standing so still, like he wasn’t really breathing, like he wasn’t really in his body anymore, as he watched the tears roll toward her mouth, his eyes flickering over her face, his lips parted. His chest—scarred, now cut again—rose with a shallow breath. She could feel the tears on her face, her back and neck tingling, her chest and throat tight—she wasn’t breathing either. She wondered if he felt the same pins and needles when he got like this. She stared at his mouth, the split lip she had given him.

She forced herself to take a deep breath, to come back to life.

She lifted her left hand, touching her thumb to his pointy chin, her fingers to his jaw and cheek, cradling his face. He had earned the split lip, he had earned his arrest, but . . . “Draco,” she said quietly. “You didn’t deserve that.”

He lifted his hand to take hold of her forearm, his fingers wrapping around the red, irritated scar. His eyes moved over her face, his mouth just open as though he’d forgotten what to do next. He licked his ruined lips. “Sure I did, love.”

She felt a tear drop onto her chest.

He turned his head and kissed her palm with his swollen mouth. Then he pulled her arm away to look at it. His jaw flexed. “Last night, I wasn’t going to—The ring hurts you, and—”

“You hurt me.”

His breath caught and he ducked his head, his white-blond hair a jagged corona.

“You can’t come home and take things out on me, Draco. I don’t deserve that either.”

He took a breath and held it. Exhaled heavily, not meeting her eyes. “Hit me, love. Strike me.”

“What? No—” But he clutched at her as she tried to shake off his hand.

“Please, love. Hurt me. Push me down and kick me—”

“Draco—stop! I won’t do it!”

“But I deserve it—”

“Stop!” she hissed. “That doesn’t make me feel better. That’s for *you*, not me.”

He nodded, his head down. Still not letting go. He looked a mess. He was a mess.

He ran his thumb over the scar. “Then let me take care of this,” he said.

He wanted to tend to it whenever he was agitated—which was all the time now. It always led to sex. Her arm was itchy and painful—it needed his blood. He could make her feel better. He wanted to feel better. But she wasn’t ready for that yet.

She shook her head. “I’m going to work.”

“Tonight—”

“Tonight is St. Mungo’s Samhain ball. I have to be seen—”

“So we’ll make an appearance,” said Draco quickly, looking to her.

“Not you,” said Hermione. “I can’t take more drama right now.”

“I’ll be good—”

“Since when—You *won’t*. You *can’t*.” She sounded angry but she was so sad.

“I *will*—” His tone was pleading but then it darkened. “I don’t want you out alone after Flint.”

“It will be a ballroom full of people—”

“I don’t trust—”

“And I don’t trust you!”

Draco flinched as though she had slapped him.

wedding had been international news and Hermione still, to this day, got letters telling her she should be with him. Strangers had cheerfully urged Hermione to reunite with Ron *in front of Susan. More than once*.

Hermione had wanted to stay friends with Ron, but she had also *had* to stay friends with Ron. The wizarding world was too small for Hermione to be the harridan who broke Ron’s heart and split up the Trio. (What about her broken heart?) Which meant Susan was forced to be friends with *her*. But sometimes being friends with Ron and Susan meant refusing to admit to herself that she could feel the tension. It meant refusing to admit to herself that she knew Susan resented her. It meant refusing to admit to herself that she did think herself superior to Susan. Just like she’d spent much of her relationship with Ron refusing to admit to herself that she wished he were a tiny bit smarter. She didn’t want to have these thoughts. It would be so much easier for everyone if she didn’t. Pretending to be the person who didn’t have them was exhausting because bad faith was exhausting. But bad things happened when Hermione didn’t pretend—like she left Ron and everyone hated her for it.

Malfoy said she was a liar but living in a blood-caste patriarchy made liars of them all. If Hermione called out every slight and slur at work, she couldn’t keep her place. If she allowed herself to think too much about the sexism in her press coverage, she couldn’t leave the house. If she let out all the anger and frustration witches were expected to swallow down, she couldn’t stay un-incarcerated. Hermione lived in a world predicated on bad faith—because prejudice was bad faith, and the world was shot through with it—and the biggest lie of all was that it was her fault she noticed and felt some kind of way about it. She told herself she didn’t notice, she didn’t care, it wasn’t that bad. When you’re punished for telling the truth, you learn to lie—mostly to yourself.

If Hermione had been less driven, she would be bonded to Ron now—the pressure had been that intense. She would have a child she loved and felt trapped by and a marriage she refused to admit made her unhappy. But that terrible part of her who had obviated her parents rather than leave the wizarding world wouldn’t let her do it. That part of her held on to the truth: She wanted to live her life for herself instead of being someone’s sidekick or vessel.

Now she felt hurt and abandoned because her friends were moving on without her. Blindsided because they hadn’t included her. She’d spent the night—after the fight in the Leaky, after the fight about Ron, while she’d tried to fall asleep in the cold, empty bed—ruminating, as if she could solve her whole life if she just thought it through one more time. But what she kept coming back to was: *What did she expect?*

Maybe Ginny was telling the truth and Susan was afraid to invite bad luck before a baby was conceived. Or maybe Susan just didn’t want to invite her husband’s swotty, snotty ex into her bedroom after having to see Hermione’s face plastered across tea towels and commemorative calendars and the *Prophet’s* front pages. Maybe Ron hadn’t prioritized his ex-girlfriend’s feelings over his wife’s wishes after Hermione had told him, over and over, that she had to focus on her career. Maybe Ginny and Harry had been caught between a friend and family (and a Weasley would always choose family). Maybe Ron and Malfoy were in agreement for the first time ever in saying Hermione hadn’t had a man she’d have turned to previously. Maybe her friends had no idea she’d agreed to a Malfoy heir because she hadn’t told them shit.

As Malfoy had so generously pointed out—How did he always do this?—she lied to them all the time. About how much she hated the scar. About how much she missed her parents. About how much the howlers got to her. She didn’t tell them how parochial she found the Weasleys’ focus on home and hearth and quidditch to be. She didn’t tell them that her desire to do more felt like something she couldn’t fully share with them. She didn’t tell them that sometimes it seemed what they mostly had in common was the past.

The answer was obvious, wasn’t it? She’d get pregnant. They’d all have something in common again. Malfoy would probably fall to the floor and weep with gratitude. Her friends would get over him being the father and welcome her back into the fold. (Who didn’t love a baby, even a pointy blond one named after a constellation?) The Malfoy family photo would loop on Shacklebolt’s campaign posters for the next decade. Everyone would be thrilled.

Everyone except her. The thought of being pressured into a pregnancy flooded her with panicked nausea. She wasn't ready. She wouldn't do it. The Ministry could force her to marry. No one could force her to have a child. (They hadn't passed *that* law yet, anyway.)

Hermione had taken Pansy's advice and not let being married to a horrible prat get in the way of a good goals checklist. She thought she'd want a child *someday* and she'd decided she'd be ready in five years, which would give her time to return to work and rise through the ranks. She didn't know that she would be ready in five years, though. She didn't know that she'd ever be ready. Hermione had so little control over her life and body; giving up any more control just didn't feel safe.

Hermione felt sad that she didn't want what everyone else wanted, what everyone else wanted her to want. It made her think there was something wrong with her—because that's what society told her, that her wanting to live her life for herself made her selfish and defective. She knew it was misogyny, and she felt sad and angry that she had internalized it. Why couldn't she have talked faster, fought harder, and somehow refused to be socialized? Thinking about it made her feel a scrabbling pressure in her chest, like something was caged inside her and desperately needed out. Maybe because these were thoughts no one wanted to hear.

If Ginny and Susan and the boys had included her in their plans, Hermione would have felt an intense pressure to do something she didn't want to do. She would have felt panicked at the prospect and sad that the truest part of her wouldn't let her do it and angry that this made her feel defective. (In other words, she would have felt exactly the same.) She would have missed her mother and imagined, over and over, the baby she couldn't bring herself to have. She would have pretended to care about Ginny's ovulation tracker and winced when she was told way too much about Harry's performance in bed. She would have pretended not to care around Susan, who certainly *didn't* want to commiserate about Ron's performance in bed. Maybe it would have brought her closer to Ginny. Or maybe it would have reminded her, over and over, that she and Ginny really weren't much alike, that Susan was sick of Hermione being the fifth wheel, that Harry and Ron had always had something she wasn't quite part of, that she didn't want the same things the others did.

She already had Malfoy to tell her that, didn't she? Did Ron want Malfoy to mistreat her? Maybe. Did Malfoy want her friends to disappoint her? Most definitely. He was jealous and possessive. He'd separate her from everyone if he could. He would keep reminding her how little she trusted anyone. He would make her feel that he was the only one who saw her, the only one who appreciated her, until she only wanted to be with him. Knowing this put her in an untenable position: defending her friends to him because she wasn't willing to let him isolate her even as she grew more distant from them because she wasn't willing to let them in on what happened with him.

She'd kept it for herself—the tender kisses after sex, the easy familiarity of talking Ministry politics in the dressing room, his satisfaction when she'd stopped pretending he couldn't make her laugh, all the times she hadn't told him that he'd impressed her. She didn't want to see Ginny smirk and Harry grimace and Ron scoff before they demanded all the details and told her Malfoy was using her. What would she say? That he was sweet when she gave him a chance? Plenty of bigots made exceptions for the women they wanted to fuck. They were, in fact, notorious for it. Draco hadn't earned anyone else's benefit of the doubt. She didn't want to hear their doubts as to why she had given him hers. She didn't want to hear them say *I told you so* now.

She'd owl Ginny and say she was fine. She'd send Susan flowers. (Were daisies appropriate? She'd never learned the twee pureblood flower languages. Not carnations—she knew that much.) She'd channel her inner Narcissa and ignore any topic she didn't feel like discussing, which was most of them right now.

She rubbed at her arm through her sleeve. The scar was itching and burning, lit up by the burst of Black magic when he'd ripped the ring off her finger.

The ring hurts you.

How long had he known?

She'd fought him instinctively, her heart racing, furious that he was making her feel this way.

She stared at him.

"So that must mean you wanted Bones to be upset." He cocked his head, his eyes playing over her, his mouth open to take a bite.

"Why would I—"

"Yes, why would you?" he snapped. "Maybe you're jealous?"

Now she was the one sneering. "I'm not *jealous*—"

"Maybe you're jealous. Bones is allowed to have her husband at the table." He said it lightly—he thought he was on to something. He jerked his chin at her. "Don't you miss me, love, when I'm not there? Did you keep me there to punish them? To start a fight because you won't? You know I'm your dog, darling—you can sic me on whomever you like."

Hermione scoffed. "I don't *want* you fighting with my friends—"

"Don't you?" He looked down his nose at her. "Such grand friends. You spend all your time lying to them and then you're so angry they don't see through you."

"I—" Hermione sucked in air but couldn't breathe it out.

He snorted a bitter laugh. "Always defending them as though you aren't furious with them."

Hermione's mouth was open, her brow furrowing, her thoughts snagged. *You spend all your time lying to them and then you're so angry they don't see through you.*

Their breakfast trays popped onto the side tables by the fireplace and he turned abruptly, no keener on this fight than she was.

He strode over to pluck the morning *Prophet* from his tray, shaking it open as he turned back to her.

"Well, it's official," he said.

She stood and snatched the paper from his outstretched hand.

DRACO DRAWS ON GOLDEN TRIO

In the photo, she leapt up to grab Draco's wrist, Harry and Ron stood behind them, the motion of her body—had the people at the table beside them taken this?—obscuring Ron and his wand. Draco looked over to her, the Azkaban runes on his neck visible, the sharp angles of his face making his blank expression look cruel. The photo looped—her throwing herself at the villain, over and over.

She tossed the paper onto the bed. "This is all so unnecessary," she hissed. "You want a seat at the table? I'll stop lying and *tell* them—"

"I killed Marcus Flint last night."

Hermione's breath caught. She was frozen in place. He was staring at her—his mouth a tight line, tension around his pale eyes. He looked defiant and angry but she thought he was also . . . scared.

He didn't move. They were standing close together now. She could feel his heat, smell the scourgified blood.

"What happened?" she said carefully.

"He accused me of spying for you. The duel didn't go his way—I opened his jugular."

A duel—not a trap. Not a hex in the back. A duel—he could have been the one to lose.

Her eyes dropped to his chest, her hand lifting to the bloodied wound there. No one had healed it. Had they been healing something worse? That blood on his shirt—had it been his this time? She looked up at him, her fingertips light on his skin. "Were you hurt?"

His eyes flooded with pain. He swallowed and looked down. She could feel his chest rising and falling under her fingers. "No, love," he whispered.

Her eyes were intent on him. Her heart was beating fast. "There were witnesses." This felt like a problem she had to solve.

"None who wants to speak to the Auror Department—"

"Until grassing gets them something. If you were working *with* the Department, you could get ahead of this—"

Draco snorted, looking away. "As much as I enjoy being dosed with veritaserum and beaten, I got enough of that action during my first arrest—"

"They *wouldn't*—"

Ginny exhorted Hermione to let her and Harry know whether she was safe. She was sorry she hadn't said something sooner—Susan was superstitious. But what had Hermione been thinking, letting Malfoy stay at their table to bait Ron? Susan was very upset.

Hermione huffed breath out her nose, her mouth pressed into a hard line, her jaw tight. If she were Susan, she'd be upset, too.

"What?" said Draco sharply. He had reappeared in his untied dressing gown, running his hand through his mussed hair. "What does it say?"

She pursed her lips.

"What?" He was looming over her now.

She looked up, dead-eyed, and held it out to him with a flick of her wrist.

He glanced between the note and her face and snatched it up, shooting her a last wary look before turning his attention to it. "Was this written by a human hand?" he muttered immediately, his chin jerking down as though he had skipped to the signature. "Does Ginevra hold her quill between her toes?"

"What? No—"

She tried to take the parchment back but he quickly held it away with a chastising look. His eyes scanned over it while she watched, and then he looked down at her, his brow furrowed. "What's this rubbish, then? They're blaming you—"

"Of course they're blaming me," said Hermione. "They feel guilty so they've convinced themselves none of this would have happened if I hadn't let you stay—"

"Let me." He was glowering, rereading the note. "I'd have never left you out alone—"

"I held my own *in a war*—"

"You can still be hexed in the back," he snapped. "As last night showed."

"*In multiple instances*," said Hermione, glaring, and his eyes darted away. She couldn't help watching him for signs he was still in pain.

"I don't want you talking to them again." He crumpled the note and threw it in the direction of the fireplace.

"Really? I wasn't sure where you stood," she sniped. "Do I get to pick which fascists you consort with? You know that's why Susan didn't want you there—"

"I have to—"

"Oh, come off it! You went running to Avery, just like last night. That was entirely your decision—"

"He's a threat to you—"

"There were other ways to handle it! You *wanted* to be in the middle of it—"

"I hate being there," he snarled, baring his teeth at her.

"You do but you just couldn't help yourself," she said, her own teeth on edge. "You're not lying to me, you're lying to yourself."

He couldn't meet her eyes. He was looking away, blinking, his lips pursed.

"Was that what you wanted—for it to be your choice this time?"

He threw his head to the side, rolling his eyes as he stepped back. He was shaking his head, jaw flexing, mouth twisting as though he were chewing over a million retorts. As though she were so, so wrong—but he couldn't say it.

Her face was mulish as she watched him, she knew.

"Maybe I did have unfinished business," he said finally. He looked to her then, looking her up and down. "What about you, then?"

"What about me—"

"You tell me I'm lying to myself. What about you, love—"

"What about *me*?"

"You're such a fucking liar, love." He was crooning it at her. "You tell me I'm talking about myself, you tell me I'm jealous, but why *did* you keep me at that table?"

Her mind was a blank. She was shaking her head. What was he saying?

"You knew it would upset Bones—"

In the light of day, she knew if he'd planned to harm her, he'd have cajoled her into taking off his ring first. He'd have sworn she was safe with him. He'd have promised he'd never hurt her. He'd have told her he'd be good.

Instead, he'd done it in the most Malfoy way possible—in the way that hurt him the most. She'd thought he was dead. She'd been leaned over him, brow furrowed, stomach sick with fear, when his heart had started up again.



They needed to leave soon to be photographed going in. Longbottom waited for her on the upholstered bench at the foot of the bed, in his tux, his bowtie hanging undone.

His eyes roved over her as she marched up to straighten his pocket square. Then she was stood between his legs, his calloused hands running up the backs of her thighs, which were readily accessible in the minidress.

He was looking down at where the hem hit her legs. "This is—pretty."

He wanted to say short. "I have it in silver for the reception after the bond," she told him. "Tonight is the trial run. If I get fewer than fifty howlers calling me a whore, I'll find something shorter."

Longbottom nodded slowly, his fingertips traveling over the fabric. "All right," he said. "I can fight."

"Chin up."

He obeyed and she began tying his bowtie.

"*Witch Weekly* is coming tomorrow," she said, her eyes on her hands.

"I don't—"

"Talk to the media. Which is why I've told them you can't take time out of your busy schedule. We're branding you as the strong, silent, successful type."

He hummed noncommittally.

"At the five-minute mark, you'll come in and I will be very surprised—" She glanced up to see the corner of his mouth quirking. "And you will say, 'I can't stay,' and kiss me on the cheek. And then you'll turn to the reporter and say, 'I'm lucky to have Pansy.'"

He was smiling faintly now, looking up at the ceiling as she worked on his tie.

"That's all I have to do?" he asked.

"That's all you have to do," she said. "And *then*, as soon as you leave, I'll tell the reporter you have the biggest cock I've ever seen—"

"Oh my Merlin," he sighed. "I wish I thought you were taking the piss."

"I'm not," she said. "They won't print it but they *will* hang on my every word."

"Oh my word—"

"And take a second look at the photo I'm providing—"

"Oh my giddy aunt," he muttered.

"There," she said, brushing down his lapels. He dropped his chin and she leaned in for a kiss. He smelled like loam and tea. "I'll handle the press, and there are some trademarks I'm filing. But you needn't be fussed."

"All right," he murmured against her mouth. "I'm lucky to have you, Pansy."

She pecked his lips and pulled back. "Very natural delivery. Full marks."

He looked up at her. Merlin, he looked good.

"I take it back," she said. "You need loads of practice. We'll have to role play—"

He was laughing now, pulling her thighs forward so that she fell into him, her arms around his neck. "I'm lucky to have you, Pansy."

"Almost. Try again."

"I'm lucky to have you, Pansy."

"You're getting there. We need to block out some time—"

"I'm lucky to have you, Pansy."

"No, Nev," she said, smiling, kissing his face, "I'm lucky to have you."



Draco was in sweaty flying breeches and an old quidditch jumper, contemplating a desultory wank in the bath, when the post popped onto the settee's side table.

Draco sat up with a pang of unease. The evening post usually came to the study. He was in the bedroom. Before his unsatisfying survey of the grounds, he'd found the Black ring on the floorboards and gone to the jeweler, and then he'd lain in bed most of the day, hoping the kneazle demon would finally suffocate him.

Now he called, "Thank you, Pip," because there must be something she thought he wanted to see. But did he? He reached cautiously for the copy of the evening edition on top.

MALFOY MATCH TO BE REVOKED???

Draco's stomach dropped, a frenetic pressure building in his chest as he scanned the article. He was too upset to focus—he wasn't taking it in. He had to start again, the pressure in his chest choking him.

After months of public conflict, Skeeter wrote, questions about his controversial marriage were coming to a head. Weasley—*fucking Weasley*—was calling for the Ministry match to be rescinded on the grounds that a marked Death Eater should never have been eligible in the first place. His wife was not safe with him. Anonymous sources (*fucking McLaggen*) accused him of running an intimidation campaign out of her office, implying she was too cowed by him to speak freely to colleagues. Avery had vowed the Wizengamot would revisit his wife's appeal.

NO.

No no no no. No. NO! This was a disaster. Without the Wizengamot mandate, she didn't have to live with him. She'd move out. Not to her rooms—out of the Manor entirely. She could move to *another country*. Maybe to Australia, to watch her parents be perfectly happy not knowing she existed—she'd prefer *that* pain to living with him. At least she loved *them*.

The bond was almost unbreakable—almost. She'd find an oathbreaker and sue to void the marital contract. Or she wouldn't—she'd live apart from him, the bond draining his magic without her near but not compelling her to stay. She'd take lovers—plenty of wizards wouldn't care that she was bonded—and have children out of wedlock. He'd taken off the ring. She could live perfectly well as an estranged Malfoy wife with her own vault. She wouldn't even need his blood. He'd be the one portkeying to watch her be perfectly happy knowing he existed and she'd got away from him.

His wife, tumbling out of her modest brick house with her new man, one of those rumpled Gryffindors she goes for. He's got the baby in his arms and she's holding the toddler's sticky hand—crouching down to fuss with the boy's shoes and little jacket before they start down the front path. The boy has her man's dark hair and her curls and golden-brown eyes—no platinum, no gray—and she scoops him up and kisses his plump cheek, leans into her man, says to the child, "Tell Daddy we love him."

NO. NO. NO NO NO. What could he do? He'd be better. He'd try harder.

Can you? Right before she turned her back.

No. No. He could try for a while, but he would still be himself. He'd always be himself. That was the worst part, wasn't it? Knowing you existed and you couldn't ever get away from yourself.

Ach. He wanted to be drunk. He wanted to be punched in the face. He wanted to be drunk while she punched him in the face. If she would knock him down and kick him in the gut, it would feel better than this.

She wouldn't even do that.

Draco, you didn't deserve that. Her hand on his cheek.

"I can be better," he whispered. It felt like his chest was hollowed out. The back of his throat ached with the tears he wouldn't shed. He tried to breathe out the pain. "Please."

"Can you?" she said coldly.

"Please," he whispered.

She turned away, threw herself back down, her back to him.

He lay on his back in the dark and tried to breathe, swallowing against the ache in his throat.

She pulled the coverlet around herself and kicked his foot away.



She shifted awake, light seeping into the room through the gaps in the heavy curtains, cold seeping in around the edges of the coverlet. She hunched her shoulders and pulled it tighter, feeling Draco's fingertips slip off her shoulder blade. Usually he was draped over her, her warm even in a thin nightdress as he breathed against her, his arm heavy on her, his feet tangled with hers. Last night—

What was that? What had he thought he was going to do? Taking off the ring—

The scar on her arm itched and burned.

She heard tapping—a beak on glass. Was that what had woken her? She looked over her shoulder to the window. She could see Draco crumpled on his side of the bed, his arm outstretched, Crookshanks on his pillow.

She slipped out from under the coverlet and skirted the bed, shivering in her nightdress. The tapping sounded again and she pulled back the curtain, cold immediately assaulting her. On the sill was Hannelore, Harry's snowy owl, holding Hermione's beaded bag, left behind in the Leaky. The owl cocked her head reproachfully as Hermione struggled with the window—usually Draco received the post in his study, and this casement stuck. Finally, she heaved it open, cold air flooding in, Hannelore fluttering her wings at the movement. Hermione reached out into the breaking day to take the bag and untie the note from the owl's leg. The owl hooted—a rude comment, Hermione suspected, about the lack of treats—and flew away.

Hermione turned back to find Draco just behind her, his bare chest goosebumped in the cold, reaching around her to close the window. She stepped back and he jerked it shut, the muscles in his arms and back flexing, his face solemn—normally he would be swearing and teasing her, she knew. He looked over at her, still stood there, and lifted his chin, as though to say, "Go on, then."

She dropped the bag to the floor and looked at the note—addressed in Ginny's uneven hand. An uncomfortable rush of adrenaline as it all came back—her horrible husband crashing the drinks meant to tell her that he'd made her an outsider to her friends' futures. No, that she'd already been one.

She looked up at him, stood watching her in the early morning light—his hair disheveled, his lip split, eyes bloodshot. He was in only his pants and her eyes flickered over the defined muscles of his shoulders, abs, thighs. He had a fresh gash on his chest, his torso streaked with poorly scourgified blood. What had happened last night?

She blinked and looked back to the note she didn't want to open.

"Come away from the window, love," he said, his voice raspy. "It's cold."

She nodded absently and then his hand was out, ushering her away—so genteel, as though last night hadn't happened, as though it weren't still happening.

He picked up his illegal wand from a pile of his clothes—he always left his expensive things everywhere, used to the elves putting everything right. The fabric reeked of cigarette smoke. There was blood on the wadded-up shirt. She hoped Pip burned it all.

He was lighting the lamps and the fire in the hearth as she sank down onto the edge of the bed, reading.

He worked his way over to her and threw himself around her. She was warm and soft with bony shoulders, and he was so cold. She took a deep breath and sighed, and he exhaled with her. He felt his shoulders drop. She was warm and soft, and the air around her felt heavy and calm—

Fuck. He was going to cry.

No, he didn't want that.

He squeezed her to him, too hard, bearing down on everything, and she jerked violently awake, thrashing instantly.

Yes.

"It's me," he said, low.

She elbowed him painfully, driving her arse into his groin. "Godsdammit, Draco! Go back to your little purist friends."

He held on tight as she fought him, instinctively throwing his head back so she wouldn't split his lip with the back of her skull. "I don't want to," he said through clenched teeth, his breath uneven as she rocked against him, her arm clamped under his. "I want to be—here—with you."

"I don't want you," she huffed.

It hurt—so bad he almost let go. It felt like he would choke on the pain. Like his chest would cave in.

Then he gritted his teeth and threw his leg over her. He rolled forward, pinning her with his weight. She struggled against him, her elbow in his gut, her fingers splayed across the sheet, and went still, her hair in his face. He could feel her heart racing against his chest.

"But you have me," he said angrily, into her hair. "Tell me I belong to you."

"Get Off. Me." Her voice guttural.

"Claim me," he said, leaning into her, pressing her into the bed. "Say it."

She flung her head back and he grunted as pain bloomed across his mouth, his lip already swelling. He tasted blood. The Black magic was crackling at his edges, beginning to sting and burn—it didn't trust his intentions. That godsdamned ring—

He grabbed at her hand, his head held back as she squirmed—

He knew that ring was hurting her—

Lightning strikes of pain as she bucked against him and he snatched at her fingers—

He got his thumbnail against the band—

They were both breathing hard through clenched teeth as she kicked and bucked—

He shifted his hand on her fingers, yanking at it—

She felt small and yielding under him, her bones hard points through the flesh—

He wrenched the ring off her, flinging it across the room, hearing it hit the floor, and then the Black magic struck him—

PAIN—

...

...

He was on his back—

...

His heart started beating again—

He was panting, shuddering—

He still wore the ring's mate, and it was displeased. He twitched as the pain spat and burned like a white-hot fire.

He couldn't catch his breath.

He could feel her leaning over him. "You godsdamned arse," she said, her voice low and mean.

His eyes were squeezed shut, tears leaking from their corners. Everything hurt so much. "Why can't you just love me?" he whispered.

"Every time I think I could, you act like such a *prick*," she hissed.

He opened his eyes, blinking. *Every time she thought she could . . .*

He could barely see her in the dark room, her face in shadow. She was leaning close—

He felt the wards welcome her and then she was stomping through on her way to the dressing room, refusing to look at him. It all turned to anger. He was no better than the Weasel—he didn't want her happy with another man. He wanted her here.

Draco leapt to his feet, the paper crumpled in his fist. "Did you plan this with him?" he shouted.

He stalked after her in his muddy boots, down the hall, to the dressing room.

"What are you on about?" she snapped, stripping down to her bra and knickers—Slytherin green, like all the others now.

"You and your *ex-boyfriend*. Did you send him to the press?" He was shaking the paper at her.

"Yes, because I *love* being portrayed to the entire wizarding world as a helpless hostage," she sniped, pushing past him in the doorway, her hair wild around her face.

He wanted to grab at her, pull her to him as her bare shoulder knocked against his arm. He turned and dogged her heels to the en suite.

"When I appeal, it's dismissed," she muttered, searching the area around the vase of white tulips next to her sink. "We flat-out duel at a Ministry ball, and that's *grand*. But you give Harry a funny look and Ron sneezes in front of Rita Skeeter, and *all of a sudden*, everyone cares."

His heart twisted at the contempt in her voice. There were still things his wife hated more than him. (The press. The Wizengamot. The patriarchy.) But spite wouldn't keep her with a husband who'd hurt her. Here was her opportunity. The Wizengamot would void the match. Her testimony would send him back to Azkaban. Bill Weasley would break the bond.

"So you put him up to it."

"*You* put him up to it. You got that stern talking to you wanted so badly—only he gave it to the *Prophet* instead of you. No one is going to trust me with foreign policy when they think I'm afraid of my own husband!" She threw up her hands. "Where in the hell are my hairpins?"

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"To St. Mungo's, to let everyone see I'm not *living in fear*." Her hands were on her hips as she glared up at him. He could see her nipples through the lace of her bra. He wanted to take that bra off her and lick and suck until she was begging him to go down on her. He wanted to be buried in her cunt.

"You're not going *anywhere* without me," he growled, pulling the jumper over his head.

"Why? So you can act up and make Ron's case for him?" she said nastily.

He threw the jumper down and started wrenching off his boots as the tub filled. "Don't I always do what's expected of me?" he sneered.

"I don't care what you do," she said, walking out.

"Don't make me come find you, darling!" he yelled after her. "You know I will!"

He got into the scalding water, his jaw set, his throat tight and aching. She hadn't said *I don't want the Wizengamot to revoke the match*. She hadn't said *I'd stay with you anyway*.

When he got to the dressing room, she was still there, swathed in black—heavy silk fitted through the hips, with lace sleeves to her wrists, lace high on her throat. He'd picked out the gown at Twilfit and Tatting when he and Theo were being fitted for Pansy's wedding. He'd wanted to tear all that lace.

She'd found her pins and was sat on the vanity's low, padded stool, putting up her hair. She didn't gasp or flinch like Avery's boys at the sight of his scars or the Mark on his arm. (*Marcus, his body hearing and bleeding, his blood spraying across Draco's bare chest*) She just eyed him in the mirror while he tore the plainest muggle tuxedo off its hanger.

She leaned toward the mirror to fasten large jet earrings, tilting her face away. She looked so beautiful and dissatisfied. A proper Lady Malfoy. He could feel his heart beating too fast.

Please, love. I'm nothing without you. I live to serve. I just want to be by your side. Please don't give up on me. Please let me try for you. He should be on the floor at her feet, groveling. But he'd told her he'd be good so many times before, and she already knew his promises were worthless.



They were late. The ballroom was spelled to look like a clearing in the woods—the tables lit by tiny, charmed bonfires surrounded by pumpkins, Rowan berries, pomegranates, marigolds—and his white-blond hair was like a spotlight in the dark room. Every head turned when she walked in on his arm, his chin high, the Azkaban runes on display above the collar of his shirt. He pulled out her chair and the diamonds of his betrothal band glittered with firelight as he held out his hand for hers.

"Fell off your broom, son?" It was Sallow, the older Slytherin seated to the left of Draco's place setting. Hermione looked up to realize Draco had never healed his lip. A visible penance—Merlin, he was self-indulgent.

Draco turned his head toward Sallow. "Fell off Mrs. Malfoy," he said, and when he turned back to her—

She slapped him right across the face. He was pulling this shit *again*?

His head whipped to the side with the crack of her palm, his hair askew despite the charm, every table around them exclaiming. And then he shook the platinum lock off his forehead and turned back to her, smiling. His eyes were burning, his split lip reopened. He licked away the blood, his mouth obscene.

Then he put his hand to her shoulder, ushering her into her chair. She sat, her face hard, her hand stinging.

He turned to the table, bowing to the witches. "Draco Malfoy," he said, as though their tablemates didn't know. "My wife, Hermione Malfoy." He said it carefully, a pause between her name and his surname. "Who gives as good as she gets. Don't you, darling?"

"Fuck you, Malfoy," said Hermione, refusing to look at him. "I'm sorry we're late—"

"It was entirely my fault," he purred, taking his seat next to her.

The rest of the table stared at them with open shock and hostility—and, yes, lust. The young woman sat across the table from them badly wanted to fuck Hermione's husband. Hermione would have somehow known she was Slytherin even without the snake necklace—she was thin and dark-haired, with a beautiful, narrow face and a calculating air about her. The man seated next to her had the distracted mannerisms of a Ravenclaw, and Hermione guessed this was a less-than-ecstatic Ministry match.

Draco ignored the soup and salad courses except for the paired wines. He slouched in his seat, his arm draped across the back of Hermione's chair, drinking. She sat stiffly upright, avoiding his touch, the scar on her arm burning and itching under its lace sleeve.

The rest of the table made stilted conversation while Hermione stewed. Scaring the shit out of her last night, then shouting at her as soon as she got home. He couldn't possibly think, while he was off killing Marcus Flint, she had hatched a plot with Ron—Ron, who had no doubt been home fighting with Susan—to put press pressure on the Wizengamot. *He* had prompted that. And what was he so angry about anyway? All the article did was burnish his carefully cultivated public image as a violent reactionary. *She* was the one who looked weak. They were already bonded. What was the Wizengamot going to do? He was being a dick—taking things out on her again. She didn't deserve this.

He sat forward and used his bare fingers to pluck the strawberries out of her salad, leaving his own uneaten. It was so childish, she snorted. Did he think anyone here didn't know she was with him? Hermione could see the Slytherin woman watching, hoping Hermione would elbow him away so that she could shoot Draco a sympathetic look.

Hermione let Draco lean into her, his arm around her on her chair, his body familiar now. He smelled like citrus and cloves and overly sweet white wine. Why was he such a pill? Why did he push everyone away when all he wanted was—Right. She had told him she didn't care what he did. She knew he hated that.

The entrees arrived, and he ignored his to pick off her plate but mostly to drink and gaze sullenly around the room. Their tablemates' eyes flickered over him, curiosity and distaste evident on their faces, the Slytherin woman preening and gesturing as she talked, trying to catch his attention as he looked

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Draco got back to the Manor well after midnight and walked the halls, feeling for gaps in the wards while he stewed.

He'd got the information he'd wanted from Avery and Montague—a high-level planning session, the major players coming in from Argentina in anticipation of action soon after. He'd told them to send the boys home for it—they were gossips. He'd convinced them to hold it the night of the Parkbottom wedding, when guests like Potter would be out of the country and the press distracted. And he'd insisted he be allowed to make an appearance, in exchange for providing shipping and transport. Shell corporations and flags of convenience were indeed useful if one thought moving men and supplies the muggle way would keep the Ministry from tracking them. Draco wasn't so sure about that, but he was willing to play along if it meant Malfoy LTD was holding the manifests. They'd wait until they no longer needed him to curse him in the back and go after his wife. He'd get to them first.

So. Events were proceeding to plan.

He hadn't planned on killing Marcus, though. As eventual collateral damage, yes. Personally, that night, in front of an audience, no.

But, then, it *was* personal. He set his jaw, his heart still beating faster than it should be. He could see Marcus on that floor, cut up, his blood pooling around him.

He wouldn't regret it.

What he truly hadn't planned for was how pathetically he'd come to dislike his wife disowning him in public. How angry it made him that Avery, Montague, Flint—everyone—thought they could make claims on him when she couldn't.

Weasley sneering at the idea of her having his child. The witches gasping. They'd disown *her*, wouldn't they? Decide she'd been corrupted. (*Corrupted*. If anyone knew how she panted and whined while she took his cock, how she held him down and fucked him. She looked beautiful on top of him, her curls wild around her face, her gold-flecked eyes heavy lidded. And she was ashamed of it, of anyone knowing.) He wanted to be kicking Weasley while Weasley doubled over on the ground.

He walked through the halls that Bella and Voldemort had taken over, that the Carrows and Lestranges had roamed without his say. He could scare children too now. He could kneel on his old team captain's chest and slit his throat in a fight gone too far. What good did it do him, when she wouldn't hold her hand out to him in a pub? When a room in her own house made her sick with old fear?

He drifted through the Manor and it felt like maybe he'd never have control over anything, like maybe he wasn't even here. Who was to say, in the dark, what was real and what wasn't, whether time had ever moved on? Maybe he had imagined that the others were dead and his father was in prison and he was an adult who had her in his house. Maybe tomorrow they would all be back. Maybe he would always be wandering these halls, still seventeen. And yet it felt so long ago, like maybe that was the part he had imagined.

He climbed the stairs and slipped inside the suite, down the hall to his bedroom, his chest numb, reality coming back the closer he got to her.

Would he always have to come home wondering whether she would still be here?

She was.

Why? Why did she stay?

He felt a flash of anger. Disgust. Why did she stay when everyone thought he was so rotten? When he *was* rotten.

His chest was tight, his shoulders unbearably heavy. He could choke on it, the disgust. He could scream.

He kicked off his shoes, tore off his clothes, letting his cufflinks and the wand fall to the floor.

He got into bed roughly, hoping she would wake, hoping she would yell at him and he could scream and scream and scream. She'd hit him in the face and it would feel so good.

"We'll talk in the study," he said finally, signaling to the older Montague and chucking his chin toward the door.

Draco accioed his shirt and suit jacket, slinging them over his shoulder and gesturing for Avery to lead the way.

He turned back to the teenagers, giving them a good look. "Keep practicing, boys. Next time I'll tell you all about the joys of Azkaban."

Then he walked out the door, the other men parting to let him through.



Draco sat languidly, his bare chest scarred and bloody, his elbows on the arms of his chair, and reached out his hand to set the wand on the table in front of him. He left his fingers resting lightly on the polished wood, his stare heavy on the older men.

"Gentlemen, I meant what I said. I put myself—along with the considerable resources of Malfoy LTD—at your disposal because I heard action was imminent. I've run all over town, providing free advertising for the cause on the gossip pages of the *Prophet*. But I do have an estate to manage and my own entertainment at home, so if this is merely a social club—"

"Malfoy! Are you asking us to overlook the fact that Marcus Flint is now dead on my ballroom floor?" demanded Avery.

"You've been overlooking his snitching to the Ministry, so—sure, why not?" said Draco. "I've done you a favor, Avery. Dispose of his body however you would have disposed of mine, had he won."

Avery and Montague exchanged sour looks.

"Just be aware: I've given my Ministry-mandated wife full access to the vaults and Malfoy LTD. If I die or go back to prison, control of those considerable resources will fall to her—not Lucius or Narcissa. So, if you would like to put those assets in the hands of a reconstituted Order, double-cross me. Otherwise, it's in your interests to keep me alive and out of Azkaban."

Draco sat back and watched Avery and Montague explode. "Malfoy!"

"Godsdamn it, son! Are you blackmailing us?"

Draco scoffed. "Not at all. It's merely an insurance policy that reinforces what I'm sure was already your decision—to keep me out of whatever happened to Marcus Flint. And don't go after Mrs. Malfoy—either one of them. House Malfoy *will* retaliate."

"You cannot possibly be this attached to that mudblood," spat Montague.

"Find out," said Draco sharply, his eyes dead, his gaze unwavering. The moment stretched. He cocked his head and saw Montague's eyes trace the tattoo on his neck. "Or simply trust me when I tell you I'm territorial."

"Draco, son, eventually you'll have to give up this pet—"

Draco snorted. "Avery, if your recruitment pitch for pureblood supremacy is that *you'll* tell me which witch I get to fuck and for how long, then I cannot possibly overstate how uninterested I am. I'll just fuck off now, shall I? I thought we were here to take down Shacklebolt, and you lot want to obsess over my wife's cunt."

Draco stood and snatched up his shirt from the chair next to his, giving the older men a wry look as he undid the remaining buttons and slipped his arms through the sleeves.

"Sit down, Malfoy," said Montague finally. "Let's talk about Argentina and your shipping concerns."

"Yes, *let's*," said Draco.



resolutely away. Hermione considered whether Pansy would have hexed her by now or would be planning a more elaborate comeuppance.

She glanced over at what Draco was staring at and saw a passing Slytherin bent to Sallow's ear. Hermione watched as surprise and consternation bloomed across the older man's face.

"Salazar!" He turned back to their table. "The Flint boy—Marcus. He's been found dead on his manor grounds. Killed by muggles!"

Hermione had flinched but now she pressed back in her seat. She'd normally be leaning forward to share her two knuts about this transparent purist propaganda. The rest of the table was talking over one another, the Hufflepuff couple next to her demanding details.

"Shocking," drawled Draco, lounging against her. "I'd have thought the Flint wards impossible for muggles to breach."

This seemed to throw Sallow off-stride. "Well," he said uncertainly, "muggles can be clever."

"I suppose Marcus cut corners," said Draco, casting left-handed to refill his wineglass. He didn't seem to be more than buzzed, though he'd been drinking steadily. "So many wizards cast just anywhere. Mrs. Malfoy and I hit all four compass points when we do *our* blood wards."

Flint was forgotten as every eye at the table now locked onto him, their dinner companions processing the implications of this statement coming from marked Death Eater and purported blood purity revivalist Draco Malfoy.

Hermione affected icy indifference, waiting to see where this was going.

"I'm sorry—" said the Slytherin woman. "Are you saying you use *her* blood to ward Malfoy Manor?"

Draco's head snapped toward the woman as though he had only now registered her existence.

"Don't speak to me if you can't address my wife properly," he spat with real venom. "Of course the Manor is warded with Lady Malfoy's blood. She's the mistress of my estate."

The Slytherin woman stammered under the weight of Draco's glare, Hermione watching coolly as anger and humiliation passed over her face.

Finally, the woman tucked her chin and glanced away and the table seemed to breathe again as Draco broke his stare to drink from his wineglass, never looking at Hermione though his arm seemed to tighten around her.

"Be that as it may," said a blinking, red-faced Sallow, "I think this goes to show—no disrespect to Mrs. Malfoy—that the violent tendencies of muggles are a real concern—"

"Utter tosh," scoffed Draco. "The worst a muggle's ever done to Marcus is overserve him at a pub."

"Well, I suppose you've become accustomed to muggle violence," Sallow said sourly, eying Draco's split and swollen lip.

Hermione's spine stiffened but Draco was already reaching out to whack Sallow on the back with a snide laugh. "Do you require kid gloves, old sport? You can't wrestle Gryffindors without getting a few scratches. Mrs. Malfoy's a pussycat. That's what Lucius reminds me—"

What? Hermione tried to control her face as Draco slipped into an eerily perfect impersonation of his father.

"Are you in a full body bind? Are you bleeding out your eyes? You have married a pussycat, Draco. Stop whingeing."

The Puffs burst into surprised laughter.

"And how *is* Lucius nowadays?" asked Sallow, needling.

"You should visit him, Sallow. He doesn't get out much anymore," said Draco, as though his father were a shut-in rather than a war criminal serving a life sentence. "I'm sure he's looking forward to a future in which you see a lot more of each other."

An ominous silence fell over the table as everyone considered the possible meanings of this statement coming from convicted insurrectionist Draco Malfoy.

Hermione looked to Draco but he wouldn't meet her eye.



Draco was stood just behind her shoulder, one hand in his pocket, one hand on his after-dinner firewhisky, rocking forward so that he periodically bumped her body with his, reminding her he was there.

Like she could bloody well forget.

"You're going to have a horrible headache," she said, "after having nothing but wine and dessert for dinner."

"I thought you didn't care what I did." *So he had been brooding about it.*

"I care how much more of a prat you're going to be with a headache," she told him.

"I'm not the one who hexed one of our lovely dining companions." He'd seen the Slytherin woman's forehead erupt in boils as they left the table, then.

"You thought she was lovely, did you? The woman auditioning to be your mistress?"

"So you *do* expect there to be an opening," he said nastily. He should be basking in her jealousy, pleased she was fussing over him. "Will you go back to Weasley, once you're free of me?"

"Ron is married, Malfoy."

"So am *I*. But that doesn't stop anyone."

Godric, he was in a snit. Why would she be going back to Ron? (*Why was everyone always fixated on Ron?*) She'd signed in blood. No one was getting free of anyone—

"Pip will pack your things."

What the fuck?

"You can be out of the Manor straight after the vote."

That clause in the marital contract—He was kicking her out?

"Clever of you to keep your vault. You'll have no trouble engaging Bill Weasley."

Hiring Bill—Was that what he thought—was that what he *wanted*?

"Take the jewelry. But the beast stays with *me*."

Hermione sneered. This was a Malfoy Special: He'd bully everyone into it while he played the victim. Then he'd insult her while he stole her cat. She didn't want his *jewelry*.

Mine, mine, mine.

I'm not giving you up.

You'll never be rid of me.

Draco whispered these words in her ear while he fucked her. He liked to pretend she told him what to do, as if he didn't do as he pleased. He liked to get on his knees and say *please* and *I'm yours*. He was a talker with some kinks.

But he'd said it himself—he was invested in her because she represented his house. Now the first hint of that being reversible and he was acting like it was a wrap.

You should have just killed me.

Why can't you just love me?

The problem's not that I hate you.

I think a lot worse.

She remembered him jerking her against him in the sitting room after he'd bought the bookstore, frustrated because he wasn't getting what he wanted out of her. He'd been angry when he'd wrenched the ring off her finger.

After she'd left Ron, her howlers had reminded her that she wasn't perfect either. She needed to stop living in denial of her faults and beg him to take her back—or she'd be alone forever because of her stubbornness. Hermione had wondered what these faults she was in denial of were; it felt to her she was aware of a great many faults. But she'd also wondered why these visions of her relationship felt so punitive. Hermione wanted to give love freely, not give in because she'd been scolded like a child not

"Come to think of it, Marcus," said Draco, tapping his wand on his neck, "where are *your* runes? Did you call for the pensieve? Did you *volunteer* while I was being beaten in an interrogation room? You can read my trial transcript if you care to know what *I* told the Ministry. Merlin knows all *you* said—"

"Yes, your trial," sneered Flint, stepping toward him as they squared up, "where the mudblood pleaded for leniency. Do you think you owe her now?"

"Oh, I owe a great many people for my time in Azkaban. But if it's your keen observation that my witch has shown more loyalty than you, then—truly—well spotted, Marcus. Real seeker's eye, there. Yes, she's been a *good girl*." He leered. "Whereas you're just a little bitch."

Flint tried to crucio him, but Draco was ready with a deflection spell that sent the curse ricocheting into the scattering, shouting boys. He struck back with a slashing diffindo, out for blood. Flint deflected, but his timing was off—he had a blind spot after Longbottom.

Draco didn't bother to be creative—death by a thousand cuts would do just fine. He sent a fast, focused barrage, the timing and angle varied enough to keep Flint scuttling and on the defensive. One sleeve of his robe was in ribbons, but the dark fabric hid the damage. Draco's bare chest was nicked but he was only vaguely aware of the blood running down him as he closed the distance to Flint. It wasn't proper—he should stay in a dueling stance and let Flint yield. But these idiots thought they were about to fight a war, and war wasn't proper, was it?

Flint's white shirt was shredded, the blood soaking through, when Draco threw in an expelliarmus he wasn't expecting. Draco reflexively batted down the wand and shoved his own into his pocket right before he lunged forward to grab Flint by the collar and punch him twice, hard, in the gut. Flint was still bent over, gasping for air, when Draco threw him down to the hardwood flooring and kicked him—and kept kicking him. Now the wizards were protesting—this wasn't dignified at all. But Draco didn't want to be dignified; he wanted to kick the shit out of someone. He felt a rib give. He was doing damage to Flint's soft stomach. The men had scattered like the boys, avoiding wild strikes, but he hadn't been stupefied yet.

Draco dropped onto Flint, his knee on his chest, his hand on his throat, snarling like an animal as Flint bled and struggled to breath.

"You never did like me—did you, Marcus?" He was sweating but all he could feel was an icy sense of inevitability seeping through him. "Well, I don't like you either."

He was breathing hard. He sucked in air and raised his voice, reaching for the wand. "It's this snitch's tongue I should have taken out." He protegoed an attempt to stupefy him and said, "Sectum."

Then someone was tackling him off Flint and he was slashing with his wand hand as he fell away and Flint's blood was spraying all over him as the wizard's carotid artery and jugular were severed.

Draco cracked his shoulder against the hardwood floor and struck out with his elbow, catching Bole in the face. Then he was kicking Bole off him and scrambling to his feet to see who else was coming.

No one. Blood was dripping from his chin, and he threw back his head to get his hair out of his eyes. He glared around the room but there were no takers. He saw shock, anger, cold assessment, fear—a few men rushing to crouch over Flint's still-warm body. The boys were chittering and staring. He could see it in their eyes—they'd got used to a bored Draco coming to entertain himself with their duels. They'd no doubt heard him mocked as a dilettante and foul-tempered fraud. They'd started to think he was safe.

Now they knew he wasn't.

Some of them were scared. Others looked ready for a wank—ready to hold down someone smaller. The less popular boys should watch out after this.

Draco let himself feel only fury and adrenaline, and the cold certainty that bad things happened and it was better they happen to someone else.

He wiped his chin on his forearm, smearing blood. Blood was pooling, spreading across the waxed hardwood floor. A waste—but, then, who wanted *Flint's* blood, anyway? He sneered and stood up straight.

"So, Avery," he said. "About those plans."

Avery looked Draco's bloodied torso up and down. Took in the wand in his hand.

"Yes, children," drawled Draco, favoring the original guilty party with a look of utter disdain. "A regular Thursday night for me, assassinating the savior of the wizarding world, in the cheapest and most highly trafficked pub in said world, in front of the press, the public, and, evidently, the purity movement's greatest gossip." He transferred his disdain to Bole. "I was actually drawing on Weasley."

"His witch stopped him," sniggered Bole.

"My witch," said Draco dryly. "Otherwise known as the Golden Girl, one third of the Golden Trio. Shockingly, she had an opinion on me executing the other two-thirds."

The boys were worked up, yelling out "You should have done it!" and "Potter's just an auror!" and all manner of nonsense. In a better mood, he'd have taken satisfaction in how quickly the Weasel was overlooked for Potter—he knew it rankled the ginger.

Burke was smirking at him while Avery watched with a frown.

Draco raised an eyebrow. They wanted to do this now?

Draco slid his wand into his pocket and casually began to remove his cufflinks.

The boys elbowed one another and went still.

Even here, Draco didn't display the Dark Mark. The boys' eyes tracked his hands, darting to one another's faces. A few had glimpsed it on the first night; most had only heard about it from the others. Nearly everyone who had the Mark was in Azkaban, in exile, or in the ground. They were all hoping to see it now, shifting for better views of him.

Draco dropped the cufflinks into a pocket and undid the buttons at his chest, looking at Burke and the men clustered around him. They thought they knew where this was going. The boys watched silently, afraid to interrupt.

Then Draco reached over his shoulder, fisted the fabric between his shoulder blades, and pulled the shirt over his head, shucking it from his arms and tossing it aside.

He was watching Burke flinch, Avery's eyes widen minutely, but he heard the sharp intakes of breath and saw Bole step back as the scars slashing across his left side were revealed.

They reached his heart, denser over his left pec, thick at the margins and then hashing over his ribs, streaking across his abs—enough to gut him at the time. At school, they'd only done enough to fix his face—to hide what Potter had done from polite company. Then they'd hushed it up. History is written by the victors; one more detail lost to the war.

Draco ran his hand through his mussed hair and rolled his shoulders back, lolled his head on his neck, letting the runes show—letting it all show.

"Harry Potter did this to me as an untrained teenager in a Hogwarts bathroom because he *didn't like me*. What do you think he's going to do to you on a battlefield?"

The Dark Mark, the scars, the Azkaban prisoner's tattoo: there was a story written across his skin, and it wasn't a flattering one for the purity movement.

He huffed a laugh, and gave the child soldiers a sardonic look. "It's not going to be a pub brawl, boys. Look up the muggle phrase 'cannon fodder.' That's you."

He plucked the wand from his pocket to spin it between his fingers as he advanced on the men. "C'mon, Burke, let's see your battle scars. Oh, that's right—you were in America. It's all just talk and drunk dueling with you lot, and, frankly, my witch puts up a better fight before bed." He looked to Avery, his expression hardening. "So. When are we getting this show on the road? I want to hear *plans*."

"I'll bet you do," called an oily voice, and Flint moved forward, finally, hand on his wand. "Taking them straight back to Potter's mudblood?"

"Oh ho! The golden snitch speaks!" said Draco with a showy wave of his hand. "That's a nice bit of projection, Marcus. How many people did you roll over on while you were ratting me out to the aurors for my veritaserum?"

A low rumble of reactions—the men disturbed by the accusation, the boys impressed by the confirmation that Draco had been brewing illegally.

"I did no such—"

allowed to know her own mind—not give herself up because the thought of her autonomy made everyone mental. Every day, she had to lie to herself to stay in society, every day the world told her that her feelings were dangerous and her instincts suspect, but she couldn't ignore how unsafe these demands that she comply made her feel.

The more time he spent with the revivalists, the more volatile Draco became. Now he was back to picking fights, getting physical, trying to force her to give more than she was ready to give. When he'd ripped the ring off her finger, it had felt like he'd finally had it with her.

He had told her not to keep things from him. He had told her not to hide her needs. And, over and over, she had let him tend to the superficial need while she kept the deeper truth hidden. He wouldn't need to bleed for her if he just took off the ring. She had let him bleed.

Draco liked tending to the scar. Maybe too much. He would come home, angry and withdrawn, and demand to see her arm. "This needs attention," he'd say brusquely when what he meant was *I need attention*. He would hustle her to the en suite and strip her down and boss her about until he opened his wrist and she melted against him and then she would feel him soften too. She would heal him and take him to bed and tell him he was good, and he would give her that stupid, hopeless look of his while she touched him. She hadn't asked him to take off the ring again. She'd just kept touching him. She hadn't wanted to think about why. Her feelings were dangerous, her instincts suspect.

But if he knew the ring hurt her, he knew she wasn't telling him everything. (How long had he known?) She was holding back. Still protecting herself. He'd come home and demanded more of her. She hadn't given it to him because she was scared. And he'd punished them both.

Now he was done. He had taken off the ring that connected them. He'd seen, in the *Prophet*, his chance to get out. He'd even found a way to claim it was her doing. He'd evict her while insisting it was her idea. Then he'd hire Bill to break the bond and tell her it was what she wanted.

Draco bumped her body with his.

"Cho and Oliver," she said, nodding toward the couple by the bar—in a conversation about broom maneuvers, judging by the violent arm and shoulder movements. "Do you think they talk about quidditch sixteen hours a day?"

He snorted—despite himself, she thought. "Yes. Theo dodged a bludger. He hates sports."

She looked back at him, surprised.

"Sometimes we only want someone because they don't want us," he said darkly, his gaze on her.

Hermione felt the back of her neck, her scalp prickling.

Draco's eyes shifted. "Speaking of our newest Unspeakable . . ."

She looked to see Theo Nott loping toward them with the wild-haired Charlie Weasley at his side, a Pucey brooch on the ginger's lapel.

"Granger!" called Theo, turning nearby heads. A man with a notched ear spun quickly away. "How many lies did you tell to get the Ministry to hire me?"

"Almost none," she said as he kissed her on one cheek and then the other. He smelled like spearmint. "Surprisingly."

He straightened, grinning, and draped an elbow over Charlie's shoulder, a gold watch showing at his wrist. Charlie had his hand on his back.

"And you—" Theo caught hold of Draco's chin with his free hand, lifting his own chin with an appraising expression as he tilted Draco's face from side to side. "Beaten for bad behavior?"

"Deservedly," muttered Draco.

Theo tsked. "Don't worry, lover, you're still pretty enough to take home."

"Do you want him, Nott?" asked Hermione dryly.

Draco let Theo slap him on the cheek.

"Docile," said Theo. "I like it. Why—are you sharing, Granger?"

"Giving him away entirely," said Hermione.

Draco glowered at her.

"Maybe I'm not sharing my things anymore," said Charlie, poking Theo in the ribs.

"Oh, *really*," purred Theo, turning to him as he shoved Draco's face away. Draco wheeled on her with narrowed eyes.

"Really," said Charlie, grinning cheekily, his gaze playing over Theo's lips.

"Since when?" asked Theo, his face caught between expressions.

"Since breakfast," said Charlie with a smug little shrug.

"Yeah?" asked Theo.

"Yeah," said Charlie, and he fisted Theo's shirtfront and pulled him in.

Then they were kissing open-mouthed, Theo's fingers in Charlie's loose curls, Charlie's hand at his hip.

"Oi, we're in public!" called a familiar voice, and Hermione looked over to find Ron approaching. He rolled his eyes as Charlie shot a two-fingered salute in his direction and Theo deepened the kiss, the hard line of his jaw moving with his tongue.

Over Ron's shoulder, Hermione could see Parkinson coming in hot in a minidress and platform heels, Neville sauntering close behind.

Ron stopped at a remove, and Hermione felt Draco's hand grip her waist.

"Oh good, you're here, Weasley—not you," said Pansy as she passed Ron. "Weasley! We need to discuss your suit!"

"Mione, can I talk to you for a minute?" Ron's face was drawn.

"No," barked Draco.

Enough of this.

"Malfoy, get down here," snapped Hermione, turning and reaching for his earlobe.

"Oi," he huffed as she jerked his head toward hers.

"Malfoy," she said, her lips at his ear, "why are you being a sulky little bitch when you could be being good for me?"

Draco sucked in a breath.

"I'm going to pay attention to you—"

Citrus. Cloves. Firewhisky. The warmth of his cheek.

"But I want five minutes to hear what Ron has to say."

A noise like a growl in the back of his throat.

"I'll be right where you can see me, and I'll come straight back."

She could feel the tension thrumming through him.

"Then we'll go home."

He went still. Then he nodded, and she released his ear.

"Could I have a kiss, then?" he asked, his face still close to hers.

"When you've earned it."

He straightened, already staring at Ron, his fingertips at her waist.

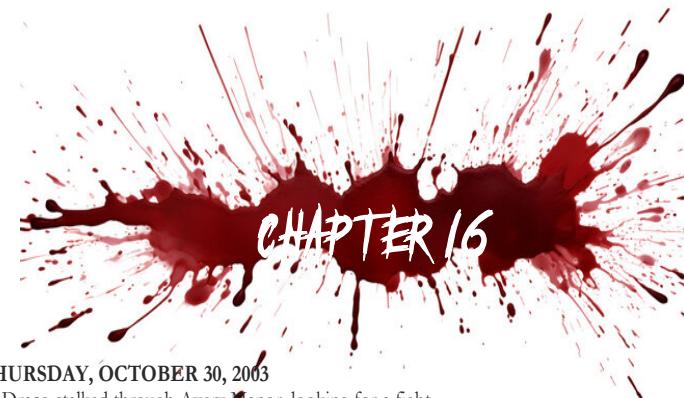
Neville was shaking Charlie's hand when Hermione turned and gestured for Ron to step to the side. She did not look back at Draco.



"Look, Mione—I'm sorry about how things went down. I didn't mean what I said the way it came out. And I would have told you, it's just—you know, with Susan." Ron rubbed at the back of his neck and looked up at her. She'd found this so endearing when they were dating.

Draco had trapped him in a double bind: If he stood up for her too much, he looked like a bad husband; if he didn't stand up for her enough, he looked like a bad friend.

"You probably heard about Flint," said Ron. "Harry's back at the department but I wanted to see if you're all right—"



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2003

Draco stalked through Avery Manor, looking for a fight.

As he neared the ballroom, he could hear the boys dueling—shouted spells and the taunts and calls of encouragement from the spectators. He stripped off his suitcoat and threw it into the corner as he cleared the door, conjuring snakes he cast without warning at the duo in the center of the practice space. They scrambled, turning in quick succession to cast stinging hexes he deflected, the boys along the wall catcalling as he took both duelers on.

He cast a series of fast stingers, aggressively pushing them back. One of the boys caught his shoulder and he shook it off, grinning—it felt so good, the pain. It was nothing like the pain of her hitting him in the face with that hex at the Ministry ball, nothing like the pain of her yelling *I can't defend you* and him knowing she was right. Just an exquisitely sharp sting that let him know he was still in his body, still in the world.

He doused the boys with icy water and one of them dropped his wand, but the other advanced with fire. Draco snorted and doused him again. Then a quick stinger to the face while he was blinking the water out of his eyes.

"You sodding wanker!" shouted the boy after his initial scream and Draco laughed.

He stung him again, twirling his wand, and the boy yelped and yielded.

Draco hoped this one wasn't killed when he sold them all out to Longbottom. He could tell these boys their cause was rotten, but they'd never believe him, would they? They'd have to find it out on their own.

The boy's rivals were mocking him while a friend stepped forward to cast a drying spell. Draco flung a few snakes at the rivals to see them jump back, and then turned toward a commotion at the opposite door—Avery and Burke with both Montagues, Bole, a handful of others, moving into the ballroom in a dense, dark wedge. Flint keeping his distance, his regrown fingers still red and raw.

Draco had a sense memory of being in Malfoy Manor and seeing Rodolphus, Rabastan, the Carrows and their minions enter rooms like this. Rooms that had been his home and then weren't.

"There he is!" called Burke.

"Here I am," said Draco sourly, considering more snakes. Merlin, he could have been Graham Montague, trailing behind this fool.

"Bole, here, was just tonight at the Leaky Cauldron—"

"Sweet Salazar's goddamned dick," muttered Draco.

"Where, apparently, you drew on Harry Potter—"

"Merlin, did you avada him?" exclaimed one of the boys to much excitement. The others were jostling one another, calling out, "You should have!" and "Tell us you did!"

They landed roughly in their bedroom, her pushing him away. She laid into him immediately.

"What the fuck was that, Draco?" She was stood by their bed, her hands on her hips. She hadn't even had a chance to grab her bag before he'd disappeared them.

"Saving your ex-boyfriend from me?" He'd begun to pace in front of her, the coiled energy in his body begging to escape.

"Saving you from yourself! Are you *trying* to go back to Azkaban?"

"Are you trying to put me there? Going out alone so I have to go find you—"

"I thought you were there to find *Ron*," she said. "Because that's who *that* performance was for."

His mouth fell open with exaggerated affront as he turned to her. "*He* picked a fight with *me*."

"And then you treated me like a sex doll to squabble over, with no thought to my feelings—"

"Chief among them *shame* that anyone might think you're fucking me, right?" He tore his hand through his hair, glowering. "I've begged you for an heir and you let him slander me—"

"You're playing revivalist all over town. Your whole cover story is you think I'm *sub-human*—"

"No, my *cover story* is I'm a hypocrite. They think I won't give up the muggleborn pet I'm fucking—"

"Good Godric, *what* are you saying to people?" Adrenaline was spiking through her, her stomach roiling.

"Nothing," he said, his voice going husky but his affect matter-of-fact. "They take one look at you and they know I could never stay away. Then I crucio some kid for asking how your cunt tastes and they know I'm the one on a lead. Weasley's not the only one who'd kill to trade places with me."

He crucioed—what? "Ron doesn't—"

"That's why your other men don't protect you," he said bitterly. "Potter's too busy playing house, and Weasley's so jealous he doesn't know whether he's in love with you or he hates you—"

"That's ridiculous." She raised her chin, crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Ron doesn't *hate* me."

"Oh, but he *does*," he said, wheeling on her. He stepped to her, watching her face. "He hates that he wasn't good enough for you. He hates the idea of you being happy with someone else."

"Then he ought to be quite pleased I'm with you," said Hermione nastily.

"*He is*," hissed Draco, leaning toward her. "He was fucking thrilled when he found out you'd left him only to be matched with me. Thought you could do better, didn't you, and instead the magic decided you were no better than a Death Eater. You *were* the one to leave him, hm?"

Hermione shook her hair back from her face. "It was mutual."

"So, as I said," said Draco, "you left him."

"That was ages ago," said Hermione. "He's married to Susan now—"

"And even she knows the score. He thought he was getting a witch who would look up to him the way you won't." His eyes were intent on her, scanning her face. "He *wants* me to mistreat you. He wants you to wish you were with him instead—"

"That's sick. It's sick you think that way—"

"I think a lot worse," said Draco darkly, looking away, stepping back.

"Oh?" Heat flashed through her. "Have you even been talking about Ron? Or have you been talking about yourself?"

Draco looked at her, his face stiff, his eyes unblinking. Then he stepped back to her and his fingers were on her jaw, his mouth close to hers.

"The problem's not that I hate you, love."

She was holding her breath.

He stepped back, pacing again, anger rolling off him. "You'll defend him but you won't defend me."

"I can't defend you when you're playing Death Eater!" yelled Hermione, her fists clenched.

"Noted," he said, glaring at her. "I'll just get back to it, shall I?"

He was still glaring as he turned on his heel, and then he was gone.

Her anger flared. "You're asking me *after* you ran to the *Prophet*?"

"I didn't run to anyone! They approached *me*, and—Mione, isn't this what we all *wanted*?"

If he only knew. She could testify—to Flint, to Crabbe, to the blackmail, the assaults, the insider trading, the illegal brewing, the contraband. Even if the Wizengamot didn't retroactively approve her appeal, she could send Malfoy back to Azkaban and empty his vaults. She could give him a head start and let him leave the country. Wasn't that exactly what she had wanted?

Malfoy, in her office, making her laugh in the middle of a fight with his absurdly specific mimicry.

Malfoy, eating toast with too much marmalade, Crookshanks on his lap, passing her the morning Prophet with a snarky comment about Shacklebolt.

Malfoy, on the settee in his study, editing her International Magic statement of purpose, a quill between his teeth as he flips to the fifth page.

Malfoy, a lock of hair fallen over his forehead, his face serious as he peers into the cauldron, counting quietly, too focused to realize she's watching him.

Malfoy, heavy on top of her, his voice broken as he promises, "You'll never be rid of me, never never never never."

She didn't want to be rid of Draco.

He had told her the truth: He had no higher ideals. His desire for power had no goal—it was merely an instinct for self-preservation that could not be sated. He wasn't brave—he was needy and self-loathing, and that made him reckless. He didn't believe in the greater good, only loyalty to his own. He was selfish.

But he allowed her to be selfish too. And she selfishly didn't want rid of him. Even if she was at her wits' end with him tonight. Even if he was impossible. Even if he was trying to goad her into it.

"What *I want*," she told Ron, "is to be taken seriously at the Ministry, and I can't do that when the *Prophet* is making me out to be an incompetent—"

"Mione, what are you on about? He was threatening you!"

What was she on about? You spend all your time lying to them. She took a deep breath.

His eyes fell to her hand, and he grabbed her wrist. "He took off the ring. Has he been forcing you—"

"He's not raping me, Ron. We get on, all right?" She pulled her hand away. "I know he acts a prat—"

"This isn't about him being a *prat*. It's about him being a *fascist*. We thought Azkaban had knocked him back. You kept telling us you were fine. Ginny kept telling us to back off. You were fighting over brooms, for fuck's sake. Now he's gone full *Death Eater*—"

"He doesn't believe that rot. He has his own reasons for getting close to the revivalists—"

"Like the fact that he agrees with them?" Ron's eyes were wide. "How are you falling for this? Whatever he's telling you, it's bullshit. Look at what he *does*. What's he say when he's not in Knockturn, roughing up anyone who won't join the cause? He's just play-acting with them? With you, it's real? Does he tell you he loves you?"

"No, of course not—"

"He's never felt this way before—"

"No—"

"It's different with you, you're so different? You know it's a fetish with them—they spend all their time obsessing—"

"It's not like that—"

"Merlin, Mione, don't tell me you're actually sleeping with him for the votes."

Her face had twisted up. "What are you on about?"

He looked right at her. "The rumors you're trading sex with Malfoy for the Wizengamot votes he gets you."

She jolted toward him, her fists clenched at her sides. "I'm not *trading sex for votes*—"

"That's what I said. I told everyone there was no bleeding way—"

"Just because he supports my career—"

"Oh, so he *does* know what to say—"

"My work is important to me, and Draco understands that—"

"He understands how to play you. He's just telling you what you want to hear. He's going to sell you out and you're making it *easy* for him—"

"That's not what's happening—"

"He doesn't care about you! He's just fucking you because he can—"

"Fuck you, Ron. Maybe I'm just fucking him because he's a good shag—"

"That's your excuse? He impaled you with his dick?"

Hermione slapped him—

Then an arm was wrapping around her waist—"Whoa there, Granger. You're with me now—"

Spear mint—Nott, dragging her back—

Draco was stepping in front of her, his wand in hand—

Draco, his voice dead: "What did you say to her, Weasley?"

Ron, disgusted: "What did *you* say, to get her to even touch you?"

Draco, sneering: "I couldn't say anything with her holding my head down—"

Then Ron and Draco were hexing each other—

Stepping back to cast, the floor clearing—

Nott was hauling her back, his footwork sure, his head over her shoulder. "C'mon, Dray—" A dark grin in his voice.

Draco was spitting out a flurry of stingers, Ron forced to slow his attack with protegos.

"Fair fight," called Nott, his arm tight around her, and Hermione glanced back to see Neville stone-faced and Charlie's lips pursed.

Draco stepped into a stinger, absorbing it with narrowed eyes. Then he pressed forward with another bombardment as Ron held his ground.

Pansy's hand was on Nott's arm, her nails digging into the tuxedo wool. "Get 'im," she said under her breath.

Draco lashed out with a vicious diffindo—

Partygoers were scrambling, casting shields as spells ricocheted—

Aurors were moving through the crowd—

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Ron, Draco's wand flying toward him—

Draco, teeth bared, hit a bleeding Ron with a wandless langlock and charged him—

He swiped Ron's wand arm aside and punched him in the jaw—

A punch to the gut—

Someone was screaming—

Hermione was frozen against Nott's hard frame—

Draco threw Ron to the ground, roaring in pain as Ron hit him at close range with a stinger.

Then Draco was kicking Ron, platinum hair flying, as Ron hexed him repeatedly, his voice hoarse and broken—

Draco dropped, snarling, onto Ron, punching him in the face—

Ron threw aside his wand to swing wildly at his head—

Draco punched him, his knuckles bloody—

Ron's fist connected, rocking Draco's head back—

Hermione slipped Nott's hold—

"Granger!"

Her heart in her throat, her wand raised—

And everything went dark as she was stupefied from behind.

"Jesus Christ," said Harry.

"Draco, I'm going to be cross with you when we get home," said Hermione, low.

He leaned into her ear and whispered, "And I'm going to tie you up so I know where you're at and fuck you for the rest of the night."

Her chin jutted out, her head cocking to the side, as she tried to hide the shiver that ran down her spine.

"What did he say to you, Hermione?" demanded Ginny. "Malfoy, did you just threaten her?"

"Yes," said Draco, his eyes seeking out Hermione's. "And I meant every word."

She glared at him, at the look of cold satisfaction on his face. Godric, he was beautiful.

"Mione, what did he say?"

"Tell them, love." His gray eyes bore into hers. "Ron wants to know."

"It's an empty threat," she said, not breaking eye contact with Draco.

"It's not." He looked to the rest of the table. "But what would you lot do about it, anyway?"

"Do we need to step outside, Malfoy?" Ron was on his feet, his wand in hand.

Draco was immediately standing, wand out—Harry right after him.

"Are you hating me on, Ronald Weasley?"

Hermione's head whipped around to Susan as the rest of the table froze, staring at Ron's wife.

"Are you seriously fighting over your ex-girlfriend right now when the whole reason we're here tonight is to tell her we're having a baby?" Susan was furious. "First telling Mione was a whole thing. Now you've forgotten I'm even at the table."

"What the fuck—"

"It's not me, it's Malfoy—"

"Excuse me—I'm sorry," said Hermione. "Congratulations, you two. That's—"

"Oh, shut it," said Susan, pushing away the seltzer Hermione hadn't taken note of until now.

Telling Mione.

Hermione looked between Harry and Ginny, their faces in matching grimaces. "You already knew?

Or—

Ginny gave her a tight-lipped smile.

"You planned it."

"Yeah, Mione. Our kids will go to Hogwarts together, just like we did." Ron looked frustrated with her, as though she had started this fight with Susan, as though he shouldn't have to explain this. "Sorry if you feel left out, but you've been single forever and now it's not like you're getting knocked up by this Death Eater."

"Not for this Death Eater's lack of trying," snarled Draco.

Ginny and Susan gasped and it felt like the entire table turned to Hermione as one. It felt like she couldn't get a full breath to speak.

"Quit taking the piss," snapped Ron. "Hermione would never—"

"Go on, darling. Tell them how hard I've been trying—"

"And we all know you wouldn't taint your precious bloodline—"

Draco jerked up his wand with an eerie calm that made Hermione grab for his arm—her chair knocked back, both hands on his wrist. It wasn't his registered wand—

"Draco! Don't!"

He looked at her, his face blank. Then he turned back to Ron, his jaw set. "Tend to your wife, Weasley, instead of obsessing over mine."

Then he pulled her into him and turned on his heel, disappearing them right as the table erupted into shouts.



Hermione suddenly understood that Susan had skipped her birthday drinks because Ron had told her Draco would be there. A wave of guilt, knowing Susan had every reason to associate Draco with the dark wizard who had killed so much of her family. Had he seen the lists with Susan's parents' names too?

"I didn't invite him." Hermione couldn't disguise the defensiveness in her voice as the others looked to her. She hadn't—even thought to when Harry talked her into after-work drinks—but she didn't have to tell him where to find her while she wore the Black ring.

"How will that look," said Ron, "if we're sat drinking with him only a month after we raided him?"

"You're sat drinking with *me*," snapped Hermione.

"Everyone knows we weren't raiding *you*," said Harry, exasperated.

And then Draco was standing over her, dressed in black, the Azkaban tattoo making him look disreputable. (He *was* disreputable.)

"Darling," he purred, his low voice full of menace, and she felt warmth spread through her.

She raised her eyebrow as though indifferent. "Malfoy."

He leaned down over her, his right hand on the back of her chair, his left thumb and forefinger catching her chin as he kissed her cheek, caging her in.

"You know I don't want you out alone," he murmured in her ear, the narrow point of his nose against her. Citrus. Cloves. The warmth of his breath on her skin.

She turned her head to him, their faces close together, his fingertips still on her. Her eyes roamed over his sharp chin, the petulant mouth she now knew too well. "Don't loom, Malfoy."

He smirked. "Yes, ma'am."

He hooked a chair from a nearby table and dropped into it between her and Harry, his arm draped across the back of her chair, his side hard and warm against her shoulder. "Mrs. Potter, Mrs. Weasley, Weasley, Potter."

"Malfoy," said Harry and Ron in unison. Ginny and Susan looked wary. Hermione realized she'd erred in prompting him to sit. His nearness had distracted her.

"You weren't invited here, Malfoy," said Ron, his tone challenging but not yet angry, his forearms on the table.

"He's behaving, Ron," said Hermione, the note of warning in her voice intended for both men.

"Yes, Ron. I'm behaving." He sounded smug as he subtly shifted closer, nestling her into him, his thumb beginning to rub slow circles on her shoulder. She was meant to be pushing him away—she could see it on their faces. "Now that I know where my wife is."

"She's her own person," said Harry sharply.

"With her own enemies," said Draco crisply. "In addition to mine. So you'll understand if I'm overprotective."

"It's your friends she has to worry about—"

"It's fine, Ron—"

"We gave you a chance, Malfoy." Ron had leaned forward. "But you've reverted to form, haven't you?"

There was an iron edge to Draco's voice now. "You shouldn't have given me a chance, Weasel. You should have just killed me. But that was rubbish, wasn't it? I haven't got so much as a stern talking to from you." He chuckled his chin at Harry. "You either, Chosen One. Let me take her straight home, didn't you?"

"I'm sat right here!" barked Hermione, pushing away to stare at Draco and Ron in turn.

"Mione told us she could handle you," said Ron, locked onto Draco as though she hadn't spoken.

"Oh, she's handled me *beautifully*," said Draco, his eyes raking over her. "So," his gaze shifted to Ron, his expression cruelly amused, "well played."

"Malfoy, you—"

"That's right, love, give it to me." He was smiling, his eyes back on her mouth as though they were alone. His sudden, singular focus on her in the crowded room felt obscene. "C'mon, love. I like it when you hurt me."



SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2006

Hermione woke on wet stone, chilled through to the bone. She jerked upright, instantly alert, her hands scrabbling for her wand in her skirt pocket. It wasn't there. She was frantically patting down the stone bench, jumping up to turn and search it—when she froze, realization setting in. She was in a cell. Of course her wand was gone.

What had Draco done?

When Draco had told her he'd hurt blood supremacists, maimed Crabbe, killed Flint, she'd told herself *so what?* If Lavender and Fred and Tonks could die, so could they. But seeing Draco throw himself onto Ron like that . . . No thought, no hesitation, snarling as he kicked him as hard as he could—like he wanted Ron dead. Like no amount of pain would stop him. Was that how he'd killed Flint? Had Draco got him down on the ground and slit his throat?

A loud, rusty creak—she spun, her skirt swirling around her legs, and saw movement in the shadows. The cell door was opening—and then Malfoy was shoved inside, his disheveled white-blond hair like a candleflame in the gloom.

She rushed to him. "Draco! Draco!"

She was clutching at him, at the tuxedo he still wore. He was turning toward her, her hands on him.

His swollen mouth was bloodied, blood both fresh and tacky at his temple, veins of red from the stingers streaking across his impossibly white skin, his hair fallen over his forehead. She was grabbing his hard, bony wrists—too roughly if they were broken. *Then they break your wrist.* But they weren't—of course they weren't.

His pale gray eyes were intent on her as her gaze swept over his face, his bruising cheek.

"Did you kill him?" she asked.

"That's what you want to know?" He sneered at her, baring his bloody teeth. His voice was raspy from the duel.

She didn't let go of his wrists. "Yes, I want to know," she said. "Do your duty, Malfoy—inform me. I demand to know what you've done."

He lifted his chin. His ruined lips were parted, his eyes heavy-lidded as he looked down his pointy nose at her. He'd gone still but she could feel the tension thrumming through him. "So what if it didn't go his way?"

Hermione sucked in air—

He'd killed Ron.

—and then she was crying, nauseous with fear.

She dropped his wrists to cover her face, her hands at her temples, pain lancing through her. She was gasping, her chest heaving—

She was choking—

She couldn't breathe—

She was going to lose everyone. One way or another, she was going to lose everyone.

What had he done?

What had he done?

"Love, love—" He was pulling at her hands. "Love. I didn't—I didn't kill him." His voice was torn, his breath catching. His fingertips were at her jaw, tilting her face to him. He was bent over her, kissing her cheeks. "Don't cry, love. I didn't—"

"Draco—" She was trying to breathe through the tears. She was dizzy. Her chest so tight. "I don't want—"

"Don't defend him—" He pulled back, a hard edge to his voice. "What did he say to you?"

She was shaking her head. It didn't matter. "Only what everyone thinks. You're telling me what I want to hear—"

His lip was curling.

"You're going to turn on me and I'm making it easy for you—"

"What about you is *easy* for me?" he sneered.

She sobbed out a laugh. "Then why do you make it harder? A public fight—"

He looked outraged, his brow furrowed, his mouth in a snarl. "No one will ever see me *stand by*—"

"What if you'd—"

"Still defending—"

"Draco?" She sighed, slumping with the weight of her frustration. She looked up at him—his bloodied face, the wrinkle between his angry eyes. "*I don't want you going back to Azkaban.*"

A breathy whine escaped him, his forehead creased, mouth open like she'd just slammed his fingers in a door. He stared at her.

"I don't want you to go to Azkaban." She could feel the wrinkle between her own eyes. "You can't do things that will get you sent back—"

Then he was kissing her roughly, hungrily, his shoulders hunched, his hands on her face, her mouth full of the taste of his blood and her own tears.

He was backing her up against the rough stone wall, pressing against her, his knee between her legs. Chills were running down her spine—the cold, wet wall—his hot, ragged breath. His hands were heavy on her, at her breasts, her ribs.

She was breathing hard, gripping his arms, her head thrown back against the wall as she blinked her eyes clear. He was licking the tears off her jaw, his pointy nose against her.

"You still want to keep me?"

"I'm trying to, Draco—"

He leaned into her, his mouth on hers. He was the only warm thing in the cell, the heat seeping off him. She was pulling him closer. His hand was working her skirt up. The silk was damp and gritty from the stone floor. She could feel him reach down to yank up the fabric as he kissed her, his tongue insistent. It was pooled over his forearm and then his fingers found her knickers. He stroked her clit through the thin silk and she sagged against the cold stone, more warmth pooled low in her belly.

He broke the kiss, his lips against hers. His fingers sliding on wet silk.

She breathed with him, her hips shifting for him, pleasure radiating up, her hand tight on his bicep.

His swollen mouth hovered over hers. "You don't want them to revoke the match? You don't want to leave me?"

"No, Draco—I told you we'd go home—"

"You don't want to move out?"

"*No.* Draco. You're the one kicking me out—"

"No! No, love. No. I just—No." Pleading. His fingers had stopped moving, his hand sliding lower—he had hold of her cunt. "You know I'd never let you go. You *know* that—"

"Draco," she sighed, "I know you'll say anything when you're fucking me."

"I'm not fucking you yet," he said, his other hand moving to his trouser button.

if he took it off. But she hadn't asked again—she didn't think she was safe. And he hadn't told her because, if he took it off, she wouldn't need him. And the fact that he thought that way proved she was right.



"*You,*" she said, storming into her office. She skirted him in the guest chair as he studied his fingernails. "What did you say to Rowle?"

"What I had to," he said nastily, looking up with his eyes narrowed.

"We'll discuss this at home," she said, dropping into her chair as Francesco surreptitiously watched.

"Fine." And he was up in a flash, sweeping out the door with his robes streaming behind him.



"Francesco has finally resigned," she said, holding up a copy of the latest *Wizarding World News*. "He was already afraid of you, and now he doesn't feel comfortable taking your money."

"So much for loyalty," sneered Draco. "That's the last time I hire a Puff."



A photograph in The Daily Prophet: Malfoy and Bole in Knockturn Alley, their heads turned down and away. Malfoy looks up, blood splattered across his face, and mutters something before the view jars and falls to the cobblestones.



Hermione threw the *Prophet* down on the blotter, her hand on her hip. "Who did you hurt this time?"

He looked up at her from behind his desk. "Someone who deserved it," he said coolly.



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2003

"Bugger," said Ginny, sat to her right.

Hermione looked up to see a shock of white-blond hair—Malfoy wending his way toward their table in the back of the Leaky. It was a busy Thursday night but Draco cut through the knots of drinkers as though he didn't see or hear them, his pale gray eyes locked on her. Hermione felt a jolt of adrenaline, her heartrate picking up. He had fucked her hard and fast that morning, whispering "mine mine mine mine," and then watched her dress while he drank his tea. He came back from late nights with the revivalists withdrawn but frantic just below the surface.

"We said just us!" said Susan, her eyes wide.

Now she was shaking her head. "No. No—they'd have let me beg and married me anyway. You were the one with the power. You could have threatened Warrington like you did today. Why would you just go along?"

Draco didn't like this question. His lips were in a tight line, as though part of him were afraid the other part would answer. He reached up and began to yank the dress off her shoulders—

"Oh."

He liked that even less.

"Is that it?" She was staring at him but he wouldn't meet her eyes. "Did you really think I'd do it? Put you out of your misery. Was *that* the plan?"

Draco looked to her, his eyes too wide, his jaw too clenched. It hadn't been the plan. But it hadn't *not* been the plan. He hadn't let himself think it through.

There had been that moment in Warrington's office—that moment when she was meant to burst into tears and whine and plead and, instead, she'd snarled, *Let's get this over with*—that moment when she'd chosen him as her punishment rather than lower herself to beg—in that moment he'd thought anything he goaded her into would be better than what he had on alone. Anything.

She was watching him. "But then why do the contract? The ring? Why put on your own dog and pony show?"

"There's a right way to do things," he snapped. It was true. He'd gone to the vaults. He'd stood and picked out the ring with her birthstone. Tradition. He hadn't been able to stop himself. "Maybe I meant what I said to the Wizengamot. Why wouldn't I want to find out what you'd do to me? If they were going to drag me back through the mud, I reckoned I'd drag you down with me and it'd serve everyone right." He shrugged, a poor pantomime of indifference. "But maybe something else would happen. Maybe I just wanted to see."

"That's it," she said. "You just wanted to see."

"Why not?" He looked at her sharply. "I wasn't doing anything else with my life."

Her whole face tightened. "What about what I wanted? For *my life*?"

"What about it?" He shoved the dress down, off her hips, so that it pooled at her feet. She was in her bra and knickers. He was back in her face. "Do you think you'd have got it with another man? Who is it you want instead? Wood? Was I wrong about McLaggen? Would you have found a way to get Weasley back if I'd appealed?"

"Enough with Ron—"

"Who, then?" He was demanding she hurt him, but he wanted to hurt this other man too.

She shook her head.

"Did you shag Nott?" There—he'd blurted it out.

Her face screwed up—confusion? Or stalling. "Wha?"

"Last night." He was stood staring at her now, his hands by his sides. A strange sensation—like his heart was twisting—was lancing through his chest, his back. It was killing him to ask. It was killing him to wonder. He kept picturing it—Nott kissing her, his body on top of hers, her looking up at Nott with her gold-flecked eyes—and then this icy hot sensation would move through him.

Those gold-flecked eyes widened.

She sucked in a breath—

"*Draco Lucius Malfoy*."

Draco's heart stopped.

"How dare you say that to me. You think I went straight from shagging you in a holding cell to cheating on you with your best mate?" Her chin was thrust forward. "What is the *matter* with you? Why would you think that?"

"I—" She'd never said his name like that before. *Cheating on you*.

"Because you cheat on me at Avery's parties? Is that it?" She was smacking his chest now—hard, but not nearly hard enough. Her face was puckered up. "Do they bring in girls? Is that why you come home so randy—you can't get off with that ring on?"

Draco's heart was hammering in his chest. *Cheat on me, come home*—she sounded like a real wife. His wife. She sounded *burt*. "No, love—" He grabbed up her hands. "There are no girls. It's just talk and dueling—"

"Is that what you call it?" she sneered. "I know you're a slut—"

"There are no girls! I don't fuck the boys! I don't want to fuck anyone but you!" yelled Draco. "I'm trying to fuck you now!"

"Oh, very nice," she spat, trying to wrestle her hands free, but he wouldn't let go. "I didn't fuck Nott. Don't send your man to me and then blame me when he's there!"

"You're right, love. You're right." He was trying to get an arm around her but she had her elbows out. "It's just—everyone fucks Nott. He's taller than me. He's better looking—"

"I don't fuck people based on how tall they are!" she shouted. "I have to actually *care* about them—"

"You care about me?" He was shouting it like an accusation.

"Of course I care about you, you stupid prat!" She wouldn't meet his eyes as she fought him.

"Then why do you want them to have matched you with someone else! What's wrong with me! Why aren't I good enough?"

A stupid, stupid question—he knew everything that was wrong with him.

He dropped her hands, looking away—and she collapsed against him. He didn't understand it. She fell into his chest, her hands at his shirtfront. Her shoulders were hunched, her head ducked.

"I just want to have a say," she said, her voice small. "I want it to be my choice."

He put his arms around her. Finally.

"We don't always get a choice," he said. *I didn't get a choice*.

She was huddled against him; he was holding her firmly, his hands on her bare skin. He bowed his head over hers. "We don't choose the world we're in. We don't choose what it does to us. But I made a choice when I didn't appeal. I thought you made a choice, too. When you didn't beg Warrington. When you warned me about the raid. When you told me not to go to Azkaban. I thought you made a choice, love. I thought you chose me."

She breathed against him. She didn't say anything—she didn't disagree.

Then she nodded. A small movement. But he felt it.

"Aren't we a good team, love? I think we are. We'll make you Minister of Magic. You'll have a say in everything. You'll have your revenge."

She went still against him. Draco held his breath.

"You really think I could be Minister?" she asked quietly.

"Of course," said Draco, feeling the cold of Azkaban in his bones. "You're the brightest witch of your age, and you're a Malfoy. You have all the weapons you need."

Her skin was goosebumped in the room's chill. He tightened his hold on her.

"Let me have you," he whispered. "You already have me."



The clawfoot tub was filling, steam rising in the cold room.

She'd lifted her chin and kissed him, tentative, and now his lips were at her neck as he unclasped her strapless bra, his touch light after they'd yelled and grappled with each other. He dropped it to the floor and then his hands were on her breasts, her nipples hard against his palms. He sighed into her shoulder, the heat radiating off him, and she shivered.

He backed her up against the tub, seating her on its lip, and then he was tugging her knickers off as he kneeled before her. He kissed up her inner thigh, pulling her onto him, pressing himself into her, his hot mouth on her. He kissed and licked her hungrily, insistently, as though it had been much longer than two days since he'd tasted her. He was tonguing circles against her clit, his brow furrowed.

"Draco," she sighed, and his fingertips dug into her thighs.

His touch was so comforting when she was still shot through with the sadness and insecurity under all her rage. She'd wanted to stay curled inside her hard protective shell. But then in that holding cell she'd thought she'd lose him, in the Wizengamot gallery she'd thought he wanted out, and her fear had cracked her open and it was so painful.

Hermione's head was full of howlers. She was meant to stay sweet and open and vulnerable and trusting while also shutting out the constant threats and criticism, and she couldn't do it—she couldn't be both. She'd had to harden her heart and understand that this was just the way the world worked—people didn't like smart, ambitious witches, they didn't like angry women, they didn't like her. But accepting that didn't somehow make her impervious to attack; it didn't make her anticipate and guard against it less. She was still just as hurt and just as anxious to avoid more pain, just as heartbroken over the love she couldn't get. *What's wrong with me? Why aren't I good enough?*

After her parents, Hermione felt that everyone would leave her and it would be her fault. It *was* her fault with her parents. Then she'd been too hard-driving, too damaged for Ron. Too career-oriented and emotionally distant for the others. She'd held off Draco as long as she could, sure he would hurt her if she didn't. And he had. People hurt you when you let them get close. People hurt you when you cared about them.

She remembered his icy gray eyes as he stared down the Wizengamot. She *had* doubted him. Then he'd threatened them all—over her. He'd told the entire wizarding world he wouldn't give her up. It was awful—she closed her eyes, blocking out everything but his mouth, his hands—to feel such relief at being wanted.

Draco Malfoy had never said he loved her—and would she have believed him, if he had? The spite, the anger, the uncertainty, the unarticulated hope for something else—that felt real and true. She understood that. She had felt it too. No, Draco Malfoy had never said he loved her, but he kept showing her he wouldn't go away.

She shouldn't find comfort in his possessive behavior. She shouldn't have shagged him after he'd intimidated Cormac—shouldn't feel safe with Nott because he was territorial—shouldn't feel valued because he'd wreck Malfoy LTD to punish anyone in his way. She shouldn't be grinding against his face now, making impatient noises. She shouldn't. But he knew what she wanted, and he wanted to give it to her, and she felt a sick thrill racing through her at the thought that she'd give him what he wanted too if it kept him on his knees.

Let me have you.

You'll have a say in everything. You'll have your revenge.

You'll have a say in everything.

You'll have your revenge.

She gasped and his mouth clamped onto her as her cunt clenched on his fingers and the spasms rocked through her. She was gripping the hard edge of the clawfoot tub, trying to stay upright. She shuddered against him, her heart racing, her breath caught in her throat. She exhaled finally, blinking and twitching, and then he was delving back into her.

"Draco," she murmured, looking down at that white-blond hair.

He hummed in response, his tongue on her.

"You look very pretty on your knees."

"Oh, love—" He was grinning against her. He kissed her thigh, looking up at her with those icy gray eyes. "Is that the nicest thing you've ever said to me?"

He sat back on his heels, put his fingers in his mouth, his eyes on hers, and sucked.

Godric.

He was taking the studs out of his shirt as he got to his feet, letting them fall to the floor. She reached for the waistband of his trousers. He was smirking when he pulled off his shirt, wiped his mouth with it.

"Draco—"

out of her heels. He shivered—it was a thrill every time, that little moment when she suddenly got shorter and he suddenly got taller.

He took hold of her hand—he was going to hold it when he wanted to now, he'd decided—and towed her to the en suite and the clawfoot tub. They'd been doing the bloodwork there since she gave up pretending she wouldn't get naked with him. He wanted to be naked with her now. It was the only thing that would make him feel better. (It would, wouldn't it?) He wouldn't fuck it up this time.

It was midday and the light was streaming in through the dark green in the stained glass, playing off the ferns. He toed his shoes off onto the slate tiles and turned to her, dropping her hand to step behind her and reach for the buttons at her nape.

"I'm not a doll," she said, even as she bowed her head for him.

This old fight? "I know, darling." But he did love to undress her. He was making quick work of the buttons. Had Nott done them up for her?

"That's how I felt today," she said darkly. "A plaything for you and the Wizengamot to fight over. I didn't know what would happen to me."

"Love." He stepped into her, kissing the back of her bare neck, his arms snaking around her, holding her tight against him. She smelled like sandalwood—like Nott. He could feel her breathing. "You doubted me? I told you I'd never let you go."

She stiffened in his arms.

Here it came. Her back was pressed to his chest, his heart beating hard against it.

"You told me you'd appeal. In your very first letter. The first thing you wrote. *Obviously, I am appealing.*"
"Obviously, I am appealing—"

She pried his arms off her, her fingernails digging in. She was turning on him. "You acted like you were *stuck* with me. A public humiliation *forced* on you. The whole time I was negotiating that contract, I thought my appeal might still be granted. Now I find out, in front of the press, from the *Wizengamot*, what, apparently, half the Ministry already knew—that it *would* have been granted but you didn't appeal. Why would you lie about that? Did you know the ring would hurt me from the start?"

"I *didn't* know. Nott worked it out after I saw your arm. But of course you'd think that of me." He sneered but his heart wasn't in it.

He caught up her left wrist and began to tug off the tight lace sleeve. He wanted her naked. She let him—she'd got used to his hands all over her, hadn't she? "That's why I lied. I knew you'd think there was some *plot* if I didn't appeal. I just didn't. I didn't see the point."

"You didn't mind being married to me." The skepticism in her voice. "After *years* spent telling me you couldn't stand me—"

"I wouldn't inflict *me* on someone I *liked*—now, would I?"

"That's it?" she demanded. "You married me out of spite—"

"And?" said Draco, bitter about where this was going. He began to work the other sleeve loose. "It was a dog and pony show. It didn't matter what I did. Shacklebolt's signature legislation and the whole Golden Trio had come out against it. Saint Potter addressed the Wizengamot, and they still pushed it through. No one was doing favors for *me*. They'd only run my trial photos with a retrospective of my crimes so people would start spitting on me in public again."

She'd gone quiet—she had to recognize the truth in what he said.

"I got the letter and it was a bad joke, giving me the Golden Girl, but I reckoned Shacklebolt needed a win and had got you in line. Then you fought it and I realized they meant to scare you and I was the worst thing they could think of. Once you'd apologized to the right people, they'd have ginned up a reason to put me back in prison, matched you to some Hufflepuff, sent you on another little war hero tour. But you only hacked them off more. That day in his office, you were meant to beg Warrington, not scream at him. They just wanted to see you on your knees, darling. You could have got out of this so easily."

She was stood there, blinking at him. Had she really never realized?

slap the cunt and they'd moved as one. Nott had headed straight for her; he didn't need to look to Draco. He'd known to wait for her after he'd bollocks it and let her get taken in. They didn't have to discuss things like this. They'd grown up around the same people, they thought the same way. He and Nott were a lot alike.

Draco's eyes roved over his wife's face, her furrowed brow. He and Nott were a lot alike. Except Nott was better than him. He hadn't taken the Mark. He didn't play Death Eater—wouldn't even pretend, wouldn't go near Avery and his mates. It was Draco's job to keep it that way—to do the dirty work so Nott would never be forced to, to make sure Avery's lot knew that Nott was under his protection so they didn't go near him either.

Had she cried on Nott's shoulder?

She'd cried on Nott's shoulder and then—

No.

Nott was notorious but he wouldn't do that. Not to Draco. Not with her.

Never.

Certainly not.

Surely not.

He wouldn't even be tempted.

But who wouldn't be? Look at her.

He wouldn't do it, though.

Unless maybe they had before. That story about the restricted section. It was awfully . . . *specific*.

She and Nott had been at the top of the class together. Draco had been, too, but he'd studied in the Slytherin rooms. And Theo had been respectful—that was his thing, he was nice to girls. That wasn't Draco's thing. He'd slept with the girls who liked to be picked on. (Or to pick on him—a couple of the older Slytherin girls, Salazar. Draco had been put through his paces.) But Theo was a sweetheart. He would have been nice to her.

Maybe she'd wanted to punish Draco for what he'd done to the Weasel, or maybe she'd just wanted someone to finish what Draco had started in that holding cell—someone who'd do it properly, not a prat who pressed her up against a wet stone wall. What had Draco been thinking? He'd seen her stupefied and stopped fighting, let the Weasel get in one last shot before the aurors mobbed him. Then he'd felt the chill of the cells and been desperate to find her. He'd made her cry—she hardly ever cried anymore—and he'd been desperate to get her back, to prove to himself she still wanted him, the only way he knew how.

He'd pushed her up against that cold stone wall, pushed his way inside her, and she was so warm—for a few minutes, it was everything he wanted. He was as close as he could get, she was holding onto him so tight, the world shrank down to her. But it wasn't good for her, was it?

That's for you, not me.

Draco sighed, pushing down the guilt and embarrassment that made him want to wriggle out of his skin.

Nott had been right to stay near when she didn't have her wand. His bed was the safest place for her in that cursed manor—that was the truth. He could trust Nott with her anywhere. He didn't have a problem with it. He didn't *want* to have a problem with it.

He had a problem with it.

She was taking off Nott's cloak, laying it carefully across the back of the settee. Next, she'd tell Draco she had to return it. *Fuck*, he needed to rein this in.

He threw his tuxedo jacket onto the bed.

"Let me see your arm, love." She still needed him for that. One last time. *He should never have taken off that ring*.

He moved toward her. She was in last night's silk and lace, the skirt shortened for day. Nott's work—she was hopeless with clothing. Then Draco was stood in front of her as she looked up at him and stepped

He looked down at the bruises mottling his torso, red streaks from the stingers. He snorted. "Don't feel too bad for the Weasel. He got his hits in."

He dropped his shirt and shucked off his trousers and pants, his socks. "Get in that tub, love," he said, bending to kiss her. "You smell like Nott's soap and I hate it."

"Says the git who smells like a holding cell." But she was sinking into the hot water, her limbs loose after what he'd done with his mouth. He was climbing in behind her in only his rings. "I told you to be good—"

"But I'm not good, love. I'm just yours." He began taking down her hair, plucking out the hairpins and tossing them carelessly onto the floor. Then his fingers were unraveling her braids and gathering up her loose curls, her hair pulling at her scalp.

She leaned back against him, lightheaded from the heat of the bath, the heat of his body, the confusing rush of emotions from the day.

He accioed the bloodletting ring and replenishing potion. She heard him pull the cork from the bottle with his teeth and spit it onto the floor—he'd started drinking it first. He leaned and reached over the edge of the tub and she heard glass rolling on slate. Then he was running his thumb down the scar, hissing with displeasure. "My fault," he muttered.

His arms were tight around her, hemming her in. She watched as he opened his right wrist in front of her, blood dripping into the water. Then he slid it down her inner arm. The relief from his blood was immediate—she melted against him, more warmth spreading through her, pooling low in her belly. He healed himself and then worked the blood into the scar and her cunt clenched, little aftershocks rolling through her.

"Draco," she sighed. "Will you fuck me after this?"

"You want my cock, love?"

She knew a prompt when she heard one. "I want your cock, Draco. I want you to fuck me."

He shivered against her in the warm, bloody water. "Now, *that* is the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"That's ridiculous, Draco—do I really never compliment you?" (She didn't.)

"I don't know, dear. What's a compliment?"

She didn't keep the smile out of her voice. "You don't know what a compliment is?"

"No, I've never heard one," said Draco, kissing her neck. "Not from you. Can you give me an example, so I know what one sounds like?"

"For instance, if I were to say you have beautiful handwriting."

"I had lessons," said Draco. "That's the best thing you can say about me, is it?"

"It's your sole redeeming quality, yes," said Hermione. "That and you're good at eating cunt."

"Now, *that* I had to work out on my own," said Draco, humming against her. "Well, not *entirely* on my own—"

Hermione jolted forward, water sloshing. "This is why I don't give you compliments!" She turned to glare at him. "Never again, Malfoy. Never again. Do you want to hear all about—"

"*No, I do not,*" he ground out, glaring back. A hard exhale. Then, softer, his eyes playing over her face: "Forgive me, love. It's been a long time since anyone was jealous. I'm still getting used to the idea that you care."

"You don't have to make me jealous to find out I care," snapped Hermione.

"I don't?" said Draco, pulling her to him, kissing her shoulder. "Tell me? That you care? Without calling me a stupid prat, if you please."

"But you're being a stupid prat."

"Pretend I'm not."

"If you *weren't*," said Hermione, facing forward, her heart beating faster—why was she afraid to say this? She couldn't look at him. "I'd say I care about you. And I'd tell you that you're smart and handsome and brilliant at politics and potions and I like your hands and mouth—"

"What they do?" His fingertips were traveling gently across her.

"How they look. But, yes, also what they do. I'd say I like being with you, and I should have thanked you for the bookstore a long time ago. Because I love it. Thank you, Draco."

He gathered her up and squeezed her to him, his pointy chin over her shoulder. "Maybe someday I'll stop being a prat and you can tell me those things."

"Maybe," she said. She sighed. "Why do you even want me, Draco? I'm not very nice to you."

"Why would I want you to be nice?"

"I'm just penance for you, aren't I? You'll get tired of it—"

"You know I'm a glutton for punishment, love—"

"No, I'm awful. Damaged, untrusting, *fueled by anger*—"

"My favorite emotion—"

"I never open up to anyone. No one likes me—"

"No one to make me jealous—"

"I get a hundred howlers a day telling me what a bitch I am—"

"Love."

His sounded so serious she stopped, took a breath. She felt so sad, her shoulders so heavy. She spent so much time trying to block these thoughts out. Now she was swamped by them. It was too much.

"You should have been sorted into Slytherin," he said, low and calm. "We don't tell our women they have to be likeable. I like you mean."

He pulled back as she turned to look over her shoulder at him. She knew she looked pathetic, her eyes searching his for reassurance. But she saw it there—his gaze soft and steady.

"I can take it, love."

She sighed and he leaned forward and kissed the corner of her mouth, his fingertips careful on her face as though she were fragile.

"Let me have it, love," he whispered. "I'm stronger than I look."

She leaned against him and he said, "If you weren't so mean, I'd tell you that you're beautiful and clever, secretly quite funny and much more charming than you think, and I like doing magic with you and talking about books with you and watching you scare everyone at the Ministry."

"Maybe I'll stop being so mean and you can tell me those things," said Hermione.

"I doubt it," said Draco, "but I've got you either way."



Draco washed her hair and watched her dry it and then took her to bed, where they lay on their sides, kissing. He felt solid and familiar next to her. Her hand was on his scarred ribs. She tried to roll onto her back and pull him with her. She wanted to feel his weight on her. He wouldn't budge.

"Draco—"

"You can be on top, love. I'm not going to—"

"Draco," she said softly. She rubbed her thumb along a scar. "I want to be here. I want you on top." He swallowed. "I'm not going to hold you down again, love."

"Draco." She looked into his pale gray eyes. "I'll tell you if it's too much."

"I'm not going to—"

"I'll tell you."

His mouth was tight, his eyes moving over her face. Finally, he said, "You'll tell me if I hurt you."

"I'll tell you, Draco." She rubbed her thumb along his ribs. "But you're not hurting me—"

"And I'll stop this time."

"I know you will."

She could feel his hesitation, the tension thrumming through him.

"Draco . . . give me what I want." She pulled at him. "I'm telling you what I want."

"With *me*, obviously."

Malfoy stepped back from her, his hands locking onto her arms, and looked her up and down. "All right," he muttered.

"I *do* have the power of speech, Malfoy," said Hermione through a locked jaw.

He straightened. "Are we on speaking terms, then, love?"

"I'll catch up with Pansy, then," said Theo. "Granger, you're welcome at the Manor anytime. Just leave that one at home."

"Have a good day, Nott," said Malfoy. "And piss off."

Theo winked at Hermione and sauntered away, grinning.

Malfoy took her hand and tugged her along in the opposite direction. He had never held her hand before. She could feel the edges of the diamond betrothal band he still wore, his grip was so insistent.

"We'll get your wand, love." He glanced at her stony face. "You'll feel better once you can hex me properly."

Godric help her, they walked into the Auror Department hand in hand. Malfoy smirkingly signed a sheaf of paperwork to do with his questioning, his confiscated wand, the latest raid on the Manor, his assault and battery of Ron, and all the massive associated fines, seemingly quite familiar with the Ministry bureaucracy as it applied to criminal suspects. He dropped her hand only upon the release of her wand, when it was time for her to sign her own forms. Then he stood over her, his fingertips light on her shoulder blade, his body angled toward her, all his haughty disdain from the hearing gone.

"Darling," he said into her ear. "Before you petrify me, let me take you home and see to your arm."

Under the lace sleeve of her dress, the scar was red and cracked, black streaks of poison reaching for her inner elbow, a burning reminder of the Black magic blasting through her as he wrenched the ring off her finger.

Godsdammit, he knew just how to extort her too.



Draco watched as she unconsciously pulled at her left sleeve. They'd got home to a parliament of owls landing on the sill—Draco recognized an Auror Department owl (no doubt Potter) and the Potter owl (that would be the She-Weasel)—as her friends learned of the Wizengamot's no-notice hearing from the press. Shacklebolt, so eager to be rid of his Malfoy problem that he'd done Draco a favor, convening before her admirers could pack the gallery to shout Draco down. The envelopes were all marked URGENT—queries as to whether he'd murdered her yet, he assumed. She was frowning over the special edition of the *Prophet* now. Did he even want to know what it said?

She'd told him she wanted him, and he'd gone into that interrogation room and acted the prat—Shacklebolt and Robards so easily distracted by how much they hated him. Then he'd gone into the chamber with the Wizengamot, and they'd asked all the wrong questions too. It hadn't mattered what he said—he'd known he had the leverage to keep her.

Now he had her, and she looked distinctly unhappy about it.

She had changed her mind.

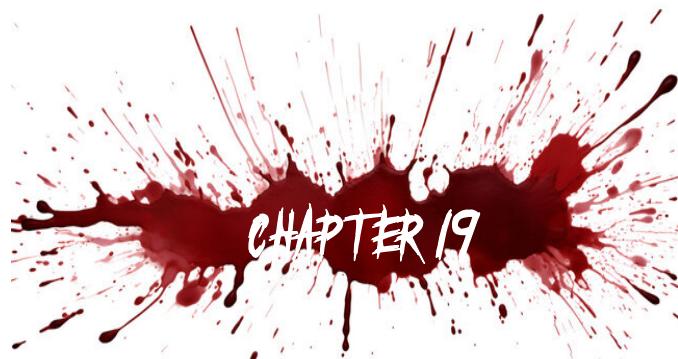
She was angry about the Weasel after all.

Or . . . something had happened at Nott Manor.

Draco would never have let Nott take her there if he'd been free. Being there had brought back the war, reminded her what she was married to. Or . . .

She was fiddling with the clasp on Nott's cloak, her expression pensive.

Nott was a good friend. He'd left Charlie to be bossed by Pansy and stood with Draco to watch his wife with the Weasel. He'd straightened when she'd clenched her fists. Then they'd seen her pull back to



SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2003

POTTER LEADS FLINT INVESTIGATION: Inside the Overnight Search of the Flint Manor Grounds

MALFOY MATCH CONFIRMED: Vote to Reverse the Ministry's Most Controversial Pairing Fails

THE SECRET TO APPEALS?: New MoM Match Mandate Info Revealed

FROM GOLDEN TRIO TO DEATH EATER TRIANGLE: Hermione's Many Men

The photograph on the left: Hermione in May, at the Battle of Hogwarts remembrance ceremony, flanked by Harry and Ron. The boys both need haircuts. Her dress is a few years old.

But they are all three smiling when she takes their hands.

The photograph on the right: Hermione is caught between Nott and Malfoy, her face solemn. She's in black silk and lace, Theo's shrunken cloak on her shoulders, her hair pinned up, Pansy's glamoured make up darker and more sophisticated than anything she would do herself. The Slytherin men are tall and lean, pressed in close the way the Slytherin men do—Malfoy's hand at her back, Nott's hand at Malfoy's back, always guiding, herding, ushering her in the direction they think she should be going. Malfoy's expression is sharp and mean. Nott is smirking as he looks away, his darkly lashed bedroom eyes somehow dangerous.

Skeeter, that absolute hack, had gone from insisting Hermione was pursuing both Harry and Ron to as good as saying she was fucking both Malfoy and Nott. Inside pages featured pictures of Nott staring her down while he kissed her hand at the Solstice Ball, Nott smiling at her in the Alley, Malfoy's visage screwed up in anger as he faced Nott in the corridor on level two.

"You took her *where*?" His arm was tight around her shoulders, crushing her to his chest. Her hands were pressed to his torso; she could smell wool and holding cell damp and the faintest traces of citrus and cloves and blood.

"Was I meant to take her to the Savoy, where Avery can aberto any door?" asked Theo. "Use the brain behind that fuckface, lover."

"You should have taken her to *Potter's*, you stupid fuckstick," hissed Malfoy, his hand on her flexing. He'd kept an aggressive hold on her since they'd been reunited outside the Wizengamot chamber, and she hadn't fought him.

"Granger, love," said Theo, "does Red leave her floo open at two in the morning while she sits bedside at St. Mungo's and her husband investigates a mysterious killing? Or do you think someone's handiwork was keeping the Potters busy?"

"You could have taken her to *Longbottom*—"

"Ah, fair point." Theo raised his eyebrows. "Live and learn?"

"You bloody douchebag," huffed Malfoy. "Where did she *sleep*?"

Finally, he moved onto her, his body warm and hard. She tilted her chin to clear his shoulder, wrapping her arms around him, pulling him near.

He was holding back.

"Draco. Let me have you."

She could feel the breath he took, his chest expanding against her.

Then he exhaled. And, slowly, he settled his weight onto her.

She kept him there, his hip bones digging into her inner thighs, for a long time, and then he fucked her slowly and then hard and fast.

He was holding her to him, trailing his fingertips across her skin, while she thought about all the ways in which she was the prat—punishing him for being an insecure egotist by never giving him a compliment, even when he deserved to know how she felt. Flirting and fucking but never really committing. Afraid to be in love with him because what if . . . What if he didn't love her back. What if he took the piss. What if he betrayed her. What if he loved her but they still couldn't make it work. What if it were her fault, because she was too messed up. What if everyone said they'd told her so. What if the whole wizarding world sneered at her for ever thinking it could happen. What if she never got over it. What if it hurt too much.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Draco, it was that she didn't trust herself. Her arm had never healed and neither had she. She didn't trust life anymore. Bad things happened. Bad things happened and you couldn't stop them, no matter how smart you were, no matter how hard you worked, no matter how much you tried to control everything and everyone around you. Bad things happened and sometimes you could see them coming, your back and chest tingling, your breath going shallow, your face going numb, and there was still nothing you could do.

Hermione Granger, who'd always been so smart, who'd always worked so hard, who'd lost her family anyway, who'd lost control of her life anyway. And now she'd been afraid to love Draco because what if it was just one more loss but this time it was one she couldn't bear.



Theo walked through St. Mungo's, his arms full of lilies. Weasley's room was easy enough to find—the hall outside the door was littered with other Weasleys.

Theo had seen Bill coming and going from Mysteries in dragonleather and waxed canvas, his long hair casually unkempt. He wouldn't mind getting the chance to work with the cursebreaker. Theo had no loyalty to the Ministry—rather the opposite—but he did like Mysteries. It was good to get out of the Manor, see people he wasn't trading anything illegal with, have puzzles to solve. Puzzles that could get him killed, but what else was new. He was having fun.

He owed Granger one.

Ginny noticed him and pushed off from the wall. "I see the Ferret sent his delivery boy."

"I can come on my own, Red," said Theo, smiling. "I don't always need Draco's help."

She rolled her eyes and stalked into the room. She was beginning to show if you knew to look.

Sometimes Theo had flashes of, well, what might be the future—he hadn't faked his Divinations coursework like everyone else, anyway. Never anything useful, like stock prices or whether he would be alone when he died. Just little moments, feelings. And his feeling was that Draco and Astoria would have been a shite match. Oh, they would have looked perfect. But the Draco in that future was drinking firewhisky in the study with Theo while Astoria took the baby to the Greengrass estate, telling her he'd catch up later. Watching Draco throw himself at Granger—it was really much more entertaining. Pansy would get pregnant as fast as she could, and then Draco would be making cow eyes at Granger.

Bill looked to George, and they turned as one to block Theo. Theo had wanked to many, many fantasies of being spit-roasted by the twins, but it was mildly (thrillingly) terrifying when the gingers

ganging up on him were Bill and George. Theo was fairly certain, under the right circumstances, either could kill him. Bill would do it without hesitation, and George would laugh when it was over. The Weasley line had really diluted when it got to Weaselbee.

"Nott," said Bill.

Theo swallowed his smile. "It was a fair fight," he said. "We had to let them sort it."

"Oh, it got sorted," said George. "How's Granger adjusting to life on the outside? Charlie said you were getting her out."

Theo tilted his head from side to side, considering. "Ready to avada us all?"

"Harsh but fair," George said with a sage nod. Then he started to laugh. "Ginny's in a tizzy cause she missed the whole thing."

Theo was grinning. "How do you mean?"

"She went home when Harry was called back and slept straight through." George was snorting. "Woke up to Ron in hospital, Malfoy and Granger all over the papers—she just got here, *mental* cause Mum told us to let her rest."

George laughing made this funny—

"I hear Malfoy's approached Longbottom," said Bill.

Not funny. Bill had probably heard it from Longbottom while Theo was mooching around the Auror Department.

"What's Malfoy's motive?" asked Bill. He was studying Theo intently, openly. (The hair and the scars were working for Theo.)

Theo didn't bother to dissemble. "He had enough of blood purity under Voldemort. And he's in love with Granger."

"Told you," said George, jerking his chin at Bill.

Draco hadn't shut up about her when they were brewing. Kept checking the doorway for her. Then she'd come by and he'd told her they didn't need help. She'd left and he'd gone back to watching the doorway, waiting for her to come back.

"How's Granger feel about him?" asked George.

Theo tilted his head from side to side.

"Gotcha," laughed George.

His turn: "Does Ron know about Longbottom?"

George raised an eyebrow. "No, mate."

Theo looked between him and Bill. "How can he not?" he asked.

"Not Ickle Ronnienkins's speed, is it?" said George. His smirk had an edge to it. Godsdamn. Theo was smirking back.

Bill was eyeing Theo up and down. "What are your intentions with Charlie?"

Theo's smile dropped. "He says we're exclusive." His gaze shifted between the two men. "I might be in love with him."

Bill and George raised their eyebrows and exchanged a look like a shrug.

"Well, Mum's hacked at Ron for upsetting Susan with this torch she thinks he's carrying for Granger—so Malfoy may get a pass on this one," said George.

"You tell Malfoy it's over, and we'll tell Ron it's over," said Bill.

"Deal," said Theo. *You're welcome, Granger.*

"I'll take those," said George, reaching for the lilies. "Susan's just going to hex you."

Theo was happy enough not to see her sour face. He surrendered the flowers and saluted these good and reasonable Weasleys. "Gentlemen, it's been a pleasure."

Theo turned on his heel, beginning to whistle as he walked back the way he'd come. He thought it would be nice, to have so many brothers.

Hermione drew back and he straightened. His eyes moved over her face, her set expression. She was gazing up at him, searching.

She held out her hand to him.

Pain flashed across his face—there, there was the sulky lover she knew—and then he caught up her hand in his.

He stepped back and bowed to her, bending low over her hand. Then he kissed her fingers like the wealthy, nearly untouchable aristocrat he was. The kind of aristocrat who could threaten the entire Wizengamot and watch it back down. The kind of aristocrat who could have used those same threats to quash a match.

Why had he lied? What hadn't he told her?

He held her hand in his and kissed her fingers. And when he looked up at her, his lips light on her skin, his pale gray eyes plaintive, all the flashbulbs went off.

Hermione nodded, woodenly filing out of her seat, Theo and Pansy falling in behind her, whispering and elbowing each other. "That's our boy—" she heard Theo say, Pansy snickering in response.

Soon Pansy and Theo were pushing through the scrum of spectators in the hall outside the chamber, Hermione clutched between them, and then there was Malfoy—surrounded by reporters. He looked irritated, cold and imperious in his tux at eleven in the morning, the bones of his face sharp under the Ministry lighting, the Azkaban tattoo forever marking him a danger.

He turned his head and their eyes locked, the press stepping back to see what would happen, whether she would run to him or hex him.

The Wizengamot had laid her loyalties bare. She had never been afraid of being married to Draco Malfoy the way she'd been afraid of being taken from him. She had fought with him. She had—yes, she supposed so—done it in public as a form of protest. A fuck you to Shacklebolt and *Witch Weekly* and everyone else who'd said witches would get over their objections. But the truth was she had never fought the marriage—not after the bond. She hadn't bribed Bill to jailbreak her; she hadn't looked for loopholes in the law; she hadn't worked out the best way to murder Malfoy; she hadn't even slept apart from him since he'd bargained her into his bed. She'd been a pussycat, biting and scratching and then curling up with him while he ran his fingers through her curls.

Maybe because Malfoy wasn't some strange man. She had known him since he was eleven—she knew who he was. And that meant, when she was with him, she knew who she was, too. He was the bigot and bully. She was the one in the right. (When you *hadn't* pledged your allegiance to a genocidal madman, you were always the one in the right.) And so she got to fight him. Hermione wasn't allowed to fight anyone else in her life. It was bad for her reputation, it would hurt her career, her feelings were wrong, her resistance suspect. But, with Malfoy, she got to let loose. And it felt bloody *brilliant*. Not holding back. Not having to be nice. Not having to worry whether she was still liked. She got to feel how she felt. And then he pulled her to him and she got to kiss his neck and suck his cock and lick his face too.

Getting to act on her emotions and desires—it was almost like having power. And so of course the Wizengamot had laid that illusion bare too.

Hermione could still feel the twist of betrayal in her chest from when she'd thought he'd scotched the match. Her body couldn't let it go. She hadn't known what he was going to say from one minute to the next. She'd felt helpless as he'd toyed with the other men while they threatened to rematch her. One moment the Wizengamot was in control of her life, the next moment Malfoy—but never her. Never, ever her.

Nott still called her Granger but she had felt the shift. When she'd seen him in that grotty waiting area and thought *of course*. Of course Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy's fixer was waiting to pick her up from jail. Now Nott's hand was at her back, ushering her toward her husband. There was no question about that any longer. But Hermione did have questions.

How long had he known about the ring?

Why had he lied about his appeal?

What hadn't he told her?

What didn't she know?

Who was she now?

The hall fell quiet as she made her way to him and he stood taller, his back stiff, eyeing her carefully. Hermione was numb all over, her chest tight. Her heart was beating too fast.

The split, swollen lips that had pressed against her skin in the holding cell were healed, the bloodied brow unblemished, his once-disheveled hair brushed back from his forehead—all evidence of that moment of frenzied coupling, of whispered confession, gone.

I'm sorry I hurt you.

I want you too.

He looked perfect now. He looked like the villain she'd been forcibly wed to.

As Hermione neared, he turned his body open to her. She reached him and he leaned in, said, low, his lips near her ear, the press hushed as they tried to listen in, "Did I earn it, love?"

The floo flashed green and Harry and Ginny tripped out into the sitting room of the lady's suite. Harry looked like he hadn't slept in thirty-four hours. Ginny looked like she would vomit.

"Hermione, are you all right?" asked Harry as Ginny gazed at the dark red and gold accents.

"Are *you*?" asked Hermione.

Then Ginny was hugging her. "Why didn't you owl me?"

"It was the middle of the night and then—didn't you sleep in?"

"Because no one owled me!"

"I was knee-deep in a *bog*—"

"I wasn't thinking," said Hermione. "The Manor was being searched, so I stayed with Nott—"

"Not in Nott Manor. Godric, Hermione! People have *died* there. *Recently*."

"Well, that tracks—"

"What happened at the hearing?" demanded Ginny. "Did you *tell* them—"

"They only called Malfoy—"

"*What*?"

"I suppose they thought they knew my stance since they had my appeal," said Hermione darkly.

"Well—" Harry looked to Ginny. "Isn't that your stance?"

"Let's sit down," said Hermione.

Harry dropped onto the settee with a groan and fell upon the finger sandwiches while Hermione poured. Ginny's eyes were flitting around the room as she leaned against him, her hand on his thigh. He was in the wrinkled spare suit he kept in his office.

"Harry—have you been at Flint Manor this whole time?"

He held out a cucumber sandwich to Ginny.

"Ugh, *no*."

"The grounds and the manor," he said. "Robards finally stepped in so I could meet Gin at St. Mungo's—"

Pip was there, pressing a ginger chew into Ginny's hand.

"Oh—"

"How is he?" asked Hermione, her stomach twisting. "A ruptured spleen?"

"And a few ribs—"

"And a collapsed lung," said Ginny. "Susan can't decide whether she wants to heal him or hex him. Or heal him *so* she can hex him—"

Hermione was wincing—

"Nott came by with *lilies*—"

Hermione's eyebrows were raised. Weren't those for funerals?

"And left before she could hex *him*—"

"He brokered a truce with Bill and George," said Harry, watching her carefully.

Hermione's eyebrows were still raised. "What did he say?"

"They're being mysterious," said Ginny. "It's not like the Ferret to want a truce—"

"Well, *I* want a truce," said Hermione. "I don't want any more fighting, especially with Neville's wedding coming up. We're *all* going to be there—"

"Hermione, forget that—how the hell are you still married to Malfoy?" Ginny sat forward. "What did the Prophet mean by *contentious*—"

"He, erm, threatened to pull his money from Gringotts and cancel everyone's shipping contracts—"

"What the fuck?"

But Ginny's eyes had narrowed. She'd heard Hermione call him Draco. Seen her tilt her cheek when he caught up her chin.

"They were talking about rematching me—"

"Which is what you . . ." Harry was grimacing, "want?"
"I don't want them in control of my life at all!"
"You might have got someone better," said Ginny, looking crafty.
"Or I might have got Goyle on parole from Azkaban—"
"Maybe just someone who's not actively plotting to overthrow the government—"
"Frankly, I'm in favor of that after dealing with the Wizengamot," snapped Hermione.
Harry rolled his eyes, slumping back. "You wouldn't say that if you saw the vile shit we're pulling out of Flint Manor."
"Which you *haven't* found *her*," said Hermione.
Harry canted his head, conceding the point. He seemed exhausted by the argument already.
Hermione straightened in her seat. "Malfoy may be a horrible prat—"
Pip was there with a cold compress for Ginny and a chastising glare for Hermione.
"Hullo, Pip," Hermione said weakly. "As I was *saying*, Malfoy and I may have fought in the *past*—"
Pip gave her a last side-eye and then she was smiling sweetly as she stroked Ginny's hand.
"But we've come to terms. If the Wizengamot had *asked*, I'd have chosen Malfoy over being rematched."
Harry's eyes shifted to Pip. "You'd—"
"Yes," said Hermione primly. "That would be my choice."
"You and Malfoy have come to terms," said Harry slowly.
"Yes," said Hermione.
Harry and Ginny exchanged a look that wasn't nearly as subtle as they thought it was.
"I'm satisfied with today's outcome," said Hermione. "What I'm unhappy about is not being trusted to make my own decisions."
Harry took a breath and then exhaled after a pause. "Right," he said.



"Ginny has unseated you as Pip's favorite," announced Hermione as she stripped off her jumper.
She'd peeled Draco off her to answer her urgent owls. Then she'd left him dozing with Crookshanks while she watched Harry and Ginny try to decide whether it was entirely hate sex at work here or Stockholm Syndrome as well. It didn't appear man or animal had moved. Which meant he was still naked under that sheet.
Draco's mouth had dropped open and, for a second, he looked absurdly offended. Then he snorted and turned his head. "Of course I don't compare with a pregnant witch."
"I'm still at the bottom of the rankings," said Hermione, working her jeans off her hips, "for calling you a horrible prat."
"Deservedly so," Draco was reaching for her, "you vicious little beast."



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2003

"Draco, Draco—quite the display. Fighting over this wife of yours? Threatening the Wizengamot?" Avery sat back behind his desk on level two, his arms wide on his armrests to make himself look bigger than he was.

Draco settled into Avery's guest chair and crossed his legs. "No one provokes me with impunity, Avery. You know that."

"You did not object to being matched with the former Miss Granger?"
"Who would object to being given a witch?" asked Malfoy as rumbles of protest began to roll through the Wizengamot. "Gift-wrapped. Tied up in a bow—"

"Mr. Malfoy?" Ford was bristling. The spectator section was abuzz. "That is not appropriate—"
"Oh, but it is *accurate*." He was glaring up at Ford, but he was beginning to smirk. "The Wizengamot gave me a gift. My lovely wartime enemy, under my own roof. Why would I object? Isn't this what you wanted—for us to fight it out all over again? You only thought we'd be too polite to do it in public. You thought my wife would be a good girl, keep it all behind closed doors, tell the press she was happy to be your pawn. Then you could pretend you hadn't harmed her. But if you'd gone to school with my wife, you'd know: That witch likes to fight. And she has never been very polite."

The chamber was in an uproar. Hermione was chewing her lip. *Fucking Malfoy*. What was he playing at? He'd taken her side in the most provocative way possible—

"Gentlemen, perhaps this match *should* be revoked," said Ali Khan, the Shacklebolt rep.
There it was. He'd goaded them into it. Hermione sucked in air, her jaw clenched. Betrayed—she felt betrayed. After what he'd said in the holding cell. After what *she'd* said in the holding cell—
"We'll send in Ministry oathbreakers to see to the bond. Miss Granger can be rematched to a more suitable partner—"

Hermione's stomach roiled. Her heart was racing. What had Malfoy done to her? Why hadn't she realized—She might actually be sick.

She wouldn't do it. She wouldn't be passed along like an object. She wouldn't be given to some strange man. She'd leave the country, she'd run, she'd do something terrible and take everyone with her, she'd murder every member of the Wizengamot she could get to before they—

"Mr. Malfoy," said Ford, "if you are telling us there will be no issue from the marriage, only more violence—"

"No, gentlemen," said Malfoy, "I'm afraid this is a fight you can't take from me."
What was he doing?

Malfoy lowered his chin, his pale eyes hard and flat above sharp cheekbones. "The bond has been made. The contract has been signed and sealed. The Noble House of Malfoy has both legal and magical claims on Hermione Malfoy, and we will enforce those claims."

Hermione was holding her breath. The press and spectators had gone still. Hermione's chest and back were tingling and prickling, as though something irreversible was coming, something she hadn't foreseen. What was happening?

"If you revoke the match," continued Malfoy, "we will block Ministry access to Malfoy Manor. We will not cooperate with Ministry oathbreakers. We will sue to enforce the marital contract. We will sue for damages. We will move assets from Gringotts to a friendlier country. Malfoy LTD will reassess its contracts under my direction."

The members of the Wizengamot were exchanging wary glances, Avery watching Malfoy with a sour smirk on his face. Malfoy had the money and spite to keep litigation going for decades. The wizarding United Kingdom would very much like to keep the Malfoy millions in its banks. And they all had arrangements with Malfoy LTD—some more legal than others. Some more immediately urgent than others.

Malfoy stared down the governing body he was openly extorting. "My wife will stay right where she is. You gave her to me, gentlemen, and I'm not giving her back."

The vote was quick.

On the question of whether the Malfoy match should be revoked, the nays carried it, and Hermione's marriage to Draco Malfoy had just been set in stone.

Hermione looked at Malfoy staring malevolently at the Wizengamot, and she was nauseous with unspent adrenaline.

The hearing was adjourned, the press leaping to their feet, and Theo stood, lazily unfolding his limbs. "Let's go get your man," he said with a grin.

Theo flinched beside her, and Hermione could feel the malignant pause as everyone in the room registered that Malfoy had been at Flint Manor as an active Death Eater.

Hermione's shoulders were tense. She already had a headache. This felt like a set up. A feeling which made no sense because Malfoy was, in fact, guilty.

"Neither, it seems, has your wand," conceded Ford. They hadn't found the illegal wand, then, or Ford would be brandishing it now, asking why it had been used to cast so many dueling spells. "Public dueling, however, is still a fineable offense—"

"*Owl me*," said Malfoy.

Ford expression darkened. "Since being matched to the former Miss Hermione Granger, you have also engaged in a series of public altercations with your new spouse—"

"We're in our honeymoon phase," said Malfoy.

"The former Miss Granger was observed striking you at the St. Mungo's Samhain gala—"

"It seems she's not living in fear of me after all—"

"She appeared to break your nose on the ninth of July—"

"This is allowed under the terms of our marital agreement—"

"You were seen dueling at the Ministry's Solstice Ball—"

"I'm willing to admit she got out of hand—"

"Mr. Malfoy?" Ford had lost patience.

"If you believe I have harmed her, charge me," said Draco, his gaze unwavering. "If you believe she has harmed *me*, that is her prerogative. Mrs. Malfoy knows she has full use of me."

The press and spectator galleries were simmering.

"Is this your way of telling us the bond has been consummated?" asked Thaddeus Rake, the Greengrass rep and a perpetual fence-sitter.

"I'm not telling you *anything* of a sexual nature about my wife," said Draco, glowering. "You'll have to find something else to wank to."

The press and spectator galleys boiled over.

"Order!" thundered Warrington.

"*Mr. Malfoy*." Rake tried again: "We are merely trying to ascertain the state of this union. The ultimate purpose of the Ministry-mandated marriages is to produce our next generation. It has been widely speculated you will not recognize offspring with the former Miss Granger because of her blood status—"

"What offspring do you expect from a witch married against her will? Are you suggesting I rape Mrs. Malfoy to produce our next generation?"

The chamber erupted into outrage. Hermione pursed her lips, exhaling harshly through her nose. She had made this argument in opposition to the bill before it passed. She had been waved away—as though it were distasteful she say it, not that it happen. Now her prat husband said it and everyone was shocked.

"*Mr. Malfoy*. If you believed this match was inappropriate, why didn't you appeal it?" ground out Warrington.

Hermione felt her spine straighten as her head whipped toward Warrington. Why hadn't he appealed it? He *had*.

"The Wizengamot granted appeals in cases in which both parties objected to the match," said Ford.

It did? Hermione could see the quick-quotes quills going wild. This information had not previously been made public.

"You and the former Miss Granger were matched on the first of July. We received her appeal that same day. We do not show an appeal from you on file."

"Then your files are correct," said Malfoy.

The entire press section was jostling one another. Hermione's eyes darted to Theo and Pansy as neither reacted. Adrenaline was spiking through her. He hadn't appealed? *He* was the reason her appeal had been denied?

Did everyone know but her? Her and the press?

"This mudblood cunt must taste like Turkish Delight," muttered Avery, looking away.

"You'll never know," said Draco, allowing annoyance to creep into his voice.

Avery snorted. "Indeed I won't."

"So, to business, then," said Draco, focusing on the cuff link he was straightening. "The time and place?"

"Not so fast, Draco—"

Draco looked up, eyebrows raised.

"We'll be using a two-stage rendezvous—"

Draco shrugged. "All right, then."

"The portkeys will be keyed to you—"

"By blood?" asked Draco.

Avery nodded. "The first will take you to the second. The second will take you to the planning session. Everything is set with Argentina?"

"Of course," said Draco, clenching his jaw. *Of course* he would have to do this himself instead of handing it off to Longbottom. He should have expected this to get him killed. "What time for the portkeys?"

"16:20 for the first. 16:25 for the second."

"Easy enough," said Draco. He didn't ask whether this was really necessary. He knew why Avery didn't trust him. If he fell down on the job, they'd be straight after her.

He drew his wand, prepared to give Avery his blood.



Hermione looked up to see Theo looming in the doorway, then strolling into her office, his hands in his trouser pockets, his thickly lashed eyes on her.

"What's Draco done now?" he asked, amused.

"You'll have to be more specific," she said dryly, setting down her quill.

He nodded toward the vase walled in by files as he threw himself into her guest chair. "White tulips." He began picking through the muggle candy Draco had left on her desk, his fingers long and nimble. "An apology."

Hermione glanced at the flowers, blinking.

Then Draco was striding into her office, conjuring a second chair without a missed step.

"Nott."

"Lover."

The energy the Slytherin men brought with them was palpable. Her office felt smaller but more alive, like something was about to happen. They were all dark wool and cashmere, silk ties and silver rings, sex and menace. Draco leaned over Theo, his hand on the back of Theo's chair, his platinum hair bright against Theo's dark waves, and said, "Tell Pansy I need to meet with Longbottom." He took his conjured seat as Hermione raised an eyebrow. "And stop eating my sweets."

"But, according to the *Prophet*, what's yours is mine," said Theo.

Draco smacked the candy out of his hand.

"Don't get him started," said Hermione.

"But he's so easy to wind up," said Theo, biting his lip as he knocked Draco's dragonskin-shod foot with his own.

"Why are you here, Nott?" said Draco with narrowed eyes.

"Came by to check on Granger, didn't I?" said Theo, dodging another smack. "*Hey!* And to make sure you got my owl. I think what you've been *trying* to say is, 'Thank you, Theo, for negotiating this truce with the Weasleys.'"

"Thank you, Theo," said Hermione pointedly.

Theo straightened, beaming. "Anything for my girl." He was batting his eyelashes at her.

"Salazar," groaned Draco, slouching in his chair. "You two make me mental. Maybe I don't want a truce with the Weasleys."

"You do," said Theo firmly, unwrapping a butterscotch candy. "Bill and George are onboard with Longbottom."

Draco looked to him sharply. "George too?"

Theo popped the candy into his mouth. "Mm-hm."

Hermione frowned. "But Harry and Ron don't know—"

"Don't know what?" said Harry, suddenly stood in her doorway, Ron right behind him.

The Slytherin men turned together, already smirking.

"That you've been replaced," said Theo, tonguing the hard candy into his cheek in a way that looked decidedly obscene. "Granger has more trainable lapdogs now."

"Hope you don't mean yourselves," said Ron from over Harry's shoulder.

"Woof," said Draco.

"Mione, you don't need this scum—"

"Is that any way to talk about your brother-in-law?" said Draco.

"I'm talking about *you*," said Ron darkly. "And Charlie is *not* marrying Nott."

"This is how I find out." Theo fell back theatrically, his hand to his chest. "Why do older men only want to shag me?"

"You're a fuck toy, darling," said Draco, his eyes on Harry and Ron as they grimaced.

Hermione said, "That's enough, you two," which only made Theo and Draco grin nastily.

Hermione sighed. "Why don't you two take off, so I can talk to Harry and Ron."

"Yes, ma'am," drawled Theo, rolling the candy in his mouth.

Draco stood and turned his back on the Gryffindor men to lean over her desk. "I'll be outside," he murmured. He kissed her, his lips soft. "Call me if you need me."

She looked up at him and gave a small nod. He was being ridiculously possessive—she wouldn't need help with Harry and Ron. But she wouldn't fight him in front of them.

Draco straightened, satisfied, and as he turned, Theo sprang up beside him. The Slytherins sauntered to the door and elbowed their way out, sneering, as Harry and Ron bristled. Hermione shook her head. Godric, she was back at Hogwarts, adopted by the snakes.



Draco leaned his back against the wall opposite her door and Theo posted up beside him, his forearm above Draco's head, leaning in like they were going to snog or tell secrets.

"You know, Dray—"

"McLaggen," muttered Draco, and the two of them froze to stare down the wizard, their eyes tracking him as he approached in the hallway.

He drew even, about to pass, and Theo turned his head and spat the butterscotch candy into his face.

"What the fuck!" huffed McLaggen, his head jerking back and then whipping toward them, but Draco bared his teeth and the Gryffindor kept moving.

"I might think you're actually jealous," continued Theo.

"And why would that be—"

"You know I would never—"

"Except for all the times you did—"

"Not with a wife—"

"Except for all the wives—"

She thought she knew how Draco felt. But maybe he was lonely and touch-starved, and she was a novelty—the muggleborn who acted like she didn't want him.

Draco, I want you too.



Pansy Parkinson dropped into the seat beside her in the spectators' gallery of the Wizengamot chamber.

"Salazar," she said after a glance at Hermione's face, and she began to cast what Hermione could only assume were glamours. "You should have owled me sooner, Nott."

"Hiya, Pans," said Theo easily. He was sat on the other side of Hermione, his legs crossed, bouncing his foot in the aisle as he surveyed the press.

An hour previous, he'd served her a stale scone and lukewarm tea on the horsehair settee, pushing aside a pile of books and a butterfly knife.

"The elves are on a strike of sorts," he'd told her in a whisper. "Father killed too many of them."

The elves were apparently still dedicated to Theo's sartorial excellence, as he was once more flawlessly turned out in tweed and velvet. Theo had transfigured Hermione's elf-cleaned gown into a funeral day dress while she bathed, and Hermione had braided and pinned up her hair and put the earrings back on. Now Pansy seemed to be charming lipstick onto her, horrified by the prospect of her appearing washed out on the front page of the *Prophet*.

Pansy looked over and Hermione straightened in her seat as the chamber doors opened and an auror escorted Draco to the chair in the center.

He walked as though he were being shown to his table by a maître d, shooting his cuffs before sitting down, his rings glinting, his white-blond hair catching the light. He was in last night's tuxedo, now rakish in the morning. They'd cleaned his shirt, healed his lip, his face, his knuckles—Hermione wondered about the damage that didn't show.

He sat with his head thrown back. Hermione couldn't see the Azkaban runes from her vantage point, but she knew they were on display. He was looking down his pointy nose, not quite glaring, the air of haughty dissatisfaction about him palpable.

There were moments when he felt so familiar now—in bed, when she was running her fingers through his hair as he licked and sucked on her nipples, the bands of those signet rings pressed into her breast—and then moments like this, when she saw him in his totality and her breath was taken away by how beautiful and strange to her he was. Hermione felt unease take hold in her chest. She did not like the sense that he was on trial. She did not like the feeling that she had been fooling herself about how this would go.

Chief Warlock Warrington called the hearing to order with his own fatuous remarks about the success of the Reconciliation Act and the Wizengamot's role in ensuring its integrity before handing the proceedings off to Phineas Ford, the representative filling the Abbott hereditary seat.

"Draco Malfoy," said Ford, "questions have been raised as to your suitability for inclusion in the Act's marriage mandate—"

"And yet I *am* included—" said Malfoy.

"A decision we're now revisiting," snapped Ford. "You are a convicted war criminal and former Death Eater who, by your own admission, took the Dark Mark willingly. In the time since your Azkaban sentence and subsequent house arrest ended, you have been credibly accused of intimidation, assault, and possession of illegal quantities of controlled potions. You have been involved in public altercations with Auror Ronald Weasley, who is now in hospital, and Marcus Flint, who was recently found dead at his manor—"

"Ministry raids have confirmed I am not in possession of controlled potions," said Malfoy, his tone turning menacing, "and I haven't been to Flint Manor since the war."

"No. But he's convinced everyone else so I sound like an idiot," said Hermione. "As if I see the Mark every day and don't know what it is—"

Something passed over Theo's face, and she paused.

"You see it every day?" he said, watching her.

"Draco sleeps without a shirt," she said slowly.

He tilted his chin up, studying her. "So you see it every day."

Hermione felt her forehead creasing. "I live with him," she said. She made a face. *What?*

Theo shrugged. "You don't make him cover it?"

"What would be the point?" said Hermione, her lip not quite curling. "I know it's there. He's never pretended he didn't do what he did."

Theo nodded, looking down. He made a diffident face. "So are you trading sex for influence? You can tell me—I'll be impressed." His cheeky grin.

"No," snorted Hermione. "We're in a relationship. Or I think we are. Draco says the purists all think I'm some sort of muggleborn pet—" Why was she repeating this? Because she couldn't forget him saying it?

"Granger," said Theo, looking like he wanted to laugh, "Draco is the pet."

"He says that, and then he doesn't do a godsdamn thing I say!" said Hermione. "I told him to give me five minutes and we'd go home. He put Ron in St. Mungo's and we went to jail!"

"It's only a ruptured spleen," said Theo, laughing now.

"Theo!"

"Dogs bite when they're afraid, Granger." He was still smiling. "Draco's afraid you don't want him."

"I'm shagging him on the daily!"

Theo's delighted smile widened, his eyebrows raised. "And do you tell him how you feel about him while you do that?"

"Yes, I tell him he's a terrible prat and I hope he goes to hell," snapped Hermione. But she knew exactly what Theo meant, and, no, she didn't tell him.

"And what does he say to you?" Theo asked, sly.

"That he likes my arse," said Hermione, deadpan. "It's a real outpouring of heartfelt sentiment, I'll tell you. Big fan of my tits too."

Now Theo was giggling. "You two are just alike."

Hermione sighed.

Theo flopped onto his back. "I can't wait to hear what Draco tells the Wizengamot."

Hermione groaned as he noxed the lights.

He left the curtains open. He stayed on his side.

"Thank you, Theo," she said in the dark.

"Anytime, Granger."

She couldn't tell from his voice what he was thinking.

"Theo," she said.

"Yes, Granger?"

"Thank you . . . for the brokers."

"My pleasure, Granger." She could hear the smile in his voice. "It's been nice to get out of the house."

"Right," she said.

Hermione lay in the dark and thought about Theo alone in this horrible place. Pansy in her manor. Draco living in Malfoy Manor with only his mother and the elves. She thought about Pansy and Theo huddling together on the settee when they were in Draco's study, about Theo slinging his arm across Draco's shoulders and Draco leaning into him, about Draco refusing to stay on his side when she was in their bed.

Sometimes we only want someone because they don't want us.

I want you, love. Tell me you want me too.

"Not with *your* wife—"

"And let's keep it that way," sniped Draco.

"Mate," said Theo, leaning in, his free hand out of his pocket now and on Draco's stomach, "*she doesn't want me.* We talked about *you*."

Draco's eyes bounced from her door to Theo.

"Which is how I know she doesn't make you cover the Mark—"

Draco didn't ask how this had come up. Theo specialized in inappropriate conversations.

"So you've been a git—trying to scare her away with your disgusting, *disgusting* body—"

Draco rolled his eyes as Theo purred in his ear, Theo's fingertips flexing on his abs.

"And she's in love with you anyway—"

Draco's head snapped toward him, their faces now close enough to kiss, nausea spiking through him. "Did she say that?"

"No, she said you don't do a godsdamned thing she says," said Theo, his voice mean.

Draco let his head hit the wall with a groan.

"But she also said you've never pretended you didn't do what you did, and she's in your rooms, in your bed, in a *relationship* with you. You didn't tell me she's with you every night, Dray." He jerked his chin. "Congratulations—she's decided she can live with you. Sounds like love to me, lover."

Draco sighed. Theo smelled like sandalwood and butterscotch. He wanted to believe what Theo was telling him was true.

"You could always say it first," said Theo.

Draco looked to him, and Theo laughed when he saw his face.

"Right," he said, pushing off the wall. "Then be a better pet, Draco, and you won't have to worry so much."

He winked and walked away, his hands in his pockets, kicking the butterscotch candy out of his path.

"Nott," said Draco.

He turned and then he came back.

"If something happens to me, you'll watch her back?"

"Forever, Dray. You don't even have to ask."

He kissed Draco on the temple, and this time Draco let him go.



"Merlin, Hermione," said Harry as he dropped into the seat Draco had vacated and ran his hand though his hair. Ron was still glowering at the door.

"Ron, sit down and have a piece of candy," said Hermione. (How Draco would whinge if he knew.) "You know they're just winding you up, don't you?"

"Nott's too cheeky," said Ron, settling heavily into the other chair and swiping up a butterscotch. "What's Charlie doing with a Slytherin fuckboy?"

Harry looked at him. "Shagging hi—"

"Yes, I got that part," said Ron. "He should be with a Hufflepuff—someone who wants to live on the preserve. And what's Malfoy playing at?"

"Well, thanks to your stunt with the *Prophet*, the Wizengamot just voted him husband of the year—so he's feeling pretty romantical about that. How's your spleen?"

"It's fine," he said around the hard candy.

"You're not still hurt?" she asked, eyeing his movements.

"It's fine," he said, cracking the candy between his molars.

"But the reason we're here—" Harry glanced at Ron.

Ron leaned back, his muscular forearms crossed. "Is to say I was out of order. I shouldn't have asked if Malfoy'd imperioed you with his dick."

Harry's squinting look at Ron said, *Really?*

Ron cracked his chin. "Malfoy's not taking this out on you, is he?"

Only if you mean shagging the living daylights out of me, Hermione did not say. Aside from her tea with the Potters and resetting the wards, they'd spent the weekend in bed. When she'd said she was sore, he'd episkeyed her cunt and fucked her again.

"It's fine."

Hermione had declared her own truce. It felt good to be outraged when her friends weren't there for her; it felt less good to admit she'd kept them at arm's length. She hadn't given Ron key information. She didn't trust him to believe in Draco's intentions if she did. But why should he when Death Eaters had killed his brother and his wife's family? Hermione wasn't the only one who'd come out of the war with some hard-earned cynicism about how the world worked. She looked at Ron and she saw the boy she'd once known, she saw the anger that had changed her too. They had hurt each other after the war. They hadn't known what to do with themselves; they hadn't known what to do for each other. Hermione had blamed him for her unhappiness, but she had felt bad, later, that she'd been part of his unhappiness too. Ron didn't always react to things in the right way. Neither did she. Her friends could be thoughtless and shortsighted and self-absorbed. Just like her. Sometimes someone wasn't fully present for you because they were distracted by their own life, and sometimes Hermione had been that someone. If Hermione was cutting herself some slack for not telling them everything she didn't know how to say, she was cutting them some slack for not knowing what she hadn't shared.

Also, she wasn't becoming Minister of Magic by breaking up the Golden Trio. One way or another, she was staying friends with Harry and Ron. She was still working out what that meant.

"How's your Flint investigation going?" asked Hermione.

Ron crunched the hard candy between his teeth. "Malfoy asking you for intel?"

"Well spotted, Ronald," said Hermione. "I'm helping to cover up a murder."

"Join the club," said Harry. "I've never seen so much obstruction in my life. These people have been impossible to brace. We can fine them for banned paraphernalia and that's about it. Nothing but paperwork and red tape."

"So you're left waiting for them to start another war," said Hermione.

"And if they do, I'll fight it." Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair. "But I'm tired, Hermione. It's one of the reasons . . . with Ginny expecting, I've been thinking more and more about Hogwarts—"

Hermione frowned. "About your children going there?" She tried not to glance at Ron. He wasn't interjecting.

Harry nodded slowly. "That and . . . teaching."

Hermione felt a flush of warmth. Harry, back at Hogwarts, their first home in the wizarding world. "Oh, that's brilliant, Harry. Really. You'd be brilliant."

He ducked his head, but he was nodding. "Maybe not right away, but—"

"What would you—"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Hermione felt her happiness turn bittersweet. Preparing children to fight the next war. They would always be waiting for the next war. They would always see the next war's soldiers in their children. She thought of Draco, angry that Avery was recruiting boys—Draco, teaching those same boys to fight. Harry, saying he was tired and then returning to his battleground. Neither Harry nor Draco wanted another war. But, someday, would the boys that Draco had trained meet Harry's students on a battlefield?

She was a fool to think Draco could mitigate the damage he'd done by getting more people killed.

She realized she was worrying about Draco Malfoy's redemption and shook it off.

"So what is it Harry and I don't know?" asked Ron, his eyebrow raised.

Theo rolled onto his side, facing her with his head propped on his hand. "So, Granger . . ." He flashed a smile. "What did Weaselbee say to make you slap him?"

"What didn't he say?" she said, and Theo grinned. The bed was big, and he was several feet away. She thought she could still feel the heat dissipating off him in the cold room. He was all long limbs and those seducer's eyes. "I hope this didn't cause a rift between you and Charlie."

"Have you seen him feed the dragons?" asked Theo, confidential. "He's less sentimental than you'd think. I don't get the impression he and Weaselbee are very close."

"They're eight years apart," agreed Hermione. "I always thought Charlie mostly talked to Bill. Molly used to complain."

Theo was grinning. "So he won't be taking me to the Burrow on Sunday nights."

Hermione snorted. "Molly will make you take an extra serving and then ask Charlie when he's giving her a grandbaby."

"Where would I even put one?" asked Theo, his eyes sparkling.

Hermione huffed a sad laugh. Theo was easy to talk to because he told the truth but kept it at arm's length.

"I'll introduce Charlie to Narcissa," he said. "She'll only demand he bring her dragon dung for her roses—"

"*What?*"

"She's quite serious about them! I used to pretend she was my mother, you know. After Father killed Mum. I'd floo to Malfoy Manor and follow her around."

He was smiling but Hermione thought she might cry.

"I'd pretend Dray and I were brothers. She used to send sweets for me in his care packages."

Hermione blinked, trying to recall. She could picture the Malfoys' awful eagle owl swooping in, Draco lording over his candy. She barely remembered Theo at all. He'd been so quiet then. She imagined being Narcissa, thinking of Theo and Draco as sweet little boys. Keeping track of which candies they liked. Now Theo was in this cursed manor and Draco was in a cell. "I should have walked away from Ron. If I hadn't reacted—"

"Granger! You can't let insults stand." Theo was amused. "Draco and Weaselbee were going to fight. Trust me on this."

"That *Prophet* piece put Draco in a *mood*," she admitted. "Well. He'd already—" She eyed Theo carefully. "He's been in a mood. Did he tell you? *He* killed Flint. Last night in a duel."

"Poor little slut—"

Hermione's eyebrows shot up.

"Draco," said Theo. "He's not really a killer, you know. Flint's been asking for it for ages. But it probably hurt Draco's feelings."

"Right," said Hermione, wondering what Theo thought that phrase meant. But he was right—Draco had been hurt. She looked at Theo's bland expression. "Is that why you do things for Draco? So his feelings won't be hurt?"

"Exactly!" Theo grinned, pleased. "He's a delicate flower, Draco. Can't have too much sun or shade."

Hermione watched his face. "What about your feelings?" she asked.

"What feelings?" asked Theo, still smiling. But Hermione knew he had feelings.

Theo changed the subject: "Then he's libeled as a violent criminal—"

"The truth can't be libel, Theo!" But she understood he was teasing her. She was frowning now, though. "Ron only told me how it looks to everyone else. Though I'm not sure I needed to know that everyone at the Ministry thinks I'm trading sex for influence with Draco—"

"You're being accused of sleeping with your husband?" Theo bounced his eyebrows. "*Scandale*."

"It is when he's a Death Eater!"

Theo's smile dropped and he looked down to where his fingers plucked at the sheet. "Is that how you see Draco, then?" He gazed up at her through his lashes.

The room was dark but Hermione was relieved to realize it smelled clean after the rotten mustiness of the hallway. Candles sprang to life on the mantle of the blocked fireplace and Hermione made an involuntary noise at seeing a time-turner among the clutter of tchotchkies and artefacts there.

"Broken," said Theo, following her gaze. "For now!"

He dropped her wrist—a strangely reassuring gesture after his tight hold outside the suite—and sauntered toward a dark doorway. "Let's find you something to wear, shall we?"

In the flickering light, Hermione could make out a horsehair settee by the fireplace, stacks of books, several antique clocks, a seer's crystal orb, a petrified corkindrill, and Theo's huge fourposter—its curtains drawn aside, the peacock blue coverlet thrown back to expose rumpled sheets. She eyed the bed warily.

Hermione was wandless, locked inside these rooms in a cursed manor with a man even less predictable than Draco.

Theo appeared in the doorway in black pyjamas, a wad of peacock blue in hand. "All right, Granger. You can change through here—but if something approaches you, call out."

Did Theo have ghosts? Boggarts? Feral elves? Something much worse?

She made her way to him slowly. When she got near, he handed her what appeared to be silk pyjamas and a toothbrush—Hermione didn't ask what he had transfigured—and then he was gesturing toward the en suite.

She had her hand on the door when she heard Theo softly say, "Granger."

She turned toward him, and his intense stare met her eyes. Then he reached out a long-fingered hand and silently laid his wand atop the pile of fabric in her arms. Hermione sucked in a breath, her eyes welling with tears, and then his fingertips were at her back, ushering her into the room, and he was pulling the door shut behind her.

The room was dark and masculine—none of Draco's ferns or flowers or stained glass. She climbed out of the dress—its skirt dirty, the lace itchy now—and examined her left arm. She'd got used to Draco's constant ministrations keeping it calm. Now the skin was inflamed, the scar weeping, crusted and cracked. She cast a cooling charm that did nothing and then scourgified everything she could scourgify. Theo's wand was elegant and bratty, just like him. She took off her earrings and scrubbed her face at the sink—Theo deserved a BAFTA for not reacting to her smeared make up—trying not to look at her forearm. She hadn't thought she'd be separated from Draco like this. Had he vanished that wand?

Theo's soap and towels smelled like sandalwood. His toothpaste tasted like spearmint. The candles guttered without burning down, charmed.

She couldn't stand one more minute in the strapless bra. She ripped it off and tossed it onto the dress, then scrambled into the pyjamas, uncomfortable with being near-naked in an unfamiliar place. He'd shrunk them down—they were still too large. But she was rubbish at clothing alteration. She took down her hair, leaving the hairpins in a pile next to her earrings, and then gave up.

When she emerged, Theo was leaning against the wainscoting opposite. He had a way of going so still he seemed to disappear. "Right," he said, pushing off the wall. She held out his wand and he slipped it from her fingers as though nothing had ever happened.

He gently herded her toward the bed. "In you go."

"Where are you sleeping?" she asked.

"On the side nearest the door," said Theo. "I'm too tall for the settee and it's not a good idea for you to be alone here. You can sleep on the settee but please don't, Granger. It's really not comfortable." Said with weary sincerity.

Hermione paused. She'd seen Theo spattered in blood and laughing; rumor held he'd recently cut a violent swath through Knockturn. He'd also never hurt her. He'd just entrusted her with his wand. And he knew exactly how vindictive Draco was.

She got in the bed.

The sheets smelled like lavender, not sex. Theo cast a tempus with an alarm and then slid in after her, seemingly without qualm. She curled up on the far side of the bed and the fatigue hit her. Everything felt so heavy, like she was melting into the mattress.

"Oh—" Hermione hesitated. Harry was looking for respite, not an underground Order. Ron wouldn't trust Draco when it was just words. Neville's secrets weren't hers to reveal. "I told Malfoy to invite George over to brew—"

"Blimey, Mione—why would you do that?"

"George asked me at dinner—"

"He was taking the piss! He'd never brew with Malfoy!"

"I think there are all kinds of things George would do that you wouldn't—"

"What's that mean?"

"Really? Nothing comes to mind?"

"What are you on about—"

The door flew open and Draco stalked in, Ron and Harry already on their feet—

"Shout at my wife *one more time*, Weasley, and this truce is over—"

"We're having a private conversation, Malfoy—"

"It's not private when I can hear it in the hall," said Draco. "Now get out, before I very publicly drag you down said hallway."

"I'd like to see you try—"

"I wouldn't!" said Hermione. "No fighting in my office! Ron, Harry, I'll see you later. Malfoy—" She pointed to the rug beside her. "With me."

He immediately crossed the room to her, smirking at Ron and Harry as he went.

Harry watched them through narrowed eyes. Ron was opening his mouth—

"Ron," said Hermione, a warning edge to her voice.

She could feel the smugness radiating off Draco as he stood beside her, his hands in his pockets.

Waiting in his sleek black suit.

Ron stared him down.

Hermione knew, if she looked over, Draco would be smiling.

Finally, Ron and Harry cleared out through the open doorway.

Hermione closed the door with a flick of her wand and swiveled in her chair as Draco turned to her.

He was wetting his lips.

"Down, boy," she said.

He dropped to his knees, his eyes molten.

She placed a high-heeled foot on his thigh, and he took hold of her ankle. His fingers wrapped around and squeezed. His chin was lowered, his gaze unwavering. She looked down her nose at his parted lips, his fluttering pulse. "Bark for me."

He did.



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2003

"You're committing to this additional risk?" asked Longbottom, his scarred fingers light on the whisky glass in front of him. His eyes, as ever, were sharp.

"I don't see that I have a choice," said Draco, careful not to sound snide. "My loyalties have committed me."

"So you're consistent," said Longbottom, not sneering the way he could have done.

"To a fault," said Draco, meeting his gaze.

The waitress approached and he held out a muggle banknote to her, Longbottom's eyes tracking his every move.

"If this goes south for me," said Draco, "I want you to look after my wife—"

"Hermione never has to worry," said Longbottom, his face utterly calm.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2003

Draco climbed steep stairs and slipped inside the office, his cloak a black hole in a riot of color.

"I need a tracking device that can bypass anti-tracking wards," he told the man in magenta behind the desk.

"Easy-peasy," said a grinning George Weasley.



Draco shifted on the unupholstered seat and winced as he reached down and adjusted. He was still half hard. "I really could have used another five minutes."

Disgust was written across Shacklebolt's face.

"I thought your wife didn't like you," said Robards sourly.

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked Draco, just to see them glower.

Shacklebolt sighed heavily. "Malfoy, how did you get into her holding cell? You were meant to be separated."

Draco snorted. "Really? I thought you wanted her to fuck some good into me."

He thought Shacklebolt was going to strike him.

Draco canted his head toward the other man sat across from him. "I hate to break it to you, Robards, but you have an auror who's susceptible to bribes."

"Give me the name. Now."

"Didn't catch it. You'll have to interrogate them all," said Draco with a facetious smile.

He tongued his bloody lip and saw the legilimens blanch as she found the memory of him being beaten in a room just like this one when he was seventeen. He'd already buried everything he had to hide under everything he merely wished he could forget. It was easy—he had so many bad memories to choose from.

"Where were you last night, Malfoy?" asked Robards.

"I met my wife and the rest of the Trio at the Leaky Cauldron—maybe you saw the press coverage? Then Mrs. Malfoy and I went home. She kept me up half the night—"

Shacklebolt was weakly shaking his head.

"Fighting," said Draco.

"What about?" asked Robards.

"You won't believe this," said Draco, cocking his chin, letting the Azkaban runes show, "but she thinks I'm jealous of her ex-boyfriend."

"Well," said Robards dryly, "tonight will have cleared that up."

"Quite," said Draco.



The door squealed on its hinges and the auror was back.

"Where's Ron?" Hermione asked before he could speak.

"In hospital," he said dourly.

Nausea spiked through her. It'd always got ugly when they fought. He'd get crude and she'd get nasty. That didn't mean he didn't think he was telling her the truth. That didn't mean she wanted him dead. "Will he—"

"He'll live," the auror said. "You're free to go."

Hermione let out a shaky breath and smoothed her wrinkled skirt.

She was led through the dank stone corridor, past iron cell doors, her mouth twisting with her stomach. What if Harry had returned from Flint Manor and was waiting for her? What if Ginny had come from St. Mungo's to tell her how bad it was? What would she say about Draco?

She stepped into a grubby processing area. She scanned for Harry's tousled hair, Ginny's determined face—habit. She found only Theo Nott, slouched aristocratically in his tuxedo, just as artfully mussed as he had been at the beginning of the evening.

Nott smiled. "Hiya, Granger."

Hermione sighed.

She turned to the desk auror. "My wand?"

"Held for spell check," he said, no friendlier than the first auror.

"I know," he said kindly.

He had refused to read the letter Draco had sent after meeting with him.

Draco hadn't enumerated every humiliation she'd endured—he knew she had her pride. But he had apologized. And he had thanked her. She had read the letter twice and put it in the back of a drawer. She wanted to keep it, but she didn't ever want to see it again.

Pansy sighed and looked away. Draco was going to do what he was going to do. He wasn't her job anymore. Still.

She didn't worry about Longbottom. He was driven by a deep well of emotion, not the surface breakers that made people lash out. He took risks but they were calculated, strategic. He wasn't afraid to wait or to let others underestimate him. His ego didn't demand he do everything. He could take care of himself. And if he couldn't, then she would take care of him.

In comparison, Draco was a fucking idiot who couldn't back down from a fight and had to make sure the whole room saw it. He and Granger were perfect for each other. Both took themselves way too seriously. Both sure they knew the right way to do everything and needed to let you know it. Pansy would pay to watch them decorate a Yule tree together. (Pansy had never decorated a Yule tree—the elves did that.) (That would change with Longbottom here.) (She should do a garden tour at the Manor.) But first Draco had to make it to December alive.

This was why she never felt like the war was over—because it wasn't. One way or another, they would keep paying for everything they had got wrong, everything they hadn't understood. Maybe this time Draco would pay with his life. No one would even be surprised.

"Pansy." Longbottom had set the documents aside, next to the stack of student essays on the side table.

She looked to him, and his face was still and open. She sighed—his calm was so soothing.

"Do you need a distraction?" he asked, unbuttoning his trousers.

"Yes." She sucked her lower lip into her mouth. Longbottom was so good at distractions.

He unzipped. "Keep my cock warm while I mark these papers, and then I'll take care of you."

She nodded, watching his fingers, cross-crossed with faint scars. He pulled out his cock.

"No hands," he said.

She nodded.

"Do you need a sticking charm?"

"Yes," she said, putting her hands behind her back.

He said the words and her hands were stuck fast. Good. She could concentrate on getting along without them.

He stuck her ankles together too.

"Oh." Brilliant. She swung her feet up onto the sofa, her back to him until she could twist around onto her side to face him. It was awkward and he didn't help except to shift so she could lay her head on his thigh. His cock had got harder. Good—this was turning him on. She licked her lips and opened her mouth and now he helped, until she was settled into place.

She moved her tongue slowly from side to side across the soft, smooth skin and his cock got harder in her mouth. Satisfying.

He was back to his essays.

Pansy was thinking about his cock and her clit and also whether she shouldn't have invited Astoria Greengrass to the wedding. The thing was, she wanted to see Daphne. And if she invited Daphne, she had to invite Astoria—and, by extension, Astoria's dreadful Durmstrang husband—but was Tori going to be a little cow about being at the chateau that would have been hers had Draco not—

Longbottom palmed her forehead, his thumb at the bridge of her nose, and began to stroke his thumb up, smoothing out the wrinkle between her eyes.

Pansy sighed out her nose and refocused on his cock, letting Astoria go. So soothing, the repetitive pressure of his thumb, her tongue moving on his cock as she lazily sucked. His hand was warm; she could feel the heat from his body. Then his hand was gone—lifted to mark the paper against the arm of the

sofa. Pansy clenched her cunt—she would like to be fingering herself. This was about to get frustrating, wasn't it? Pansy was thinking a lot more about her clit now.

Pansy sucked a little harder, her mouth full, her jaw not yet aching. His hand dropped down to her breast. He was gripping, squeezing absently as he read. She was breathing a little harder through her nose. She shifted her hips and clenched her cunt, which was only making things worse. She would like to be rubbing tight little circles on her clit. She would like to be lowering her wet, throbbing cunt onto the cock that was currently in her mouth. She would like him to be pounding the hell out of her.

Longbottom lifted his hand to mark the essay and she huffed air through her nose. His hand was back, squeezing, tweaking her hard nipple through the fabric of her dress and bra. He lifted his hand. Pansy was tightening her cunt over and over, her clit buzzing, her tongue moving with more intention. He rested his hand on her hip while he read. He lifted his hand. Pansy was squirming, desperate to touch her clit.

Finally, he reached out and flipped up the skirt of her dress. He lifted his hand to mark the paper, and Pansy lay limp with her head in his lap, his cock in her mouth, her knickers exposed. Then his hand was back, working its way into her knickers, wedging itself between her thighs, his fingers rubbing across her clit. Yes—all she could think about was her clit. She wanted him to never stop touching her. She could hear him turning pages left-handed. Every unmarked essay better be about to get a sloppily inked O with no notes.

He was pressing more firmly on her clit. She was clenching her cunt, squeezing her thighs on his hand, humming on his cock.

"Merlin," he muttered.

Paper shuffled.

A soft "fuck it."

Then: "Pansy, I'm going to prop you over the back of the sofa and fuck the hell out of you."

Perfect.

She was pulling back from his cock, looking up at him, rolling onto her elbow behind her, painful with her weight on it, and then he was moving, his hands on her, helping to push her up to sitting. She couldn't get her knees under her, she was tilting forward against the sofa back, he was up and bodily moving her—there. She was on her knees, arse out, wrists stuck at her lower back, the side of her face resting on the sofa's back. His hand had reached around to her clit, his cock was pushing into her, and then he did fuck the hell out of her.

Then he was cuddling her on the sofa, massaging her jaw and kissing her face.

"I can't wait for the wedding," he murmured. "You're going to look so good."

"I am, aren't I?"

He smiled, his mouth against her.

"How many essays do you have left to mark?" she asked.

"One."

She was grinning. She was going to make him say it. "You couldn't hold out for one more essay?"

"I really couldn't, Pansy."

"Draco—"

His bloodied lips were against her cheek. His breath was warm in the cold cell. "Maybe that's the only time I'm brave enough." He was too close for her to see his face. He breathed against her. "I'm sorry I hurt you," he whispered.

He kissed her then, before she could say anything. His hand was at his cock. He was pulling at her leg.

Then he grabbed the backs of her thighs and hoisted her up, her arms tightening around his neck, her knees on his sides as he hitched her up against the wall, his fingertips digging in, the ruined silk wadded against her waist. He pressed her hard against the stone, shifting his grip on her and grimacing, his bloodied brow furrowed, and then he was tugging her knickers aside and her breath was catching and his cock was pushing into her as he whispered the lubrication charm, and then she was gasping as he fucked her against the holding cell wall.

"I want you, love. Tell me you want me too."

She was panting, her tears wet and itchy on her cheeks, her shoulder blades rubbing painfully against lace and rough stone. The wall was so cold. The heat rolled off his body where it touched hers, the feel of him the only familiar thing in this strange place. She was holding onto him as tightly as she could. "I want you too."

He rolled his hips, pressing up against her. "Say it again."

She huffed a laugh. So greedy, so needy. But wasn't she too? "Draco, I want you too."



He hadn't got either of them off when a key sounded in the lock, the door rattling. One more thing he'd mishandled tonight.

For a second, he thought he wasn't going to stop. But he wasn't going to let another man see her compromised. Only he got to see her like this.

He pulled out with a groan—it was awkward, she was clutching at him—and then her feet were back on stone and she was righting her skirt with shaking hands, breathing hard, and he was putting himself away, which fucking sucked.

"What?" he barked as the door swung inward with a shriek of rusty hinges.

"Merlin," muttered the auror, emerging from the shadows to see Draco glaring and tucking in his shirt. "You're wanted for questioning, Malfoy."

"Right," he said, his lip already beginning to curl. His mouth was killing him, his ribs screaming, but he didn't care.

"Draco," she hissed, and he jerked back to her. What was the matter? She straightened against the wall—Merlin, she looked good. Curls springing free from her hairpins. Her face damp and flushed. Her lips bee-stung. He had done that. He wanted to stay and stare at her. Take down her hair. Finish fucking her. "Don't go back to prison," she told him.

Right. That's what he should be thinking about. The ghost of a smile tugged at his swollen mouth. Her eyes were wide, drinking him in—he wanted to see her look at him like that again.

He kissed her and walked out before the auror could grab his arm. He wasn't charged yet. They didn't need to be manhandling him.

Robards and—surprise—Shacklebolt were waiting in the interrogation room with a legilimens posing as a stenographer. So he rated the top brass and dirty tricks. Flattering.

"Minister," he drawled. "Robards."

"Found him with his wife," said the auror darkly before leaving.

Draco shot his cuffs, shrugging his jacket into place, and took his seat.

Robards took in Draco's disheveled hair, his blood-spotted and wrinkled shirt, his swollen lips. He sniffed. "Merlin, Malfoy—did you have sex in the holding cell?"

She would have to redo her make up.



Neville was stood with a drink on the other side of the courtyard dancefloor, next to Pansy in her silver minidress as she talked to Tracey Davis, but his eyes caught on Hermione and then landed on Draco as soon as they stepped out from the shadows. She looked up to see Draco jerk his chin in an almost imperceptible nod. Neville withdrew his hand from his pocket, and Hermione realized with a jolt that he was holding his old DA coin. He nonchalantly checked it and pocketed it again. His eyes flicked up to Draco and he nodded. Pansy said something to him, and he turned to her with a faint smile, his hand dropping onto the nape of her neck—the interaction over in less than a minute, as though it had never happened.

Draco cinched her close against him, his body hard and warm, murmuring, “Seems Spinnet was successful.”

He kissed her temple and plucked a tumbler of firewhisky from a passing tray. Hermione was turning the opposite way, toward a tray carrying champagne, when she saw Harry watching them with narrowed eyes. She knew immediately that he’d seen everything. He just didn’t know quite what it meant.

Then Theo was lunging toward them, dragging Charlie with him, his arm looped tight around Charlie’s neck. Charlie’s shirt was open at the chest and Hermione could see old burn scars.

Theo leaned over to kiss Draco on the cheek. “There you are,” he said.

“Here I am,” said Draco, meeting his eyes.

Theo flashed his dazzling, sincere smile. Then he was turning toward the dancefloor.

“Toasts!” Theo called to the crowd, raising his flute of champagne. “We need bridesmaid toasts!”

The Slytherins and Hufflepuffs yelled their agreement as Theo untangled himself from Charlie, kissed his mouth, and stepped forward.

“Pans, you sexy bitch!” he shouted, holding his champagne flute high. “Congratulations on snagging the fittest non-ginger Gryffindor and number-one plant daddy!”

Cheers from the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs.

“And thank you for dressing him in those tight suits!”

Catcalls from the sex-pest Slytherins and Ravenclaws as Neville shook his head and Pansy smirked.

“And you, Longbottom! You’ve made our sweet, patient Pansy—”

Jeers from the Slytherins and groans from everyone else as Pansy shot the crowd the two-finger salute.

“—fall in love with you—”

Most of the *ans* were genuine.

“—and now you have the loyalest, cleverest, funniest, most ruthless witch you could ever wish for in your corner. Pans, Dray and I love you!”

The crowd was cheering and drinking, but Hermione felt a chill race down her back as the wide smile dropped off Theo’s face and he set those thickly lashed eyes on Neville.

“And, Longbottom, for that and more, we are forever in your debt and service. May your days be long, your enemies short-lived, and your bond fruitful.”

“Hear, hear!” called the crowd, and Hermione felt her chest and back prickle and tingle, like bad things happened, like the past would just keep repeating itself until you understood it, like sometimes you had to do something terrible to change the future, like sometimes you had to do something painful to change yourself, as she realized that Theo had just married his and Draco’s loyalty to Longbottom—that this wasn’t the last time Draco would portkey home covered in blood, that they would all keep doing what they thought they had to do until they had put the past to rest.

Neville stared down Theo and nodded, and Hermione’s head whipped toward Draco—to see him raising his glass and chin to Neville, his face solemn. He had told her he had no higher ideals—he had lied.

Hermione’s eyes darted to Harry, and she saw him standing stock still in the crowd, watching.

She glanced back to Charlie, Bill and George now stood beside him, and saw the scarred ginger men looking on with knowing expressions.

Then Theo was laughing and kissing Charlie, his arm slung over Charlie’s shoulders as he pushed Draco forward. “Your turn, Dray!”

The Slytherins were jeering and cheering him on, the other house alumni exchanging dark glances, and Draco smirked and bit his lip—the prat she had gone to school with.

He stepped onto the edge of the dancefloor in the green suit so dark it was nearly black, his eyes sparkling, his platinum hair brushed back off his forehead in a perfect wave. The diamonds on his left hand glinted under the fairy lights as he raised his tumbler of firewhisky. Hermione’s breath caught. Godric, he was beautiful. She didn’t just love him, she was in love with him. How had she ever pretended otherwise?

“To Pansy, my oldest and dearest friend, who has finally found a man who can make her happy—”

The Slytherins huzzahed noisily, elbowing one another with raised eyebrows and wicked grins that spoke of years of common room drama.

“And to Longbottom, a better and braver man than me in every regard—”

The Gryffindors and Ravenclaws erupted in surprised whoops of delight, the Slytherins in jeers, the Puffs egging on both sides.

Neville raised his glass, Pansy smirking as she went on tip toe to kiss his cheek.

“I hope you like being neighbors!” Draco called, reaching back and grabbing Hermione’s hand, pulling her to him. “Because Mrs. Malfoy and I bought you the vineyard next door and we renamed it Parkbottom!”

Pansy shrieked, her drink spilling as she smacked Neville’s chest.

“Enjoy growing grapes, Longbottom! Pansy will take care of the wine!”

The crowd was whooping and hollering. Neville was laughing. Draco gripped Hermione’s hand as she gazed up at him in shock. Who bought someone a *vineyard* as a wedding present? *Her fucking husband* . . .

Draco cracked his chin to the newlyweds, smiling wide—the unguarded smile Hermione only saw at home—and shot back the firewhisky. He vanished the glass, the crowd screamed its approval, and all of George’s fireworks went off.

Then Draco turned to Hermione and kissed her until she forgot anyone else was there.



EPILOGUE

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2003

GOYLE MANOR DESTROYED BY FIRE

PROMINENT REVIVALISTS MISSING: Wizengamot Seats Sit Empty

MUGGLE SEA PIRACY ON THE RISE: What YOU Need to Know

RECONCILED???: Draco and Hermione Make Nice at Parkbottom Nuptials

THE MALFOY EFFECT: Ministry Match Appeals Skyrocket

Hermione looked up as Harry closed her office door behind him. His tie was loosened, his sleeves rolled to his elbows. He strolled to her desk and tossed down the morning edition of the *Prophet*. She glanced at it reflexively as he sat down in her guest chair, his expression calm and controlled.

"All right, Hermione." He cocked his head and crossed his arms. "What's really going on here?"

Hermione took a deep breath and prepared to tell the truth.



Lucius's lips were pursed, a sour expression on his face. "Alastair Avery was a friend of mine."

"And now he's dead," said Draco. "I took your advice regarding Mrs. Malfoy."

"I told you to do something nice for her."

"And I did—I took your other advice, which was to replace her opposition. Avery was in Mrs. Malfoy's way. House Malfoy comes first."

Lucius took a breath, his chin lifting. He sighed but he did not look dissatisfied. "House Malfoy comes first," he agreed. His eyes moved over Draco's face. "Your mother told me about the chateau and your wife."

Draco waited, his face neutral.

Lucius looked down his nose at the table, Draco's hand there, but he did not allow any deeper emotion to surface when his eyes returned to Draco's face. "She's a good girl," he said, his cadence brisk and definitive. "You need to take care of her."

"I do take care of her," said Draco. "And she hates being called a good girl."

Lucius chuckled. "Of course she does."



"Draco," said his mother, "what have you got yourself involved in?"

Draco was rocking Hermione back and forth as he held her against him. He was real and solid, his skin warm against hers. She could hear his heart beating, the blood flowing through him.

"Love," he whispered.

Suddenly, the worst was over. She pushed it down and the calm washed through her.

He was all right. He was here. He had hold of her. She was sniffling. Her breath was shallow. He was here. She hadn't lost him.

"It's just politics, Mum. We should get back to the party before we're missed."

Hermione took a deep breath. The party—

"Oh, Draco," sighed Narcissa. "Just like your father."

Hermione pulled back, Draco releasing her. Narcissa was climbing to her feet.

Hermione wiped roughly at her eyes. Draco was gazing at her, his lips parted. Blood was smeared across his lips, his chin. His chest was streaked with blood and her mascara. He brushed a curl back from Hermione's temple.

"Pip," said Narcissa.

Pip snapped her fingers and Draco's shirt and jacket—clean, mended, pressed—were laid out on the bed. The blood had been vanished—from Narcissa's dress and hands, from Draco's skin. Hermione knew, when she looked in the mirror, she would find her dress pristine and her make up restored.

"Thank you, Pip," said Draco, like a well-mannered child. "Thank you, Mum."

"Narcissa." Hermione scrambled to her feet. "Thank you—"

Narcissa pulled her into an embrace, Draco on the floor between them. His mother smelled like expensive narcissus perfume. Her arms were like steel cables.

"The magic was right when it matched you," she said. She pulled back and cupped Hermione's chin, her eyes fierce.

Then she stepped back and held her hand out at her side. "Pip?" And they were gone in an instant.

Then Draco was standing, pulling her to him. She pressed against his scarred chest, her arms tight around him, the hard lines of his body so familiar now. He smelled like citrus and cloves and blood and the replenishing potion. They breathed against each other.

"Burke was meant to kill me, but I killed him and Avery first," he said softly, into her hair. "One of the boys hexed me while I wasn't looking. Alicia Spinnet avadaed him and portkeyed me out—"

"Alicia Spinnet?" She'd had no idea. Somehow this seemed more surprising than Draco killing two blood supremacists.

"Alicia Spinnet," he said with a laugh. "She had a team with her. Wands and muggle weapons—"

"Good Godric," said Hermione.

"Terrifying, love." But he didn't sound terrified. He sounded distracted, he sounded—

"Hermione," he said.

She inhaled. She pulled away enough to look up at him—his sharp chin and pointy nose, the cruel mouth she knew so well, the eyes that followed her everywhere.

"When you said you loved me—" His tone was careful. His pale gray eyes traveled between her eyes and her mouth. She could feel his heart beating too fast. "Was that . . . only because I was dead?"

"No, dear." Her heart was in her throat. She was going to start crying again. This was what was terrifying—to say it again, when he was alive and awake, when he could reject her, disappoint her, eviscerate her. When he might not feel the same way. But she knew how she felt. And he should know too. She looked into those pale gray eyes. "I love you. I do."

He sucked in a breath, his jaw clenched, his throat working. He was blinking and then tears were rolling down his cheeks. He took another shaky breath. "I love you, too," he whispered. He swallowed hard. "I love you so much. I don't deserve—"

"Shh, Draco—" She lifted her chin to kiss him, her lips just brushing his. "You do deserve this."

And then he was kissing her hungrily, desperately—

He tasted of copper and salt—

trying to prop his head up against her knees so she could pour the potion into his mouth without choking him.

She'd pulled the cork—

Her hands were at his mouth, her own heart choking her—

It was only pooling on his tongue—

Had he already lost too much blood?

Please please please she couldn't bear this. She was going to lose him too.

"Draco, I love you," she whispered, too late.

"I love you."

"I choose you."

Too late.

"Swallow the goddamned potion so I can keep you."

Too late.

Too late.

Too

late.

And then he swallowed.

Hermione sobbed out a shaky breath. He coughed up blood and potion and she wiped his lips with her thumb. She poured more potion into his mouth, her bloody fingers on his jaw, singing the incantation she'd practiced over and over in her healing classes after the war.

Narcissa bent over him, Hermione bent over him, the women's heads close together, their voices synching. Narcissa circled her wand over Draco's neck and shoulder, and Hermione dripped the rest of the bottle and then a second into his mouth, reciting the words with his mother.

The bleeding slowed.

The flesh knit.

His skin fused.

Draco heaved a breath and began to push up from the floor.

"Mum?"

Their hands were on him, helping him to sit up.

Hermione on her knees behind him, crawling to him—

Narcissa on her knees, her hand to his face—

"Mum, you're here—Love?"

"Draco—" And then she was facing him, her legs a tangle under her, her hands on his scarred ribs and stomach, her Malfoy signet ring covered in his blood. Her heart was beating too fast, her breath too shallow.

"Hermione had Pip fetch me, dear," said Narcissa gently.

Draco looked to her. "To help?"

Hermione's breath caught. She looked at his open, unguarded face. She shook her head and told the truth. "I—I called Narcissa so you wouldn't die without seeing each other again. I—" Her breath shuddered through her. "I thought you were dying, Draco. I thought you'd want your mother."

His brow furrowed, his eyes filling with pain.

And then she was crying, her arms around his waist, her face pressed to his scarred and bloody chest.

His arm was around her, his hand tight on her shoulder. "Love—"

She was sobbing, his bare skin wet and sticky under her cheek, her shoulders hunched against the pain of thinking she'd lose him. She couldn't stop crying—

She was gasping for air—

She couldn't breathe—

His arms were cinched around her—

He was kissing the top of her head.

"Love, love—you'll never be rid of me."

Draco heard a soft pop and looked up from his ledger. It was a grounds elf, one who liked to hunt.

"Stranger at the gate," he said, wringing his hands. An affectation, Draco thought. He'd seen the elf take down deer. But the Manor grounds didn't get many guests these days. The Auror Department came straight through the floor.

Draco snatched up the spyglass on his desk and went to the window. He pushed open the casement, the cold air hitting him, and leaned out for a better angle—yes, stood just there. One of Avery's boys.

"Thank you, Pim," said Draco. "I'll take it from here."

A soft pop and Draco was alone.

Draco stood for a moment, considering. An assassination attempt so overt he would walk right into it?

Well, he would find out.

Draco could have apparated but he strode down the walk to the gates, his black cloak billowing, an unregistered wand held to his side. The Manor loomed behind him—it was built to intimidate and he let it do its job, watching the boy as he went. He was probably seventeen, compactly muscular, well shorter than Draco.

The boy stood his ground, a tremor in his hand betraying him.

"Lord Malfoy," said the boy as Draco came to a stop, facing him through the bars of the gate, and Draco saw that he was prepared to grovel.

"Why are you at my home?" he said coldly.

"Lord Malfoy—" said the boy quickly, straightening. "If I could just talk to you—"

"I'll not have your kind in Lady Malfoy's manor," said Draco. "You can talk to me at Nott Manor at this time tomorrow, or not at all."

The boy's eyes widened but he nodded stiffly. "I will be there. Thank you, Lord Malfoy—"

"Piss off," said Draco.

"Yes, sir." And he disapparated with a last plaintive look.



"I cannot *believe* you didn't tell me," said Ron.

"Would you have believed me if I'd told you before he actually did it?" asked Hermione. Turnabout being fair play, they were having this conversation at the Leaky, barely touched butterbeers on the table before them. Harry had talked to Ron first.

Ron crossed his arms and leaned back. He looked at her, his face set. "No," he said finally.

"I tried to tell you he didn't believe that rot, and you didn't trust me—"

"I didn't trust *him*—"

"Which is why I didn't tell you—"

"All right," said Harry, "now you're going in circles."

Ron heaved a sigh and canted his head. He looked tired. After a moment, he said, "I'm still angry."

"And your feelings are valid, Ronald," Hermione said primly.

Ron regarded her for a long minute. Then he snorted. "Now you're handling me," he said.

Hermione shrugged, pulling a face.

"All right," said Ron, but his mouth was quirking as he gazed around the pub. Then his eyes slowly narrowed. "Wait a minute." He fixed on Hermione, leaning forward. "Wait. A. Minute. When you said George would do things I wouldn't do—"

Hermione gave him a wincing, tight-lipped smile.

"That smug *motherfucker*—" Ron shook his head. His voice raised in pitch. "I expect he'll expect us to cover things up now! Won't he?"

"I mean . . ." Harry was pulling the face now. He looked between them. "We *are* going to cover things up."

"That's not the point!" said Ron. "Fucking *George*."

Hermione's face was carefully neutral. Too neutral.

"All right, who *else*?" said Ron.

"Bill."

He looked at her. Then his shoulders twitched, not quite a shrug. "Yeah, Bill never tells anyone anything. All right." He paused. A side-long glance. "I suppose Charlie knows."

"I suppose," said Hermione.

"Bunch of arseholes," said Ron, shaking his head. But he picked up his pint.

"Speaking of covering things up," said Hermione slowly. She looked to Harry. "Goyle Manor?"

Harry grimaced. "Shacklebolt is not happy. We're getting magical signatures from loads of people who weren't supposed to be in the country—and weren't, officially. The fact that they were and we didn't know it makes him look bad. A lot of things here look bad."

"So—"

"So a lot of things are getting swept under the rug."



"Here we go!" said Theo, shoving the boy through the doorway. Draco could see the boy's breath blow out from him in the unheated room.

The boy caught himself quickly—a decent dueler, Draco remembered. His eyes were darting to take in everything—Draco, sat behind Theo's father's desk in the dead man's cursed study. The books were rotting on the shelves, mold spreading across the flocked wallpaper.

"Sit," said Draco.

The boy hurried to do so, shifting on the chair's ratty upholstery.

"Speak," said Draco.

"Lord Malfoy." He looked over his shoulder, to where Theo towered over him on the stained rug. "Lord Nott." He turned back quickly. "I'm Eoin Barry. My father is John. We are Avery's poor relations—"

It cost the boy something to say this, but there was no denying it. His clothes were acceptable but worn. He wore no jewelry, not even a family ring.

"My father sent me to Avery. I am expected to work my way up—and I am willing to do so!"

He looked stricken by the thought that he had given the opposite impression but there was a fine line of resentment there too, Draco thought. He had been set to a task that was not thoroughly his own.

"But I am not sure . . . I . . ." And then, the words rushed out: "You are married to a muggleborn—"

"I am aware," drawled Draco, his eyes flat.

The boy nodded quickly, his head ducked as though expecting a blow. "Yes, of course, sir. I meant only that perhaps you are more . . . more . . . open-minded . . ." His eyes flicked up to Draco then. He drew a breath. "I saw the picture of you and Lady Malfoy in the paper . . ."

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"And it looked like—"

"I will warn you not to speculate about other men's wives," spat Draco. He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "You will learn it is safer not to discuss them at all."

"Of course! Of course, sir! I apologize most humbly, sir. I don't know what came over me. I would never—I didn't mean—I will never speak of Lady Malfoy again—"

Avery crumpled onto the polished tile just outside the doors and Draco felt the dark magic spreading through him like the blood rapidly soaking the carpet runner around Burke. It was hot and prickly and addictive, like firewhisky, like hatred.

A low whistle. Spinner's team had arrived. Draco could sense them moving up the hallway behind him. He glanced back—a mistake.

When he looked back to the doors, there stood one of the boys—the boy he'd hoped wouldn't be killed. That godsdamned sodding wanker Avery had brought him after Draco had told him to send the boys home. No doubt the boy had pushed to come.

He stepped into the hallway, wand up, and Draco sent him flying back with a flipendo. He turned to Spinner as she drew even with him.

"We got the doorman," she said quietly. "Good work, Malfoy. We'll take it from here."

He glanced back at the dark hallway just when the boy's diffindo hit him.

Pain—instantaneous, across his shoulder and throat—

Hot spurts of blood—

Sweet Salazar—

Spinner spitting out "Avada kedavra!"

Draco was on the floor—

She was bending over him—

"*Epikey. Epikey. Epikey.* That won't hold, Malfoy. Get to someone who can help. Where's your portkey? Do you have it? Where is it?"

He was patting at his pocket, bleeding out—

Going numb now—

She was in his pocket—

She grabbed his hand—

Something dropped into it—

A sharp pull at his navel—



Draco appeared on the bedroom floor, drenched in blood, blood gouting out of his neck.

"Draco!" Hermione was casting the vulnera sanentur even as she lurched toward him. Then she saw his glazed eyes. She screamed, "Pip! Get Narcissa!"

Pip and Narcissa popped into the room, Pip's hand on Narcissa's wrist.

"Draco!" Narcissa fell to her knees beside him, clutching his bone-white face between her hands.

And then she'd pulled her wand from her skirt and was joining Hermione in the songlike vulnera sanentur as Hermione fumbled with Draco's collar button and then Pip vanished his slashed, blood-soaked shirt and jacket. Pip snapped her fingers and the blood was cleared from his scarred chest, even as new blood pumped out. Narcissa was leaning over him, the point of her wand tracing a tight circle with interior circles over the damage, her left palm flat on his chest, over his heart.

Hermione crawled in her clinging party dress to her beaded bag on the edge of the bed, jerking it to her by its strap as she chanted the healing spell for stemming blood flow, for knitting flesh.

She was dumping it all out—*where the fuck was*—the replenishing potion. Draco's brew. It was stronger than hers—she'd admit that now.

She scrambled back to Draco with the potion bottles. Narcissa looked up, her icy blue eyes scared and determined, as she kept circling her wand point, singing the words with Hermione.

"Draco, Draco," Hermione whispered, smoothing his white-blond hair back from his forehead and trying to lift his head gently—it was so goddamned heavy, so fucking heavy like he was already dead—

The Dark Mark couldn't be reproduced by Polyjuice. It was, perhaps, a reasonable security precaution. But Draco suspected the man liked being able to make him fly through hoops.

He unhurriedly removed his cufflink and pulled his sleeves up the bare minimum to show the Mark, staring dead-eyed at the guard. The man seemed finally to lose his nerve, loosing an embarrassed cough and nodding him through.

Draco passed him, then spun back to hit him with a stupefy. He watched the man tumble to the ground as he put his cufflink back in. Then he turned on his heel and walked deeper into Goyle Manor, back into his past.

He'd ridden brooms here as a boy. Drunk stolen wine in Greg's bedroom, teasing Greg mercilessly about his crush on Daphne Greengrass. Sticky summer parties. Dinners with Greg's blustering father, Draco nodding along. A series of Death Eater errands—Greg and his father were, even now, in Azkaban. Who hosted Avery's group tonight—Greg's mother? Some cousin? Draco had not tried, after his release, to find out who had inherited the manor, though it took more effort to avoid this information than to learn it.

Muscle memory took him past the outdated wallpaper of the entrance hall, past the staircase that would lead up to Greg's rooms. The meeting would be in—yes, he could hear the din of voices coming from the formal dining room.

Draco slid the muggle coin from his pocket and whispered, "Avenseguim." He should have done so sooner but he'd wanted to make sure that Avery's group were here, that he wouldn't be directed to another portkey.

He paused here in the hallway, giving Spinnet's team time to catch up. He could skip out now, maybe, but he wouldn't.

You're key to our plans. Only you can do this for us.

He had done this before—let a small group in to a place they weren't meant to be.

Was that what you wanted—for it to be your choice this time?

Draco's purpose had always been to be used.

This time it was Longbottom's turn.

History repeating itself.

But this time he would go back to her.

He leaned against the wall, next to a bust on a marble plinth, and concentrated on breathing in and out. The portraits would start to gossip soon.

He heard muffled footsteps and pushed off the wainscoting, rolling back his shoulders as he straightened.

It was Burke.

"You don't need to go in, Malfoy. We can take care of it here."

Draco laughed darkly. "Oh, you're going to need some help, Burke, if I'm your initiation rite."

He whipped up his wand and hit Burke with a diffindo before Burke could try to avada him. He didn't think Burke had an avada in him anyway. He loved himself way too much. You had to feel hatred with the unforgivables—but it didn't have to be for your target. It usually wasn't, really.

The hex hit Burke's raised hand, sending fingers and the top of his wand flying. He screamed—more surprise than pain, Draco thought—and Draco hexed him again, catching him across the throat. It was a deep cut, blood spraying immediately, and Burke collapsed. He was already bleeding out when Draco stepped forward to stand over him.

"Too bad, Burke," he said softly. "You have to be fast. Everything can be taken from you so quickly."

But he didn't think Burke could hear him over his last ragged breaths. It was too late for Burke to learn the lesson anyway.

Movement by the doors and Draco looked up to see Avery, drawn by the scream.

Avery saw him stood over Burke, and Draco beat him to the avada. It was easy—he hated Avery for recruiting the boys he'd been using as dueling practice, and he hated himself for having been one of those boys.

"You just did," snarled Draco.

"Sir!" The boy was shaking his bowed head. "No. Sir. I—I—I didn't mean—"

Draco glanced up at Theo, who was struggling—his arms crossed, his hand at his mouth—to suppress laughter. Theo moved his hand away. "Barry!" he barked. "Get a hold of yourself."

"Sir!"

The corner of Draco's mouth quirked but he blanked his features. He leaned back as the boy straightened.

"I would never presume, sir. I meant only to say that—" The boy took a deep breath. "I am not sure I believe in blood purity, and I thought that perhaps you don't either." He sat very still, steeling himself.

Draco arched an eyebrow. "All right," he said wearily. "Who are you spying for?"

The boy gasped. "Sir, I am not—"

Draco's eyes bounced to Theo, and Theo cuffed the boy across the back of the head.

The boy flinched but did not make a sound. Conditioned, then.

"Sir, I am not lying! It's just me and—and a few of the others! I'm speaking on their behalf as well!"

"Are you, now?" asked Draco, looking to Theo. Theo's eyebrows were raised.

Theo leaned over the boy from behind, his hands on the chair's armrests, caging in Barry with his long arms. His face was very close to the boy's. He paused. "Which others?" he whispered.

"Oh?" The boy began rattling off names.

Draco could picture them. A handful who had lurked at the edges of meetings, who had come to the ballroom to duel without horsing around. They were poorer and more determined, scared but resigned to unpleasant tasks. It had been easy for Draco to believe in blood purity when he was young—he did indeed feel superior to so many people, and he accepted it when he was told he was special because of his blood instead of spoiled because of his gold. These boys didn't have gold—they saw more clearly that those who did were full of shit.

"And you all want . . . jobs? What is it you're asking for?"

"I—My father hoped that I would find a mentor at Avery's. I—it wasn't the right match for me. But you seem to know what you're about, sir. You seem to have your own way of thinking—"

Draco snorted. He thought like every fifteen-year-old at Hogwarts: taking the piss and daydreaming about his witch's cunt.

"And the others and I—we would be grateful for any opportunity you could give us. We're hard workers. Fast learners. We can be of use."

Draco looked to Theo. Theo straightened and shrugged. Did Draco want his own child soldiers? He wasn't sure that he did. But he didn't want to be assassinated by one of them in a year's time, when they'd found other masters. He didn't want to be killing them in a year's time, either, when he helped to wipe out another nest of revivalists.

"All right, enough. I'll speak to my business managers. You'll have jobs." Malfoy LTD had extensive holdings. Someone always needed an office clerk. "And in exchange—"

The boy straightened, his jaw set.

"I will receive weekly reports from each of you."

The boy waited.

Draco waited.

"On what, sir?" he finally asked.

"Everything," said Draco. "How well the company is run. Who's stealing. What rumors you're hearing. What trends you're noticing. Who's approaching you outside of work. I'll expect you to move up quickly, so you can bring me better information. Don't make things up."

The boy nodded, relieved. He could do this. Draco studied him. He would give it time, find out which of the boys he could trust, which understood information and leverage and how to get both. If they were any good, he would move them into the Ministry or the companies run by his wife's opposition.

"Where are you staying?" asked Draco.

The boy looked abashed. "Erm, we were at Avery Manor. With Potter's raids, we're sleeping rough—"

"Did they really have no money? No wage or stipend from Avery that they'd saved? "Why didn't you go home?" asked Draco.

The boy's face went hard. "My father would not be impressed by my lack of ambition."

Draco sighed as he and Theo exchanged a look.

"If we could just stay on the grounds—"

Draco could buy the git a hotel if he wanted, but he was wary of just how pathetic this boy was. Was this a mole meant to trigger Draco's hero complex so he could get close enough to stab Draco in the back? Draco wasn't a hero. He would make the boy prove himself. He watched Theo move to perch on the corner of the desk.

Theo looked the boy up and down. "Do you suck cock, Barry?"

The boy swallowed, wide-eyed. "Yes, sir?" His eyes darted between Theo and Draco, anticipating a new stage to this interview.

"Well, don't think you're finding your way into my bed that way," said Theo, his face impassive. "You lot can sleep in the guest wing. It's not safe and the elves are freed and hostile—you will have to negotiate your care with them. You may stay there as long as you survive or until you find more suitable lodging. If you steal from me or inform on me, I will execute you and burn your body on the grounds."

The boy stared at Theo. Theo stared back. Then Barry said, "I accept your terms, Lord Nott."

Draco and Theo looked at each other.

Theo turned back to the boy with a wide smile. "Brilliant."



His wife narrowed her eyes. They were stood in the dressing room, his hands at her waist. "Your idea of rehabilitating the blood purist youth is to turn them into Baker Street Irregulars?"

"I know that reference," said Draco, unzipping her skirt, "and what's wrong with my own personal spy network? They're spying on my own companies."

"For now," she said. She stepped out of her heels, and Draco smiled when he got taller.

"For now," he echoed, pleased she knew how he thought. "I'm doing Nott a favor—"

"A favor? By volunteering him to house boys you don't trust in a death trap?"

Draco worked her skirt off her hips. "The elves will be happier with more dolls in the dollhouse. Maybe they'll finally set Nott Manor right. And in the meantime, I can force the boys to play three-on-three quidditch with me. I miss quidditch."

"You're ridiculous," she said as he pulled her close, sliding his hand down her knickers to grab her arse. "Why can't Theo just hire—"

"Shhh!" He jerked back with a warning look, his voice dropping to a whisper. "You'll offend the elves. The manors are theirs. Nott has to wait for his to come round." All those years in Magical Creatures and she still didn't understand how elves thought. "You're the one who's ridiculous."

He was biting his lip as he pinched her arse.

She jolted, squirming against him and now he was grinning. He was so hard—he was going to fuck her before dinner. "I know Narcissa has her bridge club ladies spying for you now. I've got to keep up."

"It's just a little gossip—I like to have as much information as possible," she said, pressing herself to him.

"I know you do, darling." He was smiling as he kissed her, his hands gripping her tight. "Tell me you love me," he whispered.

"I love you," she said. She said it every time.

Hermione remembered a conversation she'd had with Pansy in a hotel bar in Muggle London.

"Draco," she said. "You belong to me. And I expect you to come back to me. Do you understand?" She looked into his pale gray eyes, letting out all her pain and desire. "I *need* you to come back."

He stared at her and then he nodded quickly, ducking his head. "I will, love." His mouth was a hard line as he nodded to himself. He leaned in and kissed her chastely on the lips.

Then he stepped back, his jaw clenched, his haunted eyes on her, and slipped his hand into the pocket holding Longbottom's first portkey. This one would take him away. A second one, in another pocket, was meant to bring him back.

There was a pause—she saw his chest rise and fall with his breath—and then he was gone.



So you will tell me where and when, and I will have people standing by for a controlled burn.

The November sun was going down, the sky streaked fuchsia and orange, when he arrived in a field he didn't recognize—not, as far as he knew, one of Longbottom's. He'd never find it again later.

A small group in dark tactical gear, their wands holstered alongside muggle weapons, waited.

Alicia Spinnet was in the lead, her hair tightly plaited.

"Malfoy." She gave him the two-finger salute, flashing the Order tattoo on the back of her hand. "You're our way in?"

"I'm your man," he said. "Or mole, as it were."

She jerked her chin. "I'll take it, Ferret."

"We're going in blind. I won't know the final location until I portkey in." He handed her the muggle coin and held up its mate. "Paired trackers. I'll activate mine when I'm in."

"Then we'll be right behind," said Spinnet, flipping and catching the coin, her tone not quite snide. "And if this is a double-cross, I'll avada you first."

"Likewise," ground out Draco.

She snorted. "I won't muss your hair unless I have to, Malfoy. Let's go."

He nodded and withdrew the first timed portkey from Avery, a safety pin. The sun dropped below the horizon just as he pricked his thumb—and winked out of the field with a sharp pull on his navel.

Then he was in a dark alley. It smelled like Muggle London. Narrow. Wet. Graffiti on brick. A skip reeking of food refuse. He lit his wand—a cloaked figure was stood at the alley's entrance. If he'd tried to bring Spinnet's team with him, they would have been bottlenecked here before he'd found the second portkey.

He turned and scanned the passage carefully, fighting nausea, and bent to retrieve the small box tucked behind a back corner of the skip.

He opened it to see an onyx bead carved into a skull. "Subtle," he muttered.

He lifted his head and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. A mistake, given the stink of the alley. Fine. He opened his eyes and took hold of the bead between his forefinger and blood-dotted thumb, letting the box fall away as he winked out of the alley—

He was on the grounds of an estate, inside the gates, the air fresh and cool. Goyle Manor. Salazar, he should have guessed. (Anyone could have guessed. Avery and his lot were proper idiots.) Spinnet's team would have no difficulty enchanting their portkeys to his location once he'd activated the tracker.

He pushed these thoughts from his mind and sauntered to the front entrance, where a guard made no move to open the door.

He nodded to the man as he approached.

"Let's see it," said the guard, gesturing toward Draco's left arm.

"It's me," said Draco flatly.

"Could be Polyjuiced," sniffed the man. "Let's see it."

He kissed her a few minutes longer, his hand at her jaw, and then stepped back. Hermione could hear the music and guests in the courtyard below. The sun would set soon—it was still November, and magic could only do so much. Pansy would change into her silver minidress, the fairy lights would come on, and the courtyard would become a raucous dance party.

But right now was the moment Hermione had been pushing out of her mind, the moment she had been dreading. Avery's high-level planning session, the major players in from Argentina, the men and supplies on the way, the action expected to move past talk and dueling. Draco had insisted he make an appearance—she didn't know where. He didn't know where. He wouldn't know until the second portkey took him there. He had set a snare—Avery would be caught in it with Neville's people on Draco's heels. Or Avery had set a snare and Draco would be the one caught before Neville's people could get there.

The day before, Hermione had caught Neville alone. "Why haven't you told Harry and Ron?" she'd asked him.

He'd canted his head toward her. "I won't oblige anyone to keep living through the war," he'd told her, his eyes calm and sad. "Some people did enough. They should be allowed to move on. If they can't, then they find me."

Now Draco said, "If I'm not back within the hour, tell everyone we quarreled and you kicked me out."

"Draco," said Hermione. "It's your house."

"What's mine is yours, love." He was looking down, fussing with his pockets. Then he had straightened, and a ring box was in his hand. He was holding it in front of him, not quite presenting it to her. "It's appropriate that you have this now, Mrs. Malfoy."

Hermione's brow furrowed. She watched as his pale bony fingers opened the box. Inside was gold, the Malfoy seal—it was a signet ring. A House of Malfoy signet ring in gold.

She glanced up but his eyes were cast down.

"I've had this made for you, darling. You don't have to put it on. It's only got simple protective charms on it—no heirloom enchantments, nothing that can hurt you. Have Bill Weasley confirm that for you first. But if I don't return, this will make it easier for you to dispose of the estate."

Hermione took a breath. "Draco . . . what about your parents?"

"You're my wife," said Draco simply, and, when she looked up, his pale gray eyes were clear and focused on her.

She could see the tension around them. She looked down at the open box, the Malfoy seal in gold instead of silver. Carefully, she reached out and plucked the ring from the velvet. It was heavier than she'd expected. The seal had a weight to it, the band not insubstantial. She turned her hand over. The ring's back was engraved: HGM.

She glanced up at Draco, his face set, and then studied the ring held between her thumb and forefinger.

Draco still held the box, open, near her hand. A tiny shift toward her—a prompt for her to return the ring to its home.

Hermione considered the gold seal. She already had the marital contract, signed in blood, and her vault key. She would have no practical difficulty in distributing the Malfoy assets, should she be widowed. But she knew the ring was not really about the vaults.

Hermione did not have to accept it. She could keep the ring in its box, use it to dismantle the Malfoy legacy if Draco were killed.

Or she could try to build a different legacy with him should he return.

Hermione breathed in. She could smell citrus and cloves and wedding flowers. She could feel the coiled tension in his still body.

Hermione slid the ring onto the third finger of her left hand—it pricked her, sampling her blood, and tightened to a secure fit—and, when she looked up, he was swallowing hard, his jaw flexing.

The floo flashed green and Pansy stepped into Draco's dimly lit study to the familiar sight of Draco behind his desk, Theo lounging on the settee nearest the fireplace, a purring mass of orange fur on his lap.

"Hullo, miscreants," said Pansy, brushing soot off her shoulders. "What'd I miss on honeymoon?"

Draco looked up from behind his desk. "Are you still friendly with Mrs. Burke? We have Wizengamot appointments to influence. They're filling the empty seats."

Draco was sat in front of tea he wasn't bothering to drink, Rowle and Travers with him at the small table in Knockturn. The tea house was smoky, the room too warm and reeking of sweat with everyone still bundled against the cold outside.

"Shocking, this Avery situation," said Rowle. "A major setback for the movement."

"I heard those ships were a bloodbath," said Travers. "The Order killed everyone."

"Then who lived to say it was the Order?" asked Rowle.

Draco nearly rolled his eyes.

"The crew?" said Travers.

"The point, gentlemen," said Draco, before they could ask whether he owned the ships, "is that we'll have to rebuild. Surely not everyone who's been abroad was on those ships. And we're still here. Who's running point now?"

"I'd like to," said Rowle, "but my parents are getting on in years and require quite a bit of help with their affairs. I have young children at home. They're a handful—"

"Really?" sneered Draco, just to be an arse.

"Yaxley is trying to get something going from Azkaban," said Travers. "You should talk to your father. And there's an outfit in France looking for funding—"

"I haven't heard of them. Why should I hand out gold if they've yet to do anything?" sniffed Draco.

"No, they're serious," said Travers.

"Well, if they're *serious*," said Draco. "Some of us aren't busy playing nanny elf—"

The chagrined glower he'd been looking for from Rowle—

"I'm flush and prepared to invest if it's real," said Draco. "Send serious inquiries my way."

They had a small Yule party at the Manor. Neville and Pansy and Padma came. Harry and Ginny made an appearance. Charlie and Theo and George set off too many fireworks while Angelina heckled them. The elves served too much food.

Hermione made Draco promise he wouldn't buy her any businesses, buildings, or acreage for Christmas. She gave him a Mont Blanc pen and muggle candy, and he gave her obscene muggle lingerie. Then he portkeyed her to Paris and tried to buy her everything she touched.

Neville was sat in Pansy's office, studying Malfoy's list of Avery's known associates. It was alphabetical and meticulously annotated in Malfoy's private-tutor handwriting. It would take a few years to work through properly.

Already, Malfoy's information had proved good. Getting a second and third team onto the ships at sea had been tricky but the route and vessel specifics on the manifests had made it possible. Malfoy was detail-oriented, a strategic thinker; he seemed naturally to anticipate what Neville would need.

"All right, Longbottom."

His mouth quirked and he looked to her as she dropped onto the sofa next to him, her skirt flouncing, her brassiere holding steady. She was in business mode.

He set Malfoy's list to the side.

"As you know," she said officially, "it is my goal for us to have our first baby this calendar year."

Neville raised an eyebrow as she handed him a copy of the pages in her hand, which appeared to involve diagrams.

"To that end, I've compiled a list of positions known to aid in conception. It's my thought we can work our way down the list while continuing to keep favorites in heavy rotation. If we get started *now*, then it's possible we can avoid December entirely, which I'd like to reserve for the holidays."

She shot him her *I'm serious* look.

"Then—"

"Pansy," said Neville. He took in her large, kohl-rimmed eyes, the Cupid's bow of her upper lip, the swell of her breasts. Her mouth softened as she gazed up at him. Her chest rose and fell with her breath. He set the pages to the side. "I won't need a spreadsheet to get you pregnant."



"Hermione—" Shacklebolt's expression was somewhere between thoughtful and pained. He was sat in her guest chair, a surprise visit. He'd glanced around her office when he'd arrived, and now she thought he'd expected to catch Draco there. "You have us a bit worried—"

"Oh?" Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"After the pictures out of the Longbottom wedding—"

Hermione waited but he didn't finish the thought. "Am I being accused of an improper relationship with my husband?" she asked.

"Well—" Shacklebolt huffed a humorless laugh, unable to meet her eyes. Snogging Draco Malfoy in an unending loop on the front page of *Witch Weekly* had hurt her progressive credentials considerably. But how, exactly, could Shacklebolt complain? His gaze landed on the gold signet ring on her left hand and stayed there, his expression hardening into resignation.

"Maybe you should take it up with the Wizengamot," Hermione said lightly, tilting her head. "They can hold a hearing. Tell you what I'm thinking—"

Shacklebolt sighed heavily, looking up at her.

"—since they make my decisions for me."



Charlie looked over. "I wanted to compare notes with Rolf."

Theo's grin widened, his eyebrows raised.

"On Horntails," said Charlie.

"Right," said Theo, his chin tilting up. "I'll compare notes with Luna, then."

Charlie raised his own eyebrows.

Hermione felt she was missing something, but she was beginning to have a guess as to what.

"And how extensive are her notes?" asked Theo.

"You already know," said Charlie. "You saw her take all of them."

"Oh."

"Yeah?" said Theo.

"Yeah," said Charlie.

"All right, then." Theo bit his lip and fed Charlie a grape tomato.

Charlie didn't break eye contact as he chewed it.

Theo watched, his lips parted, his gaze unwavering, and fed Charlie a blueberry.

Hermione blinked and looked away.

She could see Ginny listening, a skeptical squint to her eyes, as Luna and Rolf gestured across from her at their table on the other side of the courtyard. Harry had left his seat to talk to McGonagall, bent toward her, his hand on the back of her chair. The Hogwarts faculty had come out en masse for Neville and were seated with his gran. Hermione had said hello before they'd all sat, and Draco had insisted on accompanying her though she could feel the resentment rolling off him. He'd kept his arm around her as he'd exchanged careful greetings with Slytherins along the way, so many of them absent for so many reasons. The professors had turned tepid expressions on him, the alumnus and donor they could neither snub nor claim. Hermione had smiled too brightly, feeling an odd prickle of irritation. Draco had been quiet and sober since.

Neville and Pansy danced alone at the center of the courtyard, his eyes locked on her, her filmy robes doing nothing to hide her shape. Then Neville was dancing with his gran, and Draco looked up as Pansy approached.

"C'mon, you wanker. This falls to you as host."

Draco smiled and leaned over to kiss Hermione's cheek and then he was rising and offering Pansy his arm. Hermione sat back and observed his lean form in the tight suit as he expertly spun Pansy in circles. She'd seen them dance before—at Yule balls, the school Samhain parties. She'd watched them despite herself then. They'd been so strange to her, the spoiled little shit and his mean girlfriend. They weren't nice to anyone—they didn't even like each other—and yet they seemed to have so many friends, families who loved them, a whole weird relationship they wouldn't let go of. It had all seemed too miserable for Hermione to be jealous but she'd wondered what it was like to play by such different rules. She'd wondered, in those moments, what it was like inside their heads. Now Draco wasn't drunk and sneering and Pansy wasn't hanging on him. He handled her with neutral care, and Hermione was free to watch him from a distance again.

Godric, he was beautiful.

Then the dance space was filling, Neville and Pansy back at the center, and Draco was beside her. She put her bare hand in his and soon his thigh was against hers, their chests nearly touching as he turned them this way and that, his fingertips pressing into her shoulder blade, his eyes on the horizon.

The sun was lowering toward the grapevines when he said, "Pretend I'm being a prat—"

"Pretend?"

"And slap me like we're about to go fight in private."

"Draco," she said. "It's a *wedding*!"

She pulled his head down, her hand at his nape, her fingers in the short hair there, and kissed him until Charlie wolf whistled and Theo called, "Get a room, you two!"

They landed back in the bedroom.

It was a short, traditional bond, but that didn't mean Pansy Parkinson was being subtle.

Hermione knew from her time as a captive audience that Pansy did not care to make her guests sit through songs, poetry recitals, inspirational readings, candle-lighting, or other time-filers that might take the focus off her. She'd dismissed doves, butterflies, and fireworks as déclassé. The officiant was an anonymous wizard who had faded into the background before Pansy had even had the opportunity to edit him out of her photos. But Ginny's and Luna's dresses glinted and shone, all four attendants carried an overflowing armful of exotic greenery, and Neville's black suit and black forest green waistcoat were fitted like a glove—a glove that was currently letting all of Pansy's friends (and enemies) from school know that he was tall, broad-shouldered, well-muscled, and dressed to the left. Hermione could see the Slytherin women elbowing one another as Neville took his place, framed by the garlanded doors.

Pansy's robes left a dangerous amount of décolletage on display, but Neville's eyes never left hers as he and Pansy clasped wrists. Neville's hand was bare, a Parkinson cufflink showing at his sleeve. Pansy's emerald rings sparkled and flashed in the enchanted sunlight—there purely to draw attention to her hand. She and Neville were not exchanging wedding bands.

The vow was made, warmth flushing through Hermione even at a remove, and Neville and Theo cried. Draco stood with his jaw clenched, which Hermione thought meant he was refusing to cry, and she didn't know whether it was over seeing someone he shared so much history with execute the bond or if he was imagining the ceremony he would have had here. She remembered him telling her, on the day they were forcibly wed in an office on level two, that the Ministry had deprived Narcissa and the elves. He'd never said whether he'd wanted a wedding.

Then Neville and Pansy were kissing for a little too long, and he was escorting her into the courtyard proper while she winked saucily at the Slytherin women, and Theo was grinning and offering Ginny his arm, and Draco was leaning toward Luna to hear what she said as she took his arm, smiling at her as he walked her to where Neville and Pansy were stood to receive well wishes, Draco's and Luna's white-blond hair catching the light, Luna dwarfed by the masses of greenery in their arms.

"All right?" asked Hermione when she'd caught up to Draco, the elves already resetting the seating from the bond along the banquet tables that had appeared for a late luncheon.

"Fine, love," he said, though she knew he wasn't entirely. "My bouquet has bitten the shit out of me."

Beside them, Theo had vanished his own bouquet to hold Pansy's hand between his and peck her on the cheek. "Best wishes, Pansy," he said.

"Thank you, Theo," she murmured, gazing fondly up at him as he straightened.

Then he grabbed Neville's hand and jerked him forward. "Hey, daddy—" He kissed Neville on the mouth. "Welcome to the family."

Pansy was swatting him with her flowers—"Nott, get off my man!"—but Theo was already skipping out of her way as Neville raised an eyebrow.

Theo backed into the crowd, blowing kisses with both hands, and then Charlie was there and Theo was spinning to pluck a champagne flute off a tray as he threw his arm around Charlie's neck and his body rocked to a stop against Charlie's, the ginger absorbing all his momentum without moving.

"Lover," Theo purred, pressed tight to a smirking, wild-haired Charlie Weasley.

"Salazar," sighed Draco. "They're going to break all the furniture in their room."



Now Draco and Hermione were sat across from them as Theo lounged in his chair with his arm hooked around Charlie, drinking and idly feeding his meal to the carnivorous centerpiece and the half-grown cat on his lap.

"Shame Pansy sat Luna and Rolf at another table," said Charlie, busy with his knife and fork.

"Is it?" Theo was grinning.

The bookstore was in sight when the man muttered "whore" just as he passed her. Hermione sucked in a breath and then Theo was punching the man in the kidneys, a dirty shot to the back. The man buckled and Theo called out, "Go on, Granger. I'll only be a minute."

Hermione kept walking. Behind her, she heard Theo laugh. She didn't look back.



"Remember I'm going to Muggle London with Pansy and Padma tonight," said Hermione.

"So I will expect you late, pissed, and randy," said Draco, spooning marmalade onto his toast, Crookshanks on his lap.

"I do not—"

He raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Rude, aggressive, reeking of cheap white wine—"

"That was *expensive* white wine. You know Pansy doesn't let me—"

"Save your words, love. I will hydrate and stretch before bed—"

"I'm not *that* bad—"

"Vicious, love. Vicious—"



Theo loped down the soiled hall runner toward the floo, his wand held loosely at his side, his eyes scanning for movement among the cobwebs. He heard distant screaming, but it didn't sound like screaming he needed to attend to.

Theo had recently gone on an expedition through the guest wing and found it transformed into a decrepit boys' dormitory, the wallpaper peeling, lights flickering, boards laid across the holes in the floor. A glimpse of wash hung to dry. The sounds of roughhousing—or rough sex—behind a closed door.

A startling improvement over its last-seen state! It seemed the Nott elves were pleased! Begrudgingly so but—pleased! Maybe Pip would come talk to them?



Draco had stomped in from visiting Azkaban and was now, a full five minutes later, still banging around in the dressing room. There was no reason for that man to be making this much noise.

Hermione set her reports down next to her on the settee. She sank her fingers into Crookshanks's fur and then, wincing, moved the purring cat off her lap. She got up and walked quietly down the hall.

"Draco," she said as she entered the dressing room.

He looked up, his hands on his hips. He'd been glaring down at nothing she could see.

She made her way to him and put her hands on his sides. She could feel his scars through the thin cotton of his shirt under her right hand.

She looked up at his tense face, the crease between his eyebrows. "Do you need attention?"

He held still. She took in his pale, even skin. His beautiful mouth. His long eyelashes.

Then he sighed and dropped his hands, his shoulders releasing. He nodded, face sullen, dead-eyed.

Hermione stroked his hard stomach with her thumb. "Do you need blowjob attention or talking attention?" she asked.

His eyes had cleared. "Can I have both?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.



Draco was sat at a table in the back of a high-end pub, making small talk with a Yaxley cousin out of Bulgaria. He was a hulking bruiser with heavy features, dark hair, and surprisingly gentle hands. Draco had noted his light touch on his wand and glassware.

"Awful business with Avery," said the cousin, who didn't look overly upset.

"I was meant to be there, you know," said Draco as the man raised thick eyebrows. "Missed it to watch the Ministry marry off my ex to a gardener."

The man huffed a laugh, and then his head cocked. "Right. Now I've placed it. You're the one with the muggle fetish. Got that muggle wife—"

Draco snorted. "I like what I like," he said, smiling. "No reason to deprive myself."

A pause while the man looked at Draco. The moment stretched. Then he laughed. "Yeah, all right."

"What I like most is power," said Draco, canting his head, his fingers on his firewhisky tumbler. "House Malfoy can be patient. We've played the games with the Ministry we've had to play. It hasn't been entirely unpleasant for me—" He smiled. "But I'm hearing that patience is about to pay off."

The man shifted in his seat, his leather jacket creaking. "The group's small right now but we have big plans."

Draco lifted his chin, his expression encouraging. "That's what I like to hear."



The floo flashed green and Charlie tumbled out into Theo's bedroom. Theo was holding his breath and chewing his lower lip and staring all at once. He hadn't unblocked the bedroom floo in years. Charlie's loose curls looked windswept, his freckled face expectant. He was already starting to smile.

Theo had put off all of Charlie's attempts to visit, telling Charlie he liked coming to him. And he did. He liked seeing Charlie in Charlie's cottage, where everything felt like Charlie and Theo felt like he wasn't in his own life at all. He liked crawling into Charlie's bed and smelling Charlie on the sheets—cold wind and fire and smoke and him—and falling asleep, waiting for Charlie to come home and find him there, like a little present.

But he had been in Charlie's bed and Charlie had been holding him down and kissing his throat while he talked—babbled, really—and then Charlie had lifted his head and said, "You have a load of lads living there and I haven't seen it?"

"What?" said Theo. "What was I saying?"

"Ooh, very aristocratic," said Charlie now, looking around. "Why didn't you want me here?"

"It's full of dark magic, one wing is haunted, and the elves cursed it after Father killed too many of them during the war," said Theo, watching him. Charlie looked even more himself when he was in an incongruous place. He didn't make himself smaller or quieter or try to fit in.

"Bill would *love* it," said Charlie, his eyes sparkling. "We should invite him over."

"You want to invite Bill over?" asked Theo stupidly.

"Why not?" asked Charlie.

Theo wasn't sure why not. He'd just thought . . . well, maybe he had thought Charlie would look around and see the inside of Theo's head in his surroundings and realize Theo was for fun, not for keeps. Theo would understand. Who wanted this for keeps? Who wanted to invite their family into the way that

Hermione glanced to where Susan was stood with Cho, Luna, Padma, and Parvati, her head tilted up, her eyes scanning the pale stone walls of the chateau. She couldn't blame Susan, pregnant or not, for not feeling comfortable on Malfoy property. Hermione had told Molly she was giving Susan space and wouldn't be attending Sunday dinners for a while.

"Hungry," said Ginny. "I'm hungry again."

Nearby, Charlie and Theo were stood in forest green and black forest green, jostling each other as Pansy's photographer took their picture.

"They do look good together," said Harry.

"That's just the suits," said Ron dryly.

Harry turned to him, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes, all right, Charlie's happy," Ron said, shaking his head as he looked from Harry to Hermione. "Everyone gets a green suit and their own psycho Slytherin fuckboy in the post-war era—don't mind me."

Hermione snorted and then she and Harry were laughing as Ron crossed his arms and made a show of looking put-upon.

Theo kissed Charlie and turned to stride toward the chateau. Hermione watched as Cho, Luna, Padma, and Parvati tracked his movements from their cluster stood to the left and Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, and Terence Higgs observed him from their group on the right. But Theo was focused on Narcissa, waiting for him near the doors. He was reaching out, bending to kiss her cheek.

Charlie had jerked his chin in acknowledgment of Ron and was strolling over.

"Looks like you've got competition," said Ron, nodding toward Theo, who was now arm-in-arm with Narcissa as they walked inside.

Charlie glanced over and laughed. "I've already been informed that, should Narcissa finally divorce Lucius, our relationship is opening up."

Ron groaned while everyone else snickered but Hermione was remembering Theo's face as he introduced Charlie to Narcissa.

Neville and Pansy and Theo had come in a day early, Narcissa promptly commandeering Neville to talk about plants while Pansy commandeered Hermione to double-check guest portkey logistics—which Hermione secretly enjoyed, not because she was invested in Pansy's wedding details (all of which she had learned against her will) but because she couldn't resist a good spreadsheet. Theo and Draco had spent their time drinking and playing cards for money and owling disreputable French business contacts while Theo grew increasingly manic until Hermione had discovered the two of them smacking at each other as Draco muttered, "*Godsdamn*. If Charlie doesn't get here soon, I will dick you down myself" and Theo sang out, "I am spoken for, sir!"

Finally, Charlie had portkeyed in—his caretaking duties at the preserve covered for the weekend—and Hermione had found herself watching, her fingers on Draco's sleeve, as Theo went soft and still, stood beside Charlie with his head ducked, his eyes on Narcissa. He'd looked ten years younger. But Charlie had been grinning as he took Narcissa's hand and then Narcissa had turned to Theo and touched his arm and smiled, and Theo had come to life again.

Now Hermione watched, bemused, as Charlie bent down and picked up a half-grown cat she'd never seen before. She glanced around the courtyard, the rolling vineyards beyond. Where had it come from?

She turned back to Charlie as he slung the animal into his crooked arm, cradling it like an infant. Then it was purring loudly, paws akimbo, as he aggressively rubbed its head and fussed with its ears.

Charlie looked up, smiling, and saw Hermione's expression. He shrugged one shoulder. "I attract strays."



as she drove home her message: House Malfoy had claimed Hermione, and they were all to like it. The women turned to Hermione with polite smiles and assessing eyes.

Hermione did not think Narcissa no longer held prejudice in her heart. She thought Narcissa was clear and pragmatic in her priorities, and her priority was Draco. She would choose Draco over any person, any belief, any affiliation. She would lie to a dark lord, she would change her politics, she would accept Hermione as her daughter-in-law and cede Malfoy Manor, and she would do it without flinching if she thought it would keep Draco alive and even marginally less unhappy. Lucius and Narcissa had decided this match was a necessary step in Draco's return to society, and they were determined that it would work.

But, Hermione was beginning to understand, Lucius and Narcissa were also interested in her political career in a way Draco had been hesitant to admit. Pansy had predicted two months ago that Lucius expected Hermione to become Minister. Hermione's own fifteen-year plan had been more tempered: transfer to International Magic (check), establish herself (in progress), have a baby in five years (under consideration), earn a promotion to Department Head (to do), climb the ranks as high as she could (to be determined). She'd thought maybe Deputy Minister, proof that someone else's administration was diverse. Draco had not been willing to push his father's greater ambition onto her—until she'd been hurt and angry enough for it to become her own. The Malfoys just couldn't help themselves. But Hermione did want to be Minister. Maybe she couldn't help herself either.

"Eustacia, this is my daughter-in-law, Hermione Granger Malfoy. She just joined us this July. An ideal match for Draco—"

"Oh, yes," said Eustacia, a plump older woman whose gray curls were swept into a towering coiffure, allowing her enormous emerald earrings to catch the sunlight. "I've seen you and young Master Malfoy in the papers—"

Hermione's smile faltered. That meant pictures of them fighting.

"—and good for you, girlie. Keeping him on his toes! Oh, how Dagwood and I used to row!" She was aglow with happy nostalgia.

Narcissa's voice was knowing. "That first year—"

"You've got to show him what you've got!" brayed Eustacia. "Make sure he knows not to cross you." The older women laughed, Eustacia patting Hermione's arm.

"You know, Hermione works for the Ministry—"

"Yes, International Magic!" The older witch winked. "Good for you, girlie."

"We really need more witches in government," said Narcissa.

"Too right," Eustacia said with a delicate snort. "The wizards only muck things up."

"I've been thinking . . . why don't you add Hermione to your little newsletter," said Narcissa, her tone offhand in a way Hermione now recognized to be a tell.

"Oh!" Eustacia's eyes lit up. She looked to Hermione with a sly grin. "It's just a silly gossip rag, dear." She chuckled. "I do like to keep up with politics."



"Blimey, Hermione, are you wearing the whole vault?" said Ron.

"And have you always had these?"

Hermione batted Ginny's hands away before she could feel her up.

"I have not always had these," said Ginny, looking down to her low-cut gold gown and squeezing her own breasts instead.

"But when I try that, it's not appropriate in public," said Harry.

Ginny dropped her hands to her stomach. "I can't tell if I'm hungry or I'm going to spew."

"Susan's not feeling well, either," said Ron. "We probably won't stay past the bond."

Theo lived? But, then, Charlie thought dragons were big dogs and his favorite brothers were Bill and George—

"You haven't seen the rest," said Theo. "This is the good part."

"Is it?" asked Charlie, who was backing Theo toward his fourposter, his hands on Theo's ribs, Theo's hands on his biceps, Charlie's muscular body against his. He pecked Theo on the lips and then pushed him onto the bed. "The good part is when I shag you senseless in this posh bed of yours and then we go explore your haunted house."

"Yeah?" asked Theo.

"Yeah," said Charlie, grinning. "Why not?"



"I hate everything," announced Pansy. "It is too hot. And this bra is too tight—" Her face scrunched as she angrily grabbed at the clasp behind her back. Then she was ripping the straps off her shoulders and flinging the lace and wire across the room. "My back hurts. And my feet hurt. And everyone is stupid."

Neville watched as she clambered onto the bed in only her knickers and flopped onto her back with a groan, her breasts bouncing, her hands coming to rest on either side of her stomach, swollen with his baby. It was midday on a Sunday, the late summer sun filtering in through the gauzy curtains.

He reached for the potion bottle on the side table and then moved closer and began slowly rubbing aloe vera across the swell of her belly.

Her hands dropped to the sheet. "That's nice," she said. "Keep doing that."

He smiled.

His touch was light, fingers gliding with the gel, callused palm sliding across the tight skin. Her large, kohl-rimmed eyes fell closed. Her breath evened out.

When he was finished, he stoppered the bottle and set it aside. Then he lowered his head and took her nipple into his mouth. He tongued it lazily, and then began to suck.

"Oh—" Her voice breathy as she inhaled. "Keep doing that."



Hermione woke late in the night when he curled around her, his arm tight against her, the heat seeping off him. "I love you," he murmured into her hair.

She turned toward him, and he lifted his arm to let her. Then his hand was back on her side, in the dip above her hip, squeezing.

"I love you too," she said, breathing him in. He smelled like citrus and cloves and soap, his skin still damp from the bath. So he'd been in a smoky room, listening to people say bigoted things.

"Tell me again," he whispered.

"I love you too, Draco." She said it each time. He needed to hear it more often than she did. "Who was it tonight?"

"French fascists," he said. "I'll tell you in the morning." He kissed her, soft.

She pressed up against him, her hands on him, and the kiss turned harder and more desperate.



"One of the new wives asked if I worry about Harry on the job." Ginny snorted. "Forgot who she was talking to, did she? I reckon this is the least threatened Harry's life has ever been."

Hermione huffed a bitter laugh. They were on the drawing room rug at Grimmauld Place, her eyes on James on the baby blanket as she stroked his downy cheek. "It's just a story to them," she said. "They don't think through what it was like to live it."

Ginny hummed agreement. Then she asked, "Do you worry about Malfoy?"

Hermione looked up, surprised. Ginny's expression was unusually pensive, but she wasn't looking away.

Hermione considered this carefully. Ginny was asking her a real question, and she wanted to give a real answer. "With Goyle Manor, I was worried . . . that he didn't want to come back. Pansy told me once that she thought Draco was suicidal and, you know—" This was hard to say. "I thought so too."

Ginny nodded slowly, frowning.

"I was afraid he would get himself killed because he thought that's what he deserved."

Ginny was looking down at James, her fingers holding his foot, her lips pursed.

"But now I think . . ." Hermione took a deep breath. "You know, the boys really bothered him—the boys the purists always recruit. They want their hooks in the next generation, so it will never die out. And he saw those boys and . . . I know Draco wants to live now. I just think . . . it's something he has to do."

"Because of the boys," said Ginny, her eyes back on Hermione's face.

"Because of one boy," said Hermione. "The boy he was. I think Draco has done everything for that boy. The boy no one else did enough to protect—or respected as his own person."

Hermione didn't expect Ginny to understand, but she nodded immediately. "Harry's like that," she said, jiggling the baby's foot until he kicked at her. "I think that's why he became an auror even though it didn't make sense—since when has Harry liked rules and paperwork, right? But I think it's like you just said—he did it for his younger self. Mum says kids actually want rules. Order, structure. It's scary when it's just chaos. You have a baby and they tell you: routine, routine, routine."

"Right," said Hermione, thinking about her lists and spreadsheets, her reform bills, thinking about the chaos of her feelings. Thinking about them all trying to make the world safe for their younger selves, too late.

"Now he worries about James. About James having to live through any of the things he lived through. And I've told him we would *never* let that happen—"

"But—"

"But," said Ginny. "The world is a dangerous place. Full of sick people."

Hermione looked at Ginny, the lack of sleep she could see under Ginny's eyes. This was what they had learned as children. Bad things happened. The people meant to protect you didn't—or couldn't—do it.

They put on a brave front—most of the time.

She put her hand on Ginny's. "We're doing what we can."

Ginny looked to her. "We are," she said quietly.



The floo flashed green and Bill Weasley and Alicia Spinnet stepped out, moving briskly from the stone hearth, through the entry way, and down the hall. The walls were bare of paintings, freshly papered in a dark, masculine pattern; the Persian floor runner softened their footfalls. They reached the study door and Bill opened it, pressing back to allow Spinnet through first.

The two men inside had already looked over. Nott was leaned back in his chair, his feet on the desk in front of him, the shelves behind him empty, his hand holding a tumbler raised mid-gesture.

chateau, Hermione saw the cluster of Slytherin women eying her up and down and felt a dark wave of satisfaction as their backs stiffened and their nostrils flared.

Draco had made her into a terrible person. No, she'd already been one.

She was on his arm when she reached her free hand up to take hold of his bicep and he looked over immediately with a strange light in his eyes. He bowed his head to hers as she whispered, "Daphne Greengrass has brought Pucey."

Draco's eyes darted over. "He's distanced himself, even before Flint. Maybe he's had enough."

"And the Greengrass sisters are staring daggers at us."

He kissed her on the corner of her mouth, quick and impulsive. "I was betrothed to Astoria," he said as he straightened.

"What?"

"You have me because the Greengrasses decided I was insane—"

"Merlin, I agree with the Greengrasses on something!"

"Are you awfully jealous, dear?" he asked hopefully.

She looked at his face, grinning and eager. She was trying to be less of a prat. "I *am* awfully jealous," she said. "I want everyone to see you with me and know I have your full attention."

He beamed at her. Then he was lowering his head to kiss her open-mouthed, all tongue. Citrus. Cloves. Her hand clutching his arm, the fine wool of his suit wrinkling under her fingers. He was a horrible show off. She was breathless when he pulled away.

"There you two are—"

Godric. Hermione felt her face heat at the sound of her mother-in-law's voice.

Hermione turned to see Narcissa approaching in a severe black dress with silver jewelry. She so often thought that Draco looked like his father, but when she saw Narcissa now, all she could see was Draco's face in hers.

"Hullo, Mum." Draco was already leaning to kiss her cheek as though she hadn't just caught him snogging Hermione with that same mouth.

"Draco, dear, you're needed upstairs. And I'll just introduce Hermione to a few of the ladies, shall I?"

"Of course, Mum." Draco looked to Hermione, his expression careful. "All right, love?"

"Of course, Draco." She took a deep breath and gave him a reassuring nod.

He kissed her cheek, touched his mother's elbow, and then he was striding toward the double doors framed by climbing ivy and Pansy's wedding garlands, the Slytherin women's eyes following his lean form in the tightly fitted black forest green suit. His platinum hair caught the light—though it was November, the grounds were spelled to present as a sunny spring day. Hermione couldn't imagine how much this had cost.

Hermione tore her eyes from Draco's back and found a faint smile on Narcissa's face. Then Narcissa had her arm looped loosely through Hermione's and Hermione was being gently drug from guest to guest, the older women stood talking in fussy dresses and heirloom jewelry.

"Deirdre, dear, allow me to introduce my daughter-in-law, Hermione Granger Malfoy. She and Draco went to school together. Yes, with Pansy and Neville! Of course, Hermione had top marks—Draco was so jealous! But, then, the man *should* be in pursuit."

"Oh, Mallory, have you met my daughter-in-law, Hermione Granger Malfoy? She and Draco were just wed this July. Yes, Draco's taken the reins at Malfoy LTD and Hermione here is doing important work for the Ministry. We're very proud of her."

"Dolores, you must meet my daughter-in-law, Hermione Granger Malfoy. Isn't she lovely? Of course Draco is besotted."

"Perdita, I'm pleased to introduce my daughter-in-law, Hermione Granger Malfoy. House Granger—yes, Hermione is the first of her line. We're lucky to welcome such a talent to House Malfoy. She and Draco make a powerful pair, don't you think?"

Narcissa's touch was light as she grazed arms and exchanged perfunctory kisses. Hermione watched as her guests straightened at her approach, their gazes sweeping over Hermione and returning to Narcissa

"That means no fighting, no glaring, no sneering, no sulking—" "Sulking is inevitable with everything else you're taking from me."

"No jinxing, no hexing, no dueling—"

"I will definitely be sulking, then."

She shot another look over her shoulder.

"Oh, so *you're* allowed to glare—"

"You will be sulking while I dance with Harry—"

"No, love, that's not safe for anyone—"

"Then you had better be on your best behavior."

"I will be on so-so behavior," he said. "Otherwise, everyone will think I'm taking the piss—"

"Or—"

"Or that you've got me playing an elaborate sex game—"

"That's—"

"Can we play an elaborate sex game?" His hands were back on her arse.

"Not if you muss the beadwork and Pansy avadas us both."

"The elves will be picking beads out of the walls when I'm done—"

"Finish putting me into it first," she said, running her thumb along the scar. It had faded to white and sunk into her arm, legible but easy to glamour. She felt him do up the hook at the top of the zipper. "I need to fix my hair."

"Leave it loose, dear," he said, pushing it aside to kiss her neck.

"It's out of control," she said, leaning into him.

"That's how I like you," he murmured.

Hermione had been keeping herself very much in control since they'd arrived at the chateau, slightly awed by the seventeenth-century architecture Draco took for granted and aware that this was currently Narcissa's home. Narcissa had been there to greet them when they portkeyed in, and Hermione had heard the way Draco said "Mum" and seen the way they hugged and known that Draco had his mother's unguarded love—a love Hermione was no longer willing to sneer at the way they had at school when the Malfoys' eagle owl had delivered Narcissa's care packages of sweets.

"What does your mother do while she's here?" she'd asked Draco.

"Gardens, goes to charity luncheons, plays whist with the elves," Draco had said with a shrug.

Now Hermione heard rapid French in the hallway outside their door. Draco and Narcissa spoke English in front of her, but the chateau elves pretended to understand only French—which had prompted Pip to come along with Hermione's and Draco's luggage. "She doesn't trust them to take care of us," Draco had whispered with a smirk. There was some sort of long-standing rivalry between the chateau and Manor elves that he found amusing.

"I will behave myself around your pointless friends," said Draco now, his head still bent to her neck. Then he bit her—hard.

"Now I'll *have* to wear my hair down—" She elbowed him away to look at the bite mark in the mirror, her neck flushed red. "What happened to I don't leave marks, that's what jewelry is for?"

"Why not both?" said Draco, kissing her cheek and then moving to the armoire, where he began to withdraw a concerning number of velvet-covered boxes.

Hermione glamoured her arm and her neck, watching out of the corner of her eye as he opened the boxes to reveal an elaborate gold and diamond necklace, earrings, bracelets—

She finally turned to him. "Draco, that's too much."

"For an afternoon wedding on the grounds?" He raised an eyebrow, his brow wrinkling. "Darling, it's barely enough."

To Hermione's chagrin, she was not displeased to be dripping with Malfoy gold and diamonds when the guests arrived. The Parkbottom guest list cut a wide swath—exactly what Shacklebolt had hoped for with his wretched Reconciliation Act—and, as she and Draco stepped into the courtyard behind the

Longbottom was sat on the peacock blue settee in a black suit and white shirt, a matching tumbler in his large hand, his eyes sharp.

Nott grinned and lifted his chin in greeting.

"Who's Malfoy ferreted out now?" asked Spinnet.



This baby was late, and Pansy had had it.

"Longbottom!"

She found him in the office. He looked up from his maps when she heaved herself through the doorway. He raised an eyebrow, taking in the state of her.

"We are having sex to induce labor," she declared, her hand resting atop her stomach.

His mouth quirked. "I thought there was no evidence that worked."

"There's not," she said. "We're doing it anyway. I want this baby out."

He laughed and then he was smiling. "Understood," he said. "Am I fucking you here or am I fucking you in the bedroom?"

"We are going into that bedroom, and we are not coming out until I am in labor," said Pansy.

Longbottom's gaze moved over her, lingering on her breasts and belly. He looked her in the eye. "I can do that, Pansy."



Hermione watched as Draco smacked Pansy's hand away.

"Draco, that's *my* baby—"

"And *I'm* holding her," said Draco, glaring. They were sat close together, trading elbows on the settee.

"Imagine if they'd married," she said.

Neville let out a doubtful snort. "More tea?" he asked, bleary-eyed.



It was Christmas morning and Theo was naked and drunk in Charlie's bed, drinking Charlie's rum eggnog (disgusting) and feeding Charlie chocolate-dipped candied orange slices (quite good). Charlie snapped his teeth at Theo's fingers and then grabbed his chin and kissed him. (He was drunk too.)

"Mum sent something for you," he said.

"For *me*?"

"For you."

Charlie accioed it over—a soft, giftwrapped lump—and Theo set his eggnog on the side table.

Theo shook the lump—which had no effect—and then tore off the paper.

He held up the contents, scanning top to bottom. "It's hideous!" he said and put it on. It was a blue jumper with a T knitted into the front.

Charlie had his hands on Theo's ribs. "Color suits you," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Tell your mother thank you," said Theo, kissing him. "Does this mean we have to visit?" Charlie kissed him back, running his hands over the wool. "Nah. Next year." "Ooh?" said Theo, pulling away. "We should visit Pansy and the Plant King—" "Yeah?"

"Stuck at home with only a baby to entertain them? They're bored out of their skulls. Climbing the walls. We should cheer them up."

Charlie raised an eyebrow.

"We should bring them a goat!"

Charlie grinned. "Is that to entertain them or to entertain you?"

"Yes," said Theo, smiling his widest smile.



2005

Draco, Theo, and George were stood on the Nott estate, their breath blowing white in the cold. Draco could see movement in the windows, the boys sticking close to their fireplaces in the drafty guest wing, the elves spoiling them with spiked hot chocolate.

"Now, your goal is for your target to think you were busted alongside them, innit?" said George. He was wearing a knit hat with a large orange pom pom. "But if you *really* have to . . ." He raised his eyebrows and held up a small cylinder made to look like a tube of muggle lip balm. "Flash bang."

"*Gimme,*" said Theo, snatching it from between George's fingers.



Theo was already sat in the guest armchair, bouncing his foot and surveying the piles of unmarked scrolls and confiscated Weasley products, when the door to the dark, cluttered office opened and he heard the rustle of robes. Strange to be back at school. Theo had felt like a ghost in the halls, hugging the stone walls as the students rushed past him.

"Nott."

Theo tilted his head back to gaze up at him, smiling. "*Potter,*" he purred.

"Don't start with me, Nott." Potter settled behind the desk, just as rumpled and askew as ever.

Theo pushed his tongue into his cheek, letting his eyes play over the disheveled hair, the old scar, Potter's lower lip. Then he stopped flirting and got down to business.

"Malfoy sent me," he said. "There are threats to your family you should know about."



Draco was sat on a banquette curved around a low table in a private room in the back of a muggle club, a domestic terrorist and his right-hand man across from him, other blood supremacists stood in noisy clusters, when Theo threw himself nearly onto his lap.

"Fucking hell, lover, you've been impossible to find—"

Draco was pulling back from him, Theo's arm gone round his neck. "Maybe I didn't want to be found—"

"No, you want to hear this—"

Her head was lowered. She looked up into the mirror—

Fuck—

She was watching him fuck her—

She looked absolutely wicked—

He had to slow down. He had to slow down or—

He leaned over her, wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her up onto her knees, her back against him, her hair in his face. He could see everything in the mirror—her face, her breasts, the mound of her cunt. They sank onto their haunches together, her hand down to brace her, her other hand on her clit. He could see her face, her breasts, her hand moving as he thrust into her.

"Tell me I'm yours," he panted, watching her face.

Her lips were parted, eyes heavy lidded. "You're mine, Draco," she said, breathing hard. He was watching the mirror when her eyes flicked up and met his. "You belong to me."

He sucked in air. She knew what she did to him—

He was thrusting harder, the pleasure intense. Her mouth was open, chest rising and falling; she was looking down, focused on the feel of him.

"Let me on top," she said, and he thrust into her again and then pulled out and fell back. She was already turning to climb onto him. Her hands were all over him—his cock, his chest. Then he was back inside her and she was rolling her hips, her hand at his throat.

She lowered her face to his, her hair tenting around him, blocking out everything but her. Her lips brushed his ear. Her voice, whispering. "You're such a good boy, Draco."

Draco couldn't think—

Then she was moving on top of him. He was staring up at her.

She was grinding on him, her cunt tightening and clenching—*Yes*—

He watched it all play out on her face. He could feel every twitch and spasm—

Then he was pushing up, his feet under him, and he flipped them—he was on top, her hair streaming off the foot of the bed. He could look down and see her face; he could look up and watch himself fuck his wife in the mirror. He looked down—he wanted to see her. He wanted to fuck himself into her as hard as he could. And he did.



Hermione studied her arm while Draco zipped her into the mandatory gold gown. She had to hand it to Pansy—the witch was not afraid of being upstaged. The dress was form-fitting and ridiculously low cut, shimmering in the light.

"Thank you, Pansy," muttered Draco behind her, his hands now on her arse.

She shot him a look over her shoulder. "As though you haven't been slowly raising the neckline on all my work clothes."

His expression was all feigned innocence, but when she turned back she heard, under his breath, "No one at work needs to see your tits." His hands had roamed up to her hips.

"Speaking of which—"

"No," he said, "other people seeing your tits is not something we should be speaking of—"

"Everyone is about to see my tits in this dress, including—"

"Don't say it—"

"My friends."

Draco growled, low in his throat.

"The Gryffindors will all be here today for Neville, and I don't want to hear any nonsense out of you—"

He snorted.

"The worst, love." He bit his lip, his face close to hers as he began to fingerfuck her with intention.
"This is why nobody likes you—"
"Nobody?" He was smiling absently as he watched her. She was squirming on his hand, trying to get him to touch her clit.

"I, for one, hate you—"

He touched her clit and she slumped back against the armoire, her hips shifting forward. "Mm, and I hate having to do this to you," he purred. "Listen, love—"

"What now?" she sighed, pressing toward him.

"What's say you, as a little experiment, get on your hands and knees for me—on the bed, darling! nothing untoward—and I try shagging you senseless from behind while I stare at you in the mirror."

"What are we testing here?" she asked, shaking her robe off her shoulders, which made her breasts jiggle. Draco was painfully hard.

Whether I've been afraid to do this for no reason. "How many mirrors I'm buying for the Manor."

"Good Godric," said his wife, pushing him off.

He was grinning like an idiot—he knew that tone. He watched as she let her robe slip to the floor on her way to the bed. He raised his hand to his mouth to suck her off his fingers, his eyes on her arse. She climbed onto the bed and looked to the mirror, on her knees, assessing the angle. Now he was staring at her breasts.

"Don't keep me waiting," she said as she dropped down to all fours.

"Immediately, dear." He fixed the image in his mind and then hurried to join her.

Soon he was behind her, his cock against her arse, gathering up her hair. "I want to see your eyes, love."

It took both hands but then he had her curls pulled back from her face and he twisted the mass of hair so that he could hold it all in his right hand, her chin raised.

He looked down and ran his free hand along her cunt—she was wet and glistening. He glanced up—she was rolling her eyes and smirking but not fighting him in the least. His hand on his cock and then back on her, he watched her face as he entered her. He experienced it all at once—the sensation of pushing into the warm, wet grip of her cunt and seeing her eyes fall closed, her mouth fall open as she inhaled. A pleasurable wince as she shifted, pushing back to take him in, a little wiggle of her hips. Then she sighed, satisfied, looking pleased with herself—pleased with him. Draco blinked. He was holding his breath. He felt like he was going to cry.

She opened her eyes, smiling faintly, and Draco snapped out of it. He had his wife by the hair, on her hands and knees, his cock in her to the hilt, and she expected him to shag her senseless now, as agreed.

Draco got to it.

His hand squeezing her hip, her arse bouncing against him, her back stretched out before him, the muscles of her shoulders, her face and tits in the mirror—Draco was taking it all in, pleasure racing through him.

"Can I come on your back?" he asked brightly.

"If even a single strand—"

"Not today, then." He was much too excited to make promises.

She went down onto her forearms—

Sweet fucking Salazar—

Her arse lifting and pushing toward him—

His cock plunging deeper—

He'd dropped her hair—

He was gripping her hips, fingertips digging into flesh—

Cervix—

He eased up. If he hit it, it was all over—

"That's good—" Her voice breathy.

It was good. It was very good. He was being good—

The right-hand man: "What's this about—"

"Godsdammit, Nott—"

"Touchy!"

"Why are you here?"

"Word is Weasley's raiding you tonight—"

"Why didn't you lead with that? Up! Up!" Draco was standing, pushing Theo off him. The men were already calling others over. Someone disappeared out. Then Draco was grabbing Theo by the lapel. "Let's go—"

"Yes, I like you angry—"

He smacked Theo's hand away and dragged him to the curtained doorway. In the narrow passage outside he made eye contact with Spinnet, her team lined up behind her in stolen Ministry gear, the incident report lost by Weasley.

Then he and Theo were striding away, picking up speed as they crossed the crowded ground floor, and then they were in the alley, disappearing out.



Hermione was in an armchair in the Green Room after Sunday lunch, letting Neville and Pansy fall asleep mid-conversation, leaned against each other on the settee, while Draco monopolized Posey.

"You're a menace, aren't you? A terror." He was whispering the same nonsense to the baby that he used on Crookshanks. He was sat in his own armchair in dark trousers and a white shirt, the cuffs rolled to below the Mark, his head bowed over her.

He looked up and caught Hermione watching him. He grinned at her, his eyebrows raised, his pale eyes bright.

Merlin.



"Mrs. Malfoy! Mrs. Malfoy! What's your statement on reports the marriage mandate will be struck from the Reconciliation Act?"

"Long overdue," snapped Hermione. "Everyone knows I opposed that measure."

"Hermione! Hermione! Will you move to break your bond with Draco Malfoy?"

"I have no comment on my personal life," said Hermione, making for the lifts.

The reporter stepped back, the scrum moving with him. Draco had spent two weeks walking her across the atrium and hexing anyone with a press card who got within three feet (as well as a few unfortunate autograph-seekers). The picture of him paying the fines in gold, an unrepentant smirk on his face, had run on the front page of the *Prophet*.

Hermione reached her office on level five to find Pep perched on a planter of Malfoy estate soil, disappearing the last of her howlers. She signed her thanks and the mostly deaf grounds elf popped out of the room with a jaunty salute.



Draco was sat on the bedroom settee, his hands in the abomination's ruff, his eyes tracking her as she paced, ranting about stupid fucking Travers and the hidebound wizards on his stupid fucking committee.

When she took a breath, he asked, "Do you want me to break his jaw or only to listen?"

"I want—" She considered it, her own jaw set. She huffed out the breath through her nose and her shoulders dropped. "No, just listen."

"Carry on," he said.



"You broke his jaw," said Hermione as soon as Draco walked into her office on level five.

"But I listened first!" said Draco.



"How was quidditch?" she asked. She'd just got home and found him lounging in the bedroom sitting area.

"Rubbish," he said happily. "Nott's pitch still needs work and he's no help at all. What did you bring me?"

"I brought you . . ." She rummaged in her extended bag as he peered up at her, his pointy chin lifted, his head resting against the back of the settee. "Pure smut."

He grinned and straightened to take the book she held out to him. "Are you going to help me fact check this?" he asked, riffling the pages.

She snorted as she settled next to him. He was warm and musky from flying, his hair still windblown. "I hear the reverse-harem scene is a revelation—"

He'd pulled a severe face. "We're not doing *that*."

"Nott's right," she said, taking hold of his jumper and leaning in to kiss him. "You're easy to wind up."

"Keep winding me up," he murmured, his mouth on hers. "See what happens."



Hermione got home, sunburnt, her eyes gritty, and Draco saw her face and reached out for her and she climbed onto the bed and into his arms. He was propped against the pillows and she sank down, her head on his chest, and listened to his heart beat. He held her, her leg thrown over his.

"Let me go with you next time," he said quietly. "Don't do it alone."

She nodded, her molars clenched, and then she let herself cry.



Hermione had found Draco's baby photos, and she suspected she had not so much found them as been led to them by Pip like a horse to water.

Well, she was drinking them in.

CHAPTER 20

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2003

Draco was so vain he did not spend much time looking in mirrors. He had his prisoner number memorized—he didn't need to see it again. He saw it in the face of everyone whose eyes lingered on his neck. Now his eyes lingered on the full-length standing mirror in the chateau bedroom, and he wondered how he had not thought of this sooner.

"Bugger," she said absently. She was in a robe, gazing into the armoire's lingerie drawer, her hair wild around her face.

"What is it, darling?"

"I've just realized—with everything happening, I've completely forgotten to buy Neville and Pansy a gift."

"Ach, there's our invitation rescinded."

"Don't make fun—"

"The rules of etiquette give us a year, dear—" That exasperated look of hers. "But I see that does not meet your personal standard! Leave it to me, love."

"Draco—"

He was drifting closer. "I'm known for my tasteful last-minute gift-giving—"

"Draco—"

"Something simple, understated—" He had trapped her against the armoire. She smelled like ink and shampoo and skin cream and her.

"Malfoy." Her lips were pursed.

"Merely a gesture—" His hand had snaked inside her robe, down her stomach.

"You cannot be trusted—"

His fingers had reached her clit. "I'll send Nott to the shops—"

"Nott had better not *buy a shop*—"

"Of course not." He was rubbing little circles. She was shifting to let him. "Don't be absurd—"

"You are already hosting everyone in this ostentatious—"

"This old heap?"

"You do not need to show off—"

His fingers were gliding—she was gloriously wet.

"By outdoing everyone—"

She shifted and his fingers were . . . there, pushing into her. He raised his eyebrows, nodding along as though he were listening.

Her breath caught. She soldiered on. "With an inappropriately expensive—"

"Understood, love. I'll giftwrap some rubbish—"

"You're terrible—"

"Good," she said firmly, and Theo smiled. "Father . . ." She drew out the word, tilting her head back. His tilted his head in response. "Yes, my love?"
"May I have the butterfly?"
He raised his eyebrows and then he was shifting to reach his pocket without standing. Hermione watched, brow furrowed, as he produced a butterfly knife and held it out to the girl.
"No running with it open," he said, and she nodded quickly.
He kissed the top of her head, and she grabbed the knife and ran off.
He was smiling when he turned back to Hermione and picked up his teacup.
"Fatherhood suits you," she said dryly.
"I think so!" he said happily.



2014

Hermione looked out the window, but Draco and Scorpius were too far out for her to see them on their brooms.
"All right, Theodora. Let's kill some aphids, shall we?" Narcissa's voice, drifting up from the rose beds. "Did you know your father used to come visit me in the gardens when he was your age?"
"Do you want to brew or would you rather be gardening with Grandmother?" asked Hermione, hoping for brewing but trying not to influence Rose unduly.
"Ew."

On the other hand, no one influenced Rose unduly. Hermione almost laughed at Rose's curled lip. She had Hermione's brown eyes and curls, but it wasn't only the platinum hair that marked her as her father's daughter.

"I want to brew—you said we'd brew."
"All right! Get your lab shoes, then. No open toes—"
"I know no open toes—"
"I know you know. What do you want to brew today?"
"Polyjuice," said Rose immediately.
"Absolutely not," said Hermione.
"Something that explodes," said Rose.
"No," said Hermione.
"Something that turns Father's hair green when we slip it into his drink," said Rose.
Hermione tried to swallow a snorting laugh. "You're spending too much time with Fred."
"Mum!"
"We'll see," she said, smiling and holding out her hand.



2017

Hermione's office door flew open—
"I'm calling the Auror Department!" yelled her receptionist—
Draco immediately cast snakes from where he'd been stood beside her, reading the *Prophet* over her shoulder, and Cormac McLaggen jumped back—

"It's a crucio next, McLaggen," snarled Draco—
McLaggen stayed where he was. Barry was hovering behind him in the doorway, eyes wide, mouth a thin line. "You have a mole in my office, is that it?"

"I don't know what you're on about, Cormac—" "Stealing these endorsements out from under me? Always one step ahead—" "If you're asking whether I find you predictable, Cormac—" "No, no—" His finger wagging at her. "Barry!" "Sir?" His face doleful.
"Fire everyone hired within the last two years—" "Sir—" "Do it. We'll just see, won't we?" "That's really not necessary, Cormac—" "Five years—" "Really, Cormac—" "Oh, you don't like that?" Smug now.
Then Ron was there, elbowing past Barry, strolling into her office. "All right, what's happened?" Sounding bored.

"Oh, I see. The slightest challenge and the Golden Girl goes straight to the top—" "I'm here for you, Cormac. You're very important." Ron delivered this deadpan while clapping the other man on the shoulder.
McLaggen straightened even as his eyes narrowed.
"Why don't you come tell me about it?" said Ron. He glanced down at their feet and then met McLaggen's eyes. "Are these snakes yours?"



The girls were dark-haired and headed toward bust, already taller than Pansy. Posey took after her father—she could be secretive, scheming. Prim was Pansy's double who never stopped talking, even in her sleep. The girls fought like wild animals—until an outside threat presented itself. They had been raised to understand: The Parkinson-Longbottom sisters stuck together, and they never, ever grased.

They were both silent now, backs straight in McGonagall's guest chairs, their legs crossed at the ankles. It appeared Prim had done both their make-up—she had a heavy hand.

"Hullo, girls," said Pansy, kissing them each on the cheek. Her own mother would have been shooting her death glares, ready to berate Pansy the whole way home before she'd even learned what Pansy had done. Her father wouldn't have come at all.

Now Neville was folding himself into a chair, and Pansy took the seat beside him, smoothing out her skirt. She clasped her hands in her lap and presented McGonagall with her active listening face. Pansy had planned to send the girls to Beauxbatons and had only relented after quite a bit of whining and raging about wanting to go to school with their friends. She was prepared to pull them from Hogwarts in an instant if she didn't like what she heard.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "Mr. Longbottom. Mrs. Parkinson Longbottom. I will cut to the chase. I understand your daughters have been brought up with Scorpius Malfoy and Albus Potter—"

Pansy raised an eyebrow. So McGonagall was determined to pretend Neville was just another father instead of her beloved guest lecturer. How Gryffindor.

"Now that Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter have joined us here at Hogwarts, your girls' attitude toward them has been markedly . . . proprietary."

Pansy nearly snorted. She meant the girls treated them like pets.

McGonagall pursed her lips. "Perhaps as a result, we've had an unfortunate incident. It seems the girls took issue with the treatment Messrs. Malfoy and Potter received at the hands of some of the older boys in Hufflepuff House. Those boys are now in the hospital wing."

A twitch of their shoulders as Posey and Prim sat up straighter, pleased with themselves.

"So Scorp and Albus were being bullied and my girls stood up to those bullies," said Pansy, her tone clipped. She didn't ask where the adults had been—they never saw it. This had been between Slytherin House and the Puffs. "You should be awarding house points. They've defended their younger housemates, as they're meant to do."

Pansy lifted her chin and saw her daughters follow suit—one of the mannerisms she'd only noticed in herself once she'd seen it in her children. Just as she'd only learned how truly inattentive her mother had been by becoming a mother herself. Before that, she'd had to take it for granted.

McGonagall's mouth twisted as she glanced to Neville.

"We haven't brought them up to be bystanders," he said evenly.

McGonagall sighed, her eyes moving over the Parkinson Longbottom family. "I won't award house points for hexing other children."

Pansy and Neville waited.

"But I won't deduct house points, either," said McGonagall.

Posey and Prim exchanged a quick sidelong look.

"In this one instance."

Pansy sat back, satisfied for now. There would be other instances. At least until the girls learned not to be caught. But her daughters would take for granted that they weren't on their own.



Teddie drifted into the solarium and eventually settled on the velvet settee where Theo was drinking tea and flipping through *The Anarchist Cookbook*. She sat slouched, leaning toward him, her gangly legs tucked under her skirt. Her hair was long and unkempt, her gaze direct.

"Father," she said, drawing out the word.

Theo tilted his head in her direction, quaint muggle recipes forgotten. "Yes, my love?"

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to be cross?"

"Yes," said Theo, smiling.

"Well . . ."

Theo waited, just taking her in. He missed her terribly when she was at school or visiting her mother. "A boy at school tried to kiss me . . ."

Theo raised an eyebrow.

"And I stabbed him."

Theo nodded, his expression encouraging. "And you need me to feed the body to Charlie's Horntail."

"No—" The word drawn out and contemplative. "It was only a flesh wound. He didn't touch me . . . much."

"Did you want him to touch you?" asked Theo, his smile blandly neutral.

"No—" Drawn out but definite. "But he wouldn't listen."

Theo's smile dropped. "Who is this boy?"

Teddie canted her head, running her finger along a cushion seam. "He's in Slytherin. One of the seventh years—"

"My love," Theo said gently, "give me his name. Charlie and I will remind him how to listen."

"Is that all right?" asked Teddie.

Ford fixed her with a sour expression, and Hermione let her face go slack and mulish. It was amazing how many muscles she used all the time, every day, to keep her countenance pleasant and attentive. When she wanted to look unpleasant, all she had to do was relax.

Ford's mouth twisted as she waited him out. Finally, he said, "I will withdraw my support for the measure."

Good boy, thought Hermione. But those words were reserved for Draco and Scorpius.

Hermione had returned to work after her second maternity leave and settled in for a long slog. She skimmed Draco's reports, she read Eustacia's newsletters, she cultivated her relationship with Narcissa and her bridge club ladies, she nodded to Draco's moles when they made eye contact in the halls. But, even with all the information she could gather, even with backroom deals and dirty tricks, politics wasn't a game where she could pass one big bill or blackmail the right person or make a key speech and somehow win once and for all. Just like Draco couldn't have one big showdown and defeat blood supremacy forever. There had *been* a showdown—the Battle of Hogwarts—and here they still were. You could kill a dark lord. It was a lot harder to kill an idea. It turned out, even when change was dramatic, it was incremental.

The wolfsbane potion proposal had been a turning point in Hermione's career. The Parkbottom wedding night had been a turning point in her marriage. Draco rounding up the latest self-styled Voldemort had been a turning point in the effort to put down the blood purity movement. And, with each turning point, the world kept turning and there was more work to be done.

Hermione would defeat this measure limiting reproductive freedom and she would keep fighting for creature rights and she would gut laws enshrining pureblood prejudice and she would advance until she captured that top spot. And then the work would have only begun.



2010

Hermione watched over her shoulder as Harry said something to Draco and waited for his reaction and then Draco burst into laughter, Rosie clutched to him as he threw back his head. Harry had that sly smile of his on and then he was laughing too. They were stood at the edge of the Nott pitch, the grass around them scattered with toys and gear and goats Theo had stolen from the preserve.

Hermione avoided looking at where Ginny had the children on starter brooms though they were all obviously too young and the Parkbottom girls too reckless for that to be safe. Her eyes moved over the guest wing—quiet now, the lads all moved out.

She turned back around to see a barefoot Teddie drifting across the patio toward Theo, sat across from Hermione with a teacup and saucer in one hand. He glanced over and reached out his arm, gathering the girl in to him. She leaned against the arm of his chair, and he leaned toward her.

"You don't want to fly with the others?" asked Hermione.

Teddie shook her head, wrinkling her nose.

"Only with Charlie," said Theo, smiling, watching her face.

"Dragons are different," she said, nodding seriously.

"Less temperamental," agreed Theo.

She was running her fingers along the chair's arm. "When will Charlie be here?"

"Soon, my love." He set his teacup down and checked his gold watch. He leaned closer to her, his expression confidential. "Half an hour. Uncle Nev and Aunt Pans and Aunt Padma are all coming, and Uncle George and Aunt Angie are bringing Fred and Roxy, and Uncle Weasel is bringing Molly and Hugo. And there will probably be cake."

She nodded, chewing her lip. "Will Charlie do a fire?"

"Yes."

2009

Hermione found Draco and Theo in the conservatory, sunlight streaming in through the glass panes, Teddie sat between them on the rattan settee.

"Mmm . . . Sea the Stars."

"Sea the Stars in the fifth," said Draco, marking his racing form. "Brilliant, love."

"Draco!"

His head whipped around as she rounded the palm, a squirmy Rosie in her arms.

"Stop asking Teddie to pick ponies!"

"But she's rubbish at the quidditch spread."

"*Uncle Dray*—"

"Notts aren't sporty," said Theo, lunging off the settee to pull Scorp from a potted monstera.

"Sorry, love, but it's true," said Draco, turning to look down at Teddie with raised eyebrows. He turned back to Hermione, his eyebrows still raised. "We split the winnings sixty-forty."

Theo had conjured a frog for Scorp. The conservatory was full of frogs. Hermione could hear ribbiting from the ferns. Crooks appeared to be hunched over entrails.

Hermione decided none of this was her problem at the moment. "I have to go in. There's a fuss with Russia—"

Draco had passed his racing form to Teddie and was reaching up to take Rosie from her. "Say no more, love. We have it all under control here."

Theo had conjured another frog. "Ah, ah—don't lick that, Scorp. Spit it out! Spit it out!"

"I can see that," said Hermione. "Is that poisonous?"

"Frogs carry salmonella!" said Teddie.

"Pip!" yelled Theo.

Pip was there, prying open Scorp's mouth. Draco didn't react as Rosie kicked him in the stomach. "Go on, dear. All under control." He smiled up at her.

"Oh, he's swallowed it," said Theo.

"There are two responsible adults here," said Draco, "plus Theo."

Crookshanks began to vomit frog entrails.

Pip snapped her fingers and Scorp coughed up a frog.

"Good Godric," muttered Hermione. She bent to kiss Draco's mouth and then turned for the door before she saw any more.

Hermione leaned back in the guest chair, her legs crossed at the knee, and regarded Ford sat behind his desk. She didn't fold her arms across her chest or fidget with her sleeve. She kept her voice neutral. "I'm just surprised, Mr. Ford, that you would come out in favor of curtailing witches' reproductive rights when you have personally insisted on termination in three separate instances. It seems you want the potion available for *your* partners."

Ford opened and closed his mouth, exhaling through his nose. He looked annoyed.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "You may not call us to testify at your hearings, but we *do* talk."

Ford pursed his lips, angry now. "Those incidents were *private matters*—"

"Exactly," snapped Hermione. "And the potions a witch brews in the privacy of her own home should remain a private matter. If the Wizengamot wants to get involved, then I will be making a lot of private matters very, very public in the coming weeks."

"Yes," said Theo, and he moved over on the settee to gather her into him. "Uncle Dray will come too. You know no one gets to touch you unless you want them to. You get to say yes or no."

Theo hadn't known that when he was her age. He'd made sure to tell her.

She rested her head on his chest, and Theo sat and held his dreamy, unsentimental daughter who liked plants and animals and books and knives and fire and was still working out how to be in the world. If he could, he'd follow her everywhere, just to watch her back.

She told him the name. "And he won't bother me after this?"

"No, my love," said Theo. "No one will bother you after this."



"Malfoy."

"Ma'am." He looked over from the settee in her extended office, his thumbs poised over his phone. He was in a black three-piece suit, his platinum hair combed back in a perfect wave from his forehead.

"We have that committee meeting," said Hermione.

"Sitting in, Malfoy?" asked Padma, her papers held to her chest as she stood by Hermione's desk.

"I don't work here, Patil," said Draco derisively, glancing down to hit send on his email.

"I'll see you at home, then," said Hermione as he sprang up and pocketed the phone.

"Yes, Deputy Minister," said Draco, striding to her desk and bending to kiss her cheek. He nodded to Padma on his way out the door. "Senior Undersecretary."



2019

Draco Malfoy sat flanked by his children and mother, on the front row of the gallery, and watched his wife preside over the Wizengamot for the first time.

Earlier, they'd stood in her new office and watched her sign the oath affirming her loyalty to the wizarding United Kingdom. She had signed quickly, confidently, the diamond on her right hand flashing. Then she had put down the quill and turned her signet ring to the underside of her finger. She had pressed it to the parchment, the ring had supplied her blood, and, when she'd lifted her hand, there was the Malfoy seal—wet and shining in the light—next to her name. She'd twisted the bloodied ring back into place and spelled the document dry—the ink lightening, the blood darkening—then raised her head to meet his eye. The corner of her mouth had quirked as she refused to smirk in front of the cameras. He'd wanted to kiss her right there, at the corner of her mouth.

Now she stood and recited the oath—pageantry for the spectators and foreign dignitaries. Narcissa, sat on the other side of Rosie, ducked her head to the girl, nodded toward his wife, and said, "That will be you someday, dear."

Draco saw Rosie suck in a breath, her mouth tightening with determination. She turned to look at her mother with an expression that said, *Yes, it will*.

Shacklebolt ceded his seat to the new Minister in a symbolic transfer of power, and she began her speech laying out her vision for her administration. Reform, reform, reform. Draco had it memorized. He'd helped to edit it. There—that was *his* turn of phrase. Pause for applause—there it was. Draco felt free to smirk, here in the audience.

Scorp shifted next to him, and Draco looked over. Rosie was currently surveying the members of the Wizengamot with a slightly feral intensity, narrowing her eyes at anyone who didn't appear properly



appreciative of her mother's address. But Scorp only gazed up at his mother, his mouth soft. His hand was still in Draco's.

Draco's son was all sweetness and light. He reminded Draco of Theo when they were ten. Draco worried sometimes that Scorp was too sweet for the world, but Draco also wanted to keep him that way.

Albus was sat next to him, Scorp's foot lined up against his. Then came the rest of the Potters, a sea of gingers behind them, Theo and Charlie behind Draco with Teddie, the Parkbottom family on the other side of Narcissa. Patil, his wife's Deputy Minister, had been sworn in first and was sat with other Ministry officials. There would be a luncheon, and then the children—excused from class for this historic event—would go back to school on the train.

Draco gazed up at his wife. She was in dark robes, her hair pinned up. She'd spent the last two decades in government. She was polished now. She could command a room, coax cooperation, consider compromise. She knew how to count her votes and cut her losses. She'd learned pragmatism and self-preservation. But as she began speaking faster, more forcefully now—nearing her rousing finale—he could still see that terrible driving will, that slightly feral intensity she'd possessed as long as he'd known her. He could still see the girl he'd met when he was eleven after going to school on the train.

Hermione was shot through with adrenaline, the day so tightly packed with activities that she felt both intensely alive and slightly distanced from the singular reality of the day she'd imagined so many times. Here was this grand idea—she was Minister of Magic—experienced as a series of tasks and schedules to keep, grounded by mundane physical need. She needed to adjust a hairpin, she needed a cushioning charm, she needed something to eat, she needed the loo.

One last event now: a formal reception in the Ministry ballroom. Hermione had thought to wear black. She'd wanted to look dignified.

"Oh no," Narcissa had said when she'd seen the dresses Hermione was evaluating. "You're the most important person in the room, dear. Everyone will want to *see* you."

Hermione was wearing Gryffindor red.

Long sleeves, the gown fitted to the waist, a full skirt that took up space. Beside her, Draco was in the simplest tuxedo he owned, which somehow only made him more eye-catching. Or maybe Hermione's eyes just always caught on him—that lean form, that sharp jaw, that shock of white-blond hair above those pale gray eyes.

She and Draco came to a halt at the open doors to the ballroom. She was on his arm. For a moment, she was on the outside, looking in. She could see the press waiting, cameras held aloft. The members of the Wizengamot, scattered throughout the crowd, turned from their conversations to observe her entrance. Every Ministry bureaucrat, functionary, and staffer stared. The representatives of foreign governments and the muggle Prime Minister eyed her.

Hermione felt herself hesitate. From this day forward, she would be Minister. She would, in one way or another, take them all on.

Then Draco had turned toward her, his arm in hers pulling her closer, his free hand at her waist.

Citrus. Cloves. The heat of his cheek. He'd leaned in—his pointy nose against her, his lips near her ear.

He murmured, "They're all afraid of you, darling."

"They should be," said Hermione.

They were at Parkbottom, and it was a lovely day. Pansy had spent the morning going over redesigns for all the bottle labels and tweaking the marketing copy for her cosmetics line, and now she wandered through the gardens with a glass of wine until she reached Neville, sitting on a bench, reading his correspondence.

Nearby, in the hedge maze, Posey and Prim were busy being sisters.

"Stop yelling!" yelled Pansy. "Uncle Theo and Uncle Charlie will be here soon with Teddie, and we're all going to have a nice time!"

Neville snorted and tucked his BlackBerry into his pocket. Then he reached out and pulled Pansy onto his lap.

She held her glass out as she settled against him, her arm around his neck, his hand on her thigh. "Hiya," she said, and kissed him. He smelled like loam and tea.

"Hiya," he said, his mouth near hers. Then he pulled back. "I've decided," he said, his eyes moving over her face.

"What have you decided?" She tilted her head, studying him. Merlin, he looked good.

"I'm retiring the side project," he said quietly. His eyes didn't leave hers.

"That's good, Nev," she said. "You've done enough."

He nodded once. Then he sighed and took the wineglass from her. She leaned into him as he took a drink.

"You're allowed to move on," she told him.

Theo was drinking Charlie's rum eggnog (disgusting) and wearing this year's blue T jumper (hideous) and playing Bavarian Snap with Ron and George and Ginny on Christmas Day at the Burrow while Charlie sat on the sofa, Teddie lounged on his lap in her own blue T jumper. She leaned against him, paging through a new book and kicking her foot, and Charlie laughed with Harry at the story Bill was telling about a particularly gnarly curse in Egypt.

Theo had overheard Charlie and his mother in the kitchen before lunch, Charlie stood with Teddie on his hip while Molly whispered, "What happens when her mother comes back?"

Charlie had shrugged, unperturbed. "I expect she'll visit."

Draco had been outraged when Theo had asked if he thought Luna would take Teddie away. "Too late!" he'd snapped. "She's yours." But that was Draco. Theo would understand. Only he really hoped she wouldn't.

Word had spread like fiendfyre among the Nott elves: a new Nott heir! There had been loud crying and a lot of singing, and the elves had chased out the boggarts and aired out the halls and finally finished refurbishing the Manor. (One wing was still haunted, but what could you do.) Theo had explored this newly unfamiliar place with Charlie and Teddie, and most nights now, when they weren't at the cottage, Theo fell asleep in Teddie's periwinkle rooms. Before, Theo had felt that he was home alone in his father's house. Now he felt that he and Teddie were in their house together.

Teddie looked up suddenly and Charlie leaned toward her and asked, "What is it, sweetheart?"

"Everyone is going to scream," she said.

Then all the cards in front of Theo exploded, and everyone screamed.

"That's right, sweetheart. Very good," said Draco. "Her birthday is April 22. Her favorite color is periwinkle. She likes books and animals and is gifted in divination—of course she is. This is a Ravenclaw right here. And her name is—my, the Scamanders *are* open-minded." He looked up at Theo. "Theodora Lovegood Nott."

"Teddie!" yelled the girl.

"Teddie, then." Draco crouched down, tossing the note onto the low table. "Teddie, love, I'm your Uncle Draco. May I pick you up? Will you sit on the settee with me?"

The girl considered it and then nodded. Draco smiled and lifted her, then settled with her on his lap. Crookshanks butted her leg and she laughed and leaned forward, reaching for the demon.

Draco arranged her skirt and then looked up at Theo, stood with his hand back over his mouth. "Congratulations, Theo. The Nott bloodline has been extended for another generation. You've done your duty."

Theo's mouth fell open, his hands flying up. "Hardly! I have to bring her up!"

The fire flashed green and Pansy stepped out of the floo, brushing off her skirt (Chanel). "Just an hour of godsdamned peace and quiet," she muttered. She glanced up. "Draco, whose child have you stolen?"

"Nott's!" he said, grinning widely.



Theo was on Charlie's sagging sofa when the door to the cottage opened and Charlie pushed through in work clothes. The sun had gone down—he must have been further out than usual with a dragon.

Charlie raised an eyebrow—Theo wasn't meant to be here today. Then his brows lowered as he came to stand in front of Theo, his eyes playing over him. The girl was in Theo's lap, sleeping against him. She was warm and damp—they had both done some crying earlier. Theo felt weighted down by much more than her slight body, as though he would never be able to lift himself from the cushions he'd sunk into.

He looked up at Charlie. "I have a daughter now."

Charlie's face didn't change. "And you've let a goat into the house."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," said Theo. The kid from the pen was also asleep on the sofa. Theo had repaid most of the damage it had done.

"What is your daughter's name?" asked Charlie.

"Theodora Lovegood Nott," said Theo. "You were there when she was conceived."

"So *me* have a daughter now," said Charlie.

"Yes," said Theo, beginning to cry again.

"Sweetheart," said Charlie, "have any of you eaten?"

"I can't speak for the goat," said Theo, "but the rest of us have not."

Charlie bent down and kissed Theo on the mouth. Then he gently picked up the sleeping girl as though it were the most natural thing in the world. She stirred, her arms going round his neck, his hand on her small back. "Put the goat back," he said. "We'll start dinner."

Theo took a deep breath and stood, wiping his cheeks with his hands, smearing tears.

Charlie tilted his head and waited until Theo kissed him. "Hey," said Charlie. "This is a good thing."

"That's what Draco said," said Theo. "But—I'm *me*."

"That's right," said Charlie. "You're you. You're not your father."

Theo took another breath and looked at Charlie's face, serious for once.

"Yeah?" said Theo.

"Yeah," said Charlie.

Excerpt from The Daily Prophet Special Edition HERMIONE GRANGER MALFOY SWORN IN AS MINISTER OF MAGIC:

Hermione Malfoy (*née Granger*) was sworn in as Minister of Magic today, succeeding Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was first appointed Acting Minister in 1998 before taking the top spot formally that same year.

The Minister was accompanied by her husband, Malfoy LTD shipping magnate and Sacred 28 scion Draco Malfoy, and their children, Scorpius Hyperion (13) and Ara Rose (11), both currently carrying on Malfoy family tradition as members of Slytherin House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, as well as the Minister's mother-in-law, philanthropist Narcissa Black Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy, the Minister's father-in-law, remains in Azkaban, serving a life sentence. Other notable attendees included Head Auror Ronald Weasley and Hogwarts DADA professor Harry Potter—members, with the Minister, of the Second Wizarding War's Golden Trio.

In the past fifteen years, the name Granger has become somewhat ubiquitous in the wizarding world, between the Granger & Malfoy bookstore chain, the Hermione Granger Endowed Chair for Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, the Granger wing of St. Mungo's Hospital, and other charitable endeavors the Minister has established under her maiden name. During this time, the Minister has simultaneously made the Malfoy name synonymous with governmental reform, championing an ambitious slate of legislation as Deputy Minister and in her prior roles in the Departments of International Magical Cooperation and Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. (For more on Mrs. Malfoy's legislative record, see pp. A10-A11.)

The Minister has enjoyed a meteoric rise to power since being wed to Mr. Malfoy in 2003 under the short-lived marriage mandate in then-Minister Shacklebolt's signature Reconciliation Act.

Considered by many a controversial figure in wizarding politics, Mr. Malfoy holds no formal political position and has not been a registered member of any recognized political party since taking the Dark Mark at sixteen. Convicted of war crimes committed as a Death Eater during the Second Wizarding War, he served two years in Azkaban, followed by two years of house arrest. Since his release, while active in business and pureblood circles and periodically spotted in the company of blood purist ideologues, Mr. Malfoy has emerged as an aggressive supporter of his wife's progressive agenda, leading many to question his true political beliefs. However, Mr. Malfoy, who habitually refuses interview requests and communicates with the media only via press release, has resisted all calls to clarify his political leanings. When asked, the Minister, who wears a House of Malfoy signet ring and co-hosts several well-known fundraisers with her mother-in-law, will only

comment on the record to say she was forcibly bonded to Mr. Malfoy by the previous administration. Despite this, Mr. Malfoy is frequently seen in his wife's offices and appears with the Minister at all official functions as well as at the Malfoys' annual Yule Ball.

The Minister has moved to quash speculation that her first act in office will be to pardon Lucius Malfoy, stating she will recuse herself from any Wizengamot vote on her father-in-law's fate. However, sources close to the Minister indicate she will not veto a commutation of sentence should it reach her desk. Already the Minister has shaken up Ministry staffing by hiring longtime Chiefs of Staff Eoin Barry and Jason Whitby away from the offices of Cormac McLaggen and Justin Finch-Fletchley respectively.



Excerpt from the Wizarding World News feature MINISTER MALFOY'S MAD DOG:

... While those who get their news primarily from the fashion pages might be forgiven for thinking Mr. Malfoy is merely the Minister's exquisitely dressed arm candy, those who follow the less savory aspects of the political world will be familiar with the whispers that have dogged Malfoy since his days at Hogwarts, where he first made many of the connections that make up his elite circle to this day.

Notoriously convicted at seventeen of war crimes committed during the Second Wizarding War as the youngest Death Eater ever to take the Mark, the Azkaban-tattooed Malfoy was considered by many to be an unrehabilitated blood supremacist at the time of his Ministry-mandated bond to the now-Minister in 2003, and was, throughout the early aughts, frequently if sporadically seen in the company of other known purists. While the blood purity revival movement of this era ultimately fizzled and died—due in no small part to the death or disappearance of many of its most vocal proponents—Malfoy emerged unscathed and with a curious mix of conservative and progressive associates, leading some to question the role he played in this bloody post-war period.

While his Gryffindor wife connecting him to progressive Gryffindor figures such as then-auror Harry Potter, current-Head Auror Ronald Weasley, and Parkbottom co-founder and CEO Neville Longbottom may seem the obvious answer here, at the time, Malfoy and the former Miss Granger were engaged in a heated public battle, having been forcibly married by the Shacklebolt administration (for more on Shacklebolt's controversial Reconciliation Act, see p. B10). The

Malfoys were known for public duels and altercations, with Mrs. Malfoy disavowing her husband's political ties on multiple occasions at a time when he was being credibly accused of assault and battery, intimidation, possession of controlled potions with intent to distribute, and other acts of domestic terrorism. And while Potter is famously—at Mrs. Malfoy's request—godfather to the

Malfoys' firstborn, Malfoy and Ronald Weasley have publicly maintained a somewhat chillier relationship, despite (or perhaps because of) Weasley's working relationship with Mrs. Malfoy after a previous high-profile romance.

Instead, it seems likely that Malfoy's progressive connections came via another, more circuitous route: his son's other godfather, Theodore Nott. An enigmatic figure, the Nott scion and on-and-off-again Unspeakable has been a close friend of Malfoy's since childhood, leading to rumors in some quarters that the two were romantically entangled in their youth. At the time of the Malfoy bond,

Nott had earned a reputation as Malfoy's enthusiastic hatchet man, known in Knockturn for appearing when least expected to do Malfoy's dirty work. Exempted from the Reconciliation Act's marriage requirements for reasons unknown, Nott was first linked to dragontamer Charles Weasley during this period, and it's possible that this Weasley, via Nott, introduced Malfoy to other Weasley brothers' alleged anti-purist activities.

While the Weasley family's anti-purist politics are well known, perhaps less widely reported are rumors that independent cursebreaker Bill Weasley and Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes owner George Weasley were actively involved in anti-purist mercenary work during this post-war period. Bill Weasley has refused to comment on this subject and has only spoken on the record regarding Malfoy to confirm that he performed work for the Malfoy estate as part of his then-employment with Gringotts Bank. Meanwhile, George Weasley has vocally maintained that he is merely a joke shop proprietor, though WWW-produced incendiary devices have been recovered from various hotspots over the years. George, whose years at Hogwarts overlapped with those of the Minister and Malfoy as well as Nott, has not denied reports that someone at Malfoy Manor has been a private investor in WWW since 2003—though, when the information leaked in 2008, it was widely assumed that Mrs. Malfoy was the one writing the cheques.

But of course no deep dive into the anti-purist activity of the aughts would be complete without a mention of Longbottom. The tight-lipped wine, cosmetics, and apothecary mogul is primarily known for his wartime heroics and marriage to society page fixture Pansy Parkinson Longbottom, Parkbottom's co-founder and CIO and, coincidentally, Malfoy's Hogwarts paramour. Despite

her—from the twenty-three-month-old up—was seconds away from laughing or crying or throwing themselves on the floor if anyone looked at them funny.

Hermione had, in fact, caught Draco shooting Seamus an absolutely filthy glare before turning to smile at Albus as he sat beside Ginny in the audience, Ginny the buffer between him and Susan. Hermione had watched the three of them on the front row as Molly and James immediately left their seats to hang on their mothers and Draco conjured daisies for Molly and let Albus climb onto his thigh while he held Scorp. Theo was sat to Draco's other side, looking sadly in need of rescue as Posey clambered on him and pulled on his ear. Hermione knew he hadn't wanted to come, but Neville was on stage with Hermione, Harry, and Ron, and Pansy had pressganged him into helping with the girls. Now Albus and Scorp both began to cry, and Draco stood abruptly and stalked out of the Great Hall in his black three-piece suit, a wailing toddler in each arm.

He was back—his face set, the boys red-cheeked but calmed—by the time Hermione stood at the podium to announce the Hermione Granger Endowed Chair for Muggle Studies, funded with Malfoy gold.



The flames flashed green and Draco looked up to see Theo stepping out of the floo, holding a little girl to his chest, his face eerily blank. She had long, wavy brown hair and large, thickly lashed eyes—she was looking around now, smiling shyly.

"That's a cat!" she yelled, pointing.

Draco got up, skirting his desk as Theo squatted to set her down carefully—she was wearing a diaphanous silver dress and pink shoes—and then she was darting toward Crookshanks on the settee while Draco stood and watched, his hands on his hips.

"Theo," he said slowly. "Whose child have you stolen?"

Theo was stood watching, his arms crossed defensively, one hand over his mouth. His eyes shifted to Draco. "Mate."

Draco watched her pet the orange mass of fur, ready to remove Crooks if he started to bite. She appeared to be the age of Pansy's girls but this wasn't Posey or Prim. He looked to Theo.

Theo reached into his pocket and then held out a folded piece of parchment. "Mate, the note says she's mine."

"Merlin, Theo—" Draco stepped forward to take the paper.

"Where's Scorp?"

"With Narcissa for the morning," said Draco absent-mindedly as he unfolded the note. "*Luna*"

Theo nodded slowly. "Remember that Ministry ball . . . when you and Granger were first married—"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "When you and Charlie and Luna . . ." He looked at the little girl. He looked back to Theo.

"I followed instructions!" said Theo.

"She didn't say anything at Pansy's wedding?"

Theo shook his head.

Draco scanned the note. "Dear Theodore . . . how are you . . . hasn't it been a nice spring . . . Rolf and I have returned from Canada . . . embarking on a multi-year research trip . . . it's been lovely having her but it's time for you to take over care of your daughter . . . you need her help more than I do." He looked up at Theo, his brow furrowed.

Theo could only offer a helpless shrug.

Draco resumed reading. "She's four—"

"I'm four!" yelled the girl, holding up four fingers.

Draco watched them for another minute.

Then he pulled the photograph from his inner breast pocket and slid it across the table.

His father looked down his nose—he needed glasses—and reached for it, frowning. He brought it closer to his face, his other hand instinctively tightening on Scorp as his attention was divided. He squinted—and then he flinched, and his eyes darted to Draco.

“A second?” The older man’s voice cracked.

Draco nodded quickly, his own eyes welling with tears. He swallowed them back, blinking. “A girl,” he said. “She’s three months along.”

Lucius’s face broke into a wild smile—Draco didn’t know the last time he’d seen Lucius smile like that, a real smile—and then he was standing, tugging Draco into a hard embrace, Scorp between them—and then Draco was crying.

“We haven’t had a second since—”

“I know,” said Draco. His father had his arm around his shoulders, shaking Draco like he’d just won the World Cup. Draco was trying to stop crying, to be his father’s brave boy. But he wanted this so badly—he so badly wanted this to be real. His wife loved him. He had his perfect little boy. He’d have a perfect little girl. When they’d held him down here against the cold wet stone and tattooed his neck, he’d thought he’d be dead in a cell within the year.

Draco’s father had his hand clamped on the back of his neck. He kissed Draco’s temple. “Well done, my boy. Well done.”

Draco laughed at how his heart swelled. Ridiculous—all he had done was shag his wife. He hadn’t done anything. But his father was proud of him, and pride seeped through Draco like the warmth of dark magic. He’d pleased her enough that she’d kept him and kept his children too. She didn’t have to.

Lucius’s chest puffed out and Draco knew he was about to take credit. “This is why we wanted this match! You’ve reinvigorated the Malfoy bloodline. This muggleborn blood—”

“Say whatever bigoted thing you’re about to say and get it out of your system,” said Draco, regaining his composure.

Lucius affected affront. “It’s not bigotry to say the muggles are more fertile!”

Draco raised an eyebrow as Lucius repeated “It’s not!” to the laughing toddler. He knew his parents would never truly abandon their old ways of thinking. He was sure they expected Scorp to marry a pureblood.

Draco had already—for no reason at all—charted out all the society children in Scorp’s age range. His son would marry for love—of course—but Draco would strongly prefer he fall in love with one of the Parkbottom children. Those girls were going to be *ruthless*. Which meant, with his luck, Scorp would grow up to fall for the younger Potter boy. (Draco had smacked Theo for planting *that* seed in his mind.) But if he did, fine. Scorp could fall in love with whomever he wanted. As long as it wasn’t Ron Weasley’s daughter. Draco was prepared to ruin lives in that case.



That May was the ceremony to mark the ten-year anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. A dog and pony show, Draco would have called it, if he weren’t being so carefully circumspect. He’d only made wry noises of agreement when Hermione had complained she was expected to sit on stage for much of the program, on display with nothing to do. She knew he was dreading the retrospectives. The press would run photos of her standing next to him, holding Scorpius, and beside those photos would be Draco in a cage when he was seventeen, gaunt and sneering in a loop forever, his neck yet to be tattooed.

It was a long, uncomfortable, emotional day. The five-year anniversary had ended in a drunken revel as they let off steam in Hogsmeade. Now Hermione, Ginny, and Susan were all heavily pregnant. (Oh, the irony.) The men were tense. The children were out of sorts. Hermione felt that everyone around

enjoying a squeaky-clean reputation, Longbottom has periodically quashed quiet speculation that in the post-war period he armed and funded independent military contractors comprised of former Order members. A rarely seen photograph from the Parkbottom wedding in 2003 shows Malfoy toasting the Longbottoms while Nott, Charles Weasley, Bill Weasley, and George Weasley look on.

While Malfoy was surely anathema to Longbottom at the time, given their respective roles in the war, this seemingly insignificant moment may have marked the beginning of a strange alliance—and indeed it’s long been assumed that it was only Malfoy’s presence at his ex-girlfriend’s wedding that spared him from the massacre of revivalist leaders, hushed up by the Ministry and later

exposed by WWN reporters, that occurred at Avery Manor that very night. Whatever the case, throughout the aughts, Malfoy’s revivalist associates had a bad habit of dying, while some of his wife’s most vocal critics abruptly retired from politics or experienced sudden changes of heart. (It’s said a whisper network advised new Ministry hires and appointees not to cross Mrs. Malfoy without expecting to draw Malfoy’s notice, to unpredictable results.) When the Malfoys’ daughter was born in 2008, none other than Longbottom and Parkinson Longbottom were named her godparents.

It was then, upon the end of the revivalist movement in the late aughts and Mrs. Malfoy’s return to full-time Ministry work after her second maternity leave, that the now-Minister’s career took off—just as Malfoy was portraying himself to the press as a family man too preoccupied with fatherhood to dabble in politics. If, previously, Mrs. Malfoy’s critics had whispered that, in marrying her to Malfoy, the Ministry had inadvertently given her an attack dog (with his own rabid dog in Nott), now they were treated to saccharine press coverage of Malfoy, Potter, Longbottom, and various Weasleys embracing fatherhood via play dates, birthday parties, and children’s quidditch matches that intertwined their lives as much as their children’s. Even the unmarried Nott began appearing in public with a previously unseen daughter midway through 2008.

Of course, these wholesome displays were tempered by Malfoy’s habit of taking his young children to Azkaban to visit his war criminal father—a move which drew scathing commentary and resulted in the now-Minister’s strict refusal to answer any press questions regarding her children. For her part, the Minister has maintained a bright line between herself and her father-in-law, with critics unable to unearth a single interaction between the two since the Minister, as a teenager, testified at the trials that saw the senior Malfoy convicted. Ultimately, this proto-scandal was swamped by a tsunami of ambitious reform bills that solidified Mrs. Malfoy’s progressive credentials and refocused the conversation. But with Mrs. Malfoy’s ascension to the top spot, tongues are wagging again, with the favored theory being that Mrs. Malfoy will allow House Malfoy to engineer Lucius Malfoy’s release from prison on the condition that he expatriate with his wife to the family’s chateau in France.

What’s for certain, though, is that pundits across the political spectrum are braced for the Malfoy administration to be an activist one—one combining Gryffindor ideals with Slytherin cunning.



“I miss the children already,” said Draco. “I miss my vicious little beast.”

“I know, dear, but Rose has to go to school. She can’t spend the rest of her life at home, bullying us. She has to extend her reach.”

Draco hummed noncommittally. They were lying spooned in bed, his arm tight around her, his head on her pillow. Crookshanks was curled on Draco’s pillow, too elderly to be moved against his will.

“And you need to stop sending them so many care packages,” said Hermione. “You’ll embarrass them—”

"No, I'm helping them to make friends—"

"You're helping Scorp to make friends because he shares his sweets. You're helping Rose to make enemies because she doesn't."

Draco huffed, but there was no answer to the truth. He hitched her tighter, his body warm and hard against hers. Then: "Scorp fancies Albus, doesn't he?"

Hermione snorted. "I think the whole world knows that except Albus."

"All right. Rosie will have to bully her husband into taking her name. I'll amend her marriage contract—"

"*Draco.* He's thirteen. He might also like girls—"

"No, Nott foresaw this," said Draco. "It's going to be Albus." A pause, then: "Rosie can marry James and we'll only have to split holidays with one set of awful in-laws—"

"You really want to double down on the Potters?" asked Hermione, amused.

"Why not?" said Draco, all feigned indifference. "It's only that they root for the wrong club."

"No, Fred is the better match for her."

Draco's tone turned thoughtful. "They do both like explosives—"

"Because they're children," said Hermione. "Why am I having this conversation? We're not arranging any marriages."

"But it worked for us," said Draco.

"Did it?" asked Hermione.

"Don't you remember, dear? It was love at first sight. You were so shy and retiring. I swept you off your feet—"

"Yes," said Hermione. "That's exactly how it happened."

She turned over and he lifted his arm to let her. They were face to face, his hand on her hip. Citrus. Cloves. The heat of him.

"You were so gentle with me," said Draco wistfully. "Slow to anger, quick with a kind word—"

"Yes, that's me," said Hermione.

"Always so nice to me—"

"Just what you deserved—" She was smiling, her mouth close to his.

"Tell me you love me," said Draco.

"I love you." She kissed him, her hands on him, her body pressing closer. "You're all mine. And you will never, ever be rid of me. Never, never, never, never—"

He whispered it: "I love you too, Mrs. Malfoy."

"I wasn't aware you were in the habit of voting against my measures. Three times—what a shame."

He fixed her with a sour look. "And *each time*, I have been accosted by a different young man and robbed."

"And you think, what, I employ these young men? Like a little . . . gang?" Hermione laughed. "Do you think I have a little dormitory for them?" She smiled.

Rake pursed his lips. "Of course not—"

"This all sounds quite fanciful," said Hermione. "I don't know how I can help you. I suppose you could start voting my way and see if anything changes."

Rake left her office in a huff, and Hermione shook her head at Draco's petty psych ops. Petty but—yes, all right—mildly satisfying. She had returned from her maternity leave with a vengeance—back to peppering the Wizengamot with bills for Rake to vote against—and so had Draco.



They were having a proper Yule party this year—not yet the full ball Draco knew his mother would like to return to, but her bridge club ladies were out in force, his wife's friends and colleagues making more than an appearance. There was, as he had once promised, no cap on the number of Weasleys.

He was stood beside her, greeting guests, his son in one arm. She was in Gryffindor red—he'd picked out the dress. Her hair was loose and wild—he'd insisted. Controlling, possessive, a terrible prat—he didn't care. He liked seeing her like this. She had on her Malfoy signet ring—she didn't take it off—and the diamond ring he'd bought her last year that she pretended to think was too big. She was smiling and happy—the most beautiful woman there.

Draco was having a hard time keeping his free hand off her arse. He didn't want to put Scorp to bed, though the boy was about to get fractious. He was showing off, and he wasn't sorry.

He sidled closer and kissed her. She was wearing Pansy's semipermanent lipstick—he could kiss her as much as he wanted.

"Tell me you love me," he murmured, his mouth close to hers. He didn't care how many guests saw them being bad hosts, wrapped up in each other. He wanted everyone to see.

"I love you." She smiled at him. She said it every time.

"I love you too," he said.



2008

"Who's my brave boy?" asked Lucius, bent over the squirming blond toddler on his lap.

His wife hated him bringing the baby to Azkaban. (She'd muttered he'd grow up thinking an Azkaban tattoo was a Malfoy family birthmark, which Draco thought was a low blow.) But her own ideals were her undoing—she wouldn't deny the boy a chance to know his grandfather.

At least until Lucius hacked her off. It truly warmed Draco's heart in this chilly coll, knowing the threat of withholding Scorp gave his wife total control over Lucius.

Draco smiled, watching his father tickle the eighteen-month-old he'd bundled into Slytherin green for the visit. The boy was shrieking with laughter, calling Lucius Papa.

"I have a surprise for you," he said.

His father looked up sharply, one eyebrow raised. "You've killed more of my old friends."

Draco snorted. "No, we've run out. I live a quiet life now."

"Clearly," said Lucius, pulling a face for the baby as his laughter bounced off the stone walls.

"I just want this to be over. That's all Draco wants too."

"Nott—"

"Was probably enjoying himself."

"Oh my Merlin." Harry had barked a laugh. "I've never been flirted with that aggressively on the way to an interrogation before."

Now Hermione looked down at Scorpius and he gazed up at her and she smiled. She hadn't asked Harry what he'd done to the wizard. She understood now what she would do to anyone who threatened her family.



2007

Scorpius's first word was not weasel. It was "cat."



Draco was crouched down, one hand steadyng a swaying Scorpius, the other holding out a greasy cube of diced ham. "Give the beast a treat," he said.

Scorpius frowned, concentrating on taking the ham from him. His little fingers picked up the cube from Draco's flat palm.

Then he shrieked and threw it into Crookshanks's face. The flat-faced demon snatched the ham off the rug and Scorpius laughed and clapped.

"Brilliant," said Draco.

Draco held out another piece of ham, and Scorpius carefully took it from him.

"Gently," said Draco, his hand on the boy's warm back, a tiny shoulder blade under his fingertips. "Gently."

Scorpius thrust out the ham, and the abomination delicately, using only its teeth, took the meat from his fingers.

"Good boy," said Draco. He pulled Scorpius close and kissed his cheek, and his son laughed and laughed.



"Yesterday, I was mugged for the third time this autumn—"

Hermione's head jerked back. "That's shocking," she said. "Do you live in a bad neighborhood?"

"What?" snapped Rake. He was sat in her office guest chair, his face puckered in consternation. "I certainly do not. I believe there to be another cause—"

"Were you dressed provocatively?"

Rake's mouth fell open.

"What were you wearing? Are you known to carry large sums of gold?"

"No and no," ground out Rake. "These muggings have occurred every time I've voted against one of your policy initiatives—"

"What a bizarre thing to believe," said Hermione. "Do you think I am mugging you?"

"No—"

Hermione got back to the Manor to find Theo and Draco sitting together on the settee in Draco's study, Theo holding Scorp and singing a dirty sea shanty while Draco read his spies' reports.

"How can none of them spell?" asked Draco, flying a piece of parchment onto the low table with a flick of his wrist. "How does Potter stand this?"

"Maybe Potter can't spell," said Theo, looking up from the baby.

"Harry can spell," said Hermione, dropping into the club chair in her frilly dress.

"That's what Voldemort said," said Theo to a withering look from Draco as Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Give me back my baby," demanded Draco, reaching for him.

"Shan't!" said Theo, blocking Draco's hand with his shoulder.

"How was cards, love?" asked Draco as Theo sprang up from the settee, Scorp in his arms.

"Brutal," said Hermione with a sigh. Her feet hurt despite the cushioning charm, and she was itching to change into loungewear. "I heard all about three affairs, two illicit business deals, and my own substandard bridge skills. Narcissa is sending the chateau elves to drill me."

"That *is* brutal," said Draco, looking impressed.

Theo had circled the back of the settee and now he blew a raspberry on the baby's cheek and deposited Scorp, laughing, into Hermione's lap.

Hermione forgot about her feet and her dress and her embarrassingly bad bridge play. She smiled at her happy baby, warm and solid against her, and lifted him up to kiss his face.



Draco and Narcissa and the elves had been driven mad by the prospect of Scorp's first Christmas. The Manor looked as though it had vomited bunting and garlands all down its front. Every doorway Hermione walked through was hung with mistletoe, every room clustered with candles arranged with holly, ivy, rosichips, roses, and apples. New gifts appeared under the Yule tree daily, half marked "to: Scorpius from: Father" and half marked "to: Mummy from: Scorpius." Hermione had said, once, "Is this a bit much?" and Draco had looked so hurt that she'd kept her mouth firmly shut ever since, except to agree that, yes, Scorp clearly loved Christmas.

Now it was early afternoon on Christmas Day and Hermione was nursing Scorp while Draco slept off his sugar crash beside her, his foot pressed to her. She was still wearing, on her right hand, the enormous diamond ring Scorp had, apparently, picked out at the jewelers. She'd finish feeding him and they'd all have a little nap and then they'd go with Narcissa to tour Neville's gardens and have Christmas dinner with Neville and Pansy and Theo and Charlie and the girls.

Two nights before, they'd gone to Grimmauld Place, where Draco and Ginny had sprawled on the drawing room rug with Scorp and Albus and bickered, James clinging to Ginny, and Hermione had drunk half a beer while she talked to Harry after following him down to the basement kitchen. It hadn't been a conversation she'd wanted to have in front of the children.

"Is everything good now?" she'd asked him. Draco hadn't told her, exactly, what Harry had done to the dark wizard that spring. As though he hadn't wanted her to think of Harry that way.

"It is, yeah," he'd said. "Neville had Malfoy's veritaserum—"

Hermione had groaned, remembering the raid—Harry an auror, sent on a wild goose chase. It had seemed so long ago.

Harry had huffed a laugh that went grim. "So we found out what we needed to know. Neville and I've spent the last few months mopping up. I think we're all right. I, ah—I owe Malfoy and Nott for bringing him in."

Hermione had shaken her head. "You don't—"

"That's what Malfoy said—"

"Granger!" scolded Theo, holding out grabby hands for a fussing Scorpius. "I've spent *years* placating a whining blond baby."



Hermione lay on her side, her head propped in her hand, and stared at her baby. She'd come back from her bath to find Draco asleep on his back, Scorpius asleep on his chest, Crookshanks asleep on Draco's pillow, Pip watching over them.

Hermione had spent nearly nine months as Pip's favorite, her every whim answered with alacrity, only to be unseated the very second Scorpius was born. But when Pip had seen her come out of the en suite, she'd popped out of the room, and now Hermione watched over Draco and Scorpius and Crookshanks. They all looked so innocent when they were asleep.

"People say to sleep when the baby sleeps," she'd told Narcissa, and Narcissa had laughed lightly.

"But you won't want to sleep, dear," she'd said with a smile. "You'll want to look at your baby."

She was right. Hermione just wanted to stare at his little nose and his tiny fingers and his delicate eyelashes and the mouth that already looked like Draco's. Her genes hadn't put up a fight. The baby looked exactly like Draco. She'd thought she couldn't get enough of him, and she'd got more.



Hermione had put on real clothes and left the Manor for the first time in months. It felt amazing. It felt terrible.

"Right on schedule," said Harry.

Hermione looked up to see Draco's white-blond hair catching the pub's low light as he wended his way toward their table in the back. The worst of the lunch rush had passed, and Hermione could watch him from across the room. He was dressed in black, the Azkaban tattoo visible above his collar. The diamonds of his brothal band glinted, his pale hand spread across Slytherin green—because, yes, he'd brought the baby, clutched to his chest. And of course he'd put Scorp in green.

Hermione felt herself smiling too widely—she must look like an idiot, beaming at them as they neared.

"Did you miss us?" asked Draco, looming over her.

"I did," she said, smiling up at him.

He smirked and hooked a nearby chair. He settled next to her, holding the baby up to survey the table. "Look, Scorp," said Draco, "it's Mummy, the savior of the wizarding world, and a weasel."

"I hope his first word is weasel," said Ron. "Weasel, weasel, weasel!"

"Here, let me hold him," said Harry.

"No," snapped Draco, his nose wrinkling. "It's *my* baby."

"Oh, there's no doubt of that," said Ron wryly, eying Scorp's white-blond hair. "I'll send over some Gryffindor hand-me-downs, so you can dress him properly!"

Draco made a sound of true revulsion, like a cat with a hairball, and Hermione burst into laughter with the others.



Theo and Draco apparated into the back of Longbottom's greenhouse and threw the man side-alonged between them down to the cracked tile.

Draco shot his cuffs and cast the incarcero and then the silencio.

Theo cracked his neck. "Phew. Kinda nasty." He pulled at his bloodied collar, shrugged his suit jacket into place.

Draco was still breathing hard. The little finger on his left hand was broken. The wizard was screaming at them but Draco couldn't read his lips.

He heard a distant pop of apparition.

Draco glanced over as Theo looked to the long greenhouse aisle and his mouth broke into a wide grin. Theo nudged the man on the tile with the pointy toe of his dragonskin shoe. "Daddy's home." He looked back up. "Oh my Merlin . . . and he's brought the Saint."

Draco followed his gaze. Longbottom was striding down the greenhouse's central aisle, his plants reaching out for him, his cloak streaming back. And just behind him was Harry Potter, his face grim, still in his professor robes.

"What *did* you do, boyo?" Theo nudged the man again and began to laugh.



Draco was lying prone beside her, up on his forearms, leaned over to kiss her stomach. She was propped against the pillows, watching him.

"Mine, mine, mine," he murmured between kisses. He turned his head and rubbed his cheekbone against her belly as though he were a cat scent-marking her.

"You're ridiculous," she said, pushing a lock of hair off his forehead with her fingertip.

He looked up at her, guileless. "But it is mine," he said. He turned back to kiss her belly. "It's my baby."

"I'm the one doing all the work here," said Hermione. "It's my baby."

"Hmm," said Draco. He kissed her stomach. "I'll share him with you."

"Generous," Hermione said dryly.

"I'm known for my generosity," said Draco, pushing himself lower on the bed and moving to between her legs.



Childbirth was scary and painful, and Hermione and Draco and the baby all cried a lot during the first week, but Narcissa brought Hermione chilled cabbage leaves for her engorged breasts and held the baby while they slept and smoothed Hermione's hair back from her temple and told her she was a natural, and then Hermione cried some more.



"I'm sorry he's not in a better mood for you," said Hermione, who was not in a particularly good mood herself, her nerves as frazzled as her hair.



2006

Draco was sat behind Nott's desk, looking through the most recent reports, when Barry quietly took his seat across from him. Some of the lads had moved on. They'd found flats together. Or got girls and married young. But others, like Barry, stayed. Nott didn't charge them rent. The elves treated them as favored playthings. Draco paid well. They were loyal.

"You're to apply for a position in Cormac McLaggen's office," said Draco.

He looked up and Barry gave a short, sharp nod. He was sat slightly hunched, his eyes intent on Draco.

"Make sure you're hired. You're going to work your way up. Become indispensable. I'll pay more each year you're there. I expect you to be Chief of Staff ten years from now when he starts to challenge Mrs. Malfoy for the top spot."

Barry nodded his understanding.

"Who's the lad you've got yourself into—Whitby?"

Barry nodded, his mouth tense.

"Reliable? Won't grass on you when you row?"

"He's solid, sir." He'd relaxed minutely as he said it.

Draco nodded. "Once you're in, he's to apply to Finch-Fletchley's office. You can be his reference. I want to keep an eye on JFF too."

"I'll tell him, sir."

Draco made eye contact. "Good man."

Barry straightened in his seat.



"Mrs. Malfoy! What do you say to charges you've been corrupted by your husband's interests?"

"My policy record speaks for itself," snapped Hermione. "It's ranked in the ninetieth percentile by every progressive organization that tracks legislation. Report that!"

"Mrs. Malfoy! Over here!"

"Hermione! Hermione! Would you say relations have warmed between you and your husband?"

"I have no comment on my personal life," said Hermione as Draco's arm tightened around her.

"Mrs. Malfoy—"

"Hermione!"

"Hermione! Hermione! What about the baby?"

"What baby?" said Hermione, her hand spread protectively across her pregnant stomach.

Draco held the lift door open as she kissed him, and then she was in the lift and the doors were closing and she could hear him snarling "Piss off!" in the atrium. He would be back for her at five.

She was conducting an experiment in which she aggressively gaslit the press and then waited to see how they handled the near-total lack of reportable quotes about her private life. Results were mixed, but data collection was ongoing.



She'd let herself get sloppy, so she could pretend it was an accident, pretend she hadn't thought about it, pretend it wasn't by choice. But it was her choice—right now, it was her choice.

She ran her thumb over the even skin, unmarked for the first time in seven years.

Sometimes things changed.

She took a deep breath.

She made her decision.

"Draco!" she yelled.

He arrived in the doorway in his shirt and trousers, the *Prophet* in hand.

He climbed into the clawfoot tub with her, once he understood.

"I'm going to take care of you," he kept murmuring, kissing her, holding her to him, his clothes soaked through. "I'm going to take care of you both."

"I know," she said. She looked at his open, hopeful face. His clear gray eyes. She could feel the warm, lapping water and the hard cast iron, his hands on her, his legs tangled with hers. "Draco, I'm scared."

"I know, love." He looked her in the eye. He didn't look away.

"Aren't you scared?" she asked.

"No, love."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

She huffed a weak laugh. "You're such a prat."

He smiled at her. "I know, love."

He smoothed the damp curls back from her face. She kissed him, and he took off his clothes, slinging the sopping wet fabric onto the slate tiles, and then he took her back to bed.



Pansy had a one-year-old and a newborn. But she also had an army of elves, and she didn't see why her family planning being on point had to disrupt her holiday routine. She'd told Longbottom they were still doing a garden tour and open house—and she'd told Nott he was *not* bringing a goat to *eat her goddamn garden*. Longbottom was in charge of the outside and the elves were responsible for the inside and it was going to be festive and lovely or, Sweet Salazar's boiled bollocks, she was going to avada someone. For fuck's sake.

In truth, Pansy was nervous about having two daughters. She did not have a good relationship with her mother. (She did not have *any* relationship with her mother, currently.) She was not good at female friendship. But she wasn't going to be one of those witches who acted like daughters didn't count. (This mindset being why she didn't have a relationship with her mother.) She wasn't going to try for a boy and then treat him like the prize. If she wanted to spend time with male children, she had Draco and Nott, didn't she? No, it was settled. She had two daughters, and she was going to like it.

Neville did.

He was rocking Primrose now, staring at her with a faint smile on his face. Besotted, her mother would say. (*Get out of my head, Mother.*) Pansy was standing in the hall with Posey on her hip, watching him through the open door to the nursery. Merlin, he looked good.

For just a second, Pansy felt out of time. How had she gotten here? Grown, married, two children with this perfect man. When had this happened?

Then Posey started to whinge. He looked up, and Pansy shook it off and walked through the door. He extended the rocking chair to fit them all.

Pansy sat with her family, her elder daughter on her lap, her husband's arm around her, and rocked back and forth.

"There you have it," said Hermione. "Malfoy doesn't even work here, and he's heard about them. I can't imagine the rest of the department isn't also hearing things—or soon will be."



"You've been lucky, Malfoy," said the man, an intermediary.

They were in a dark part of Muggle London, walking away from a tense meeting in the back of a pub—Draco being introduced to the dark wizard he'd been looking for. Draco was a high-profile sympathizer with deep pockets and a willingness to use violence to effect change; eventually, everyone wanted to meet him, and they usually thought it was their idea. Most of what Draco did was extremely simple: He made himself available and then passed raw information to Longbottom. Draco wasn't a killer—he was the way in. He'd told Longbottom the truth: He was good at being a traitor.

"How's that," said Draco, but he had a feeling he knew. The intermediary was a man with his fingers in a lot of potions. Someone who could start to put those potions together. They passed under a streetlamp and Draco saw the shrewd look on the man's face. Then they were back in darkness.

"That business with Avery. The Yaxley outfit in Bulgaria. The training camps in France. This raid the Ministry won't admit to. They keep just missing you while everyone else gets dead."

The passed under a streetlamp and Draco shrugged. A self-deprecating smirk. "You know what they say. Better to be lucky than good."

The man snorted, back in the dark. "No one's accused you of being good, Malfoy."

Draco laughed. Then he avadaed the man, his body lit up by green lightning.

"I'm good at some things," said Draco, sensing more than seeing the man crumple to the pavement.

Draco blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dark. Then he walked away.

Draco wasn't a killer, but he'd stopped lowering his wand. After nearly bleeding out twice in his life, he'd concluded he didn't much appreciate the sensation. And as much as he did enjoy a fuss, he hadn't liked the pure fear he'd seen in his wife's eyes the last time he'd almost got himself dead. He'd decided, if he came back to her covered in blood again, it wouldn't be his own.

It was too bad. He didn't hate this man. But he hated the idea of not going home. And that was enough.



Hermione slipped into the hot water and leaned her head back against the lip of the tub, steam rising in the cold room. She was running late for work, she should be hurrying, but fatigue washed over her. She'd slept hard after fucking Draco while he gave her that desperate look of his, whispering, "Yes, please, Hermione—" as she moved on top of him. Now her cunt was sore, her breasts aching. She checked the door, willing him to wander in with the paper. She wanted to fuck him again.

She should go to work.

She was running the soap down her arm when she stopped, the bar slipping from her grip.

The water splashed as she sat upright.

Adrenaline spiked through her. Her heart was racing.

The scar was gone.

She took a deep breath and ran her thumb over the smooth, unblemished skin.

She thought back to Draco looking up at her the night before, smiling, his eyes alive. She'd run her fingertip down the bridge of his nose, thinking she couldn't get enough of him. That perfect face. That beautiful mouth. He was such a prat. She wanted to eat him up.

He'd been surprisingly plump before he'd turned pointy, though she could see it was him around the eyes and chin. His white-blond locks hadn't darkened a whit since birth. Here he was in lacy white newborn gowns and then, as a toddler, in ridiculous miniature robes as though he'd need to run a board meeting later that day, a hard part in his hair. Hermione shook her head and watched him look over and laugh in a loop. She went back and looked at them all again . . .

She was smiling faintly as she studied them, smiling as he looked over and laughed.

She had a few favorites . . . she watched them loop.

It was dirty, dirty pool Pip was playing.



Hermione got home from the Ministry to find Draco in the shadows of his study, glaring at his ledger.

"Are you still at work in here?"

"It would seem so," he snapped.

Hermione's hand moved to her hip as she cocked an eyebrow at him.

He sighed through his nose, his jaw tight, and threw down the Mont Blanc pen. Then he was pushing back in his chair and his chin tilted up as he crossed his arms. He looked at her sullenly.

Hermione regarded him, her face impassive.

Finally, he said, "I need attention."

"It would seem so," she murmured.

She dropped her hand and moved to his side of the desk. He watched her, his face hardening into a sulk, until she got close enough for him to wrap his arms around her waist and lean his head against her. She held his head to her chest, her palm on his cheek, and gently stroked his hair back from his temple.

"Did you have a bad afternoon?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No."

Hermione ran her fingertips through the platinum locks. Citrus. Cloves. She could feel him breathing.

"Will you fly with me?" he asked. "Just to the pond."

She hummed, considering. "Can I squeeze the life out of you and shriek that you're going too fast?" she asked.

His cheek bunched under her palm, and she could hear his slight smile when he said, "Yes."

"All right, then," said Hermione, knowing good and well that, after she'd spent a broom ride clinging to him while her heart raced, they'd both be ready to fuck by the pond.



"Does your opposition to the fair trade bill have anything to do with the elf labor you're exploiting in Nice? You have several workshops there, no?" asked Hermione.

Justin Finch-Fletchley shifted in her guest chair, his lips pursed. "I . . . didn't realize those workshops were common knowledge."

"Aren't they?" Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Malfoy."

"Ma'am." He looked over from the settee in her extended office, where he'd been conjuring dill. (Someone was randy.)

"Have you heard anything about Justin's workshops in Nice?"

"I've heard quite a lot," drawled Malfoy.